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# INSIGHT

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**P.30**

## The Gift

**Five writers recall the presents that meant the most.**

## With Dad home, she was sure this Christmas would be perfect

**T**he year that I loved purple, my father finally came home for Christmas. He wore a white Navy uniform with a patch of a fighting Seabee on it and a sailor's hat on his blond hair. It was 1963, and my father had spent two long years stationed in Cuba while my mother, brother and I lived in Rhode Island with my grandmother, Mama Rose.

Just weeks before he returned, my principal, Miss Knight, had burst into my secondgrade classroom crying: "Our beloved president has been shot!" We were lined up and dismissed, our spelling tests still in our hands.

At home, my mother and Mama Rose sat staring at the black-and-white television watching the events unfold. It seemed to me then that life without my father was fraught with danger and uncertainty.

A year earlier, my family had waited out the Cuban Missile Crisis with my father right there in Cuba. When the news finally came that catastrophe had been averted, it was as if the house itself sighed with relief.

Even Christmas had taken on strange and unfamiliar attributes without him. Instead of tramping through the woods in search of the perfect, tallest Christmas tree, my mother got the tree of her dreams: a silver artificial one.

"No pine needles to vacuum," she announced, clutching the box close. "No impossible stand to mess with."

My mother loved all things modern. She longed for shag carpeting, a dishwasher and electric anything: knife, toothbrush, can opener.

She opened the box and ordered my brother, Skip, to remove the tree. I watched in horror as he pulled out first a long skinny pole dotted with holes, and then, one by one, the pompom-tipped branches. Gleefully, my mother set about building the tree, sticking each branch into the pole.

Just as I tried to imagine how our ornaments -- the pine cones topped with tiny elves, the grinning Santa heads -- would look on it, my mother opened another box. She had a color scheme, she explained, holding up a shiny blue ornament. My brother went from window to window placing plastic candles in each one. When he plugged them in, their flames lit up the same shiny blue.

"Now for the best part," my mother said, opening a final box that held a pinwheel with wedges of red, blue, green and yellow on it. She plugged it in, and it began to slowly rotate, each color reflecting off the silver tree, illuminating it ever so briefly.

"I'm going to tell Daddy," I said, starting to cry. Christmas was the smell of pine and strands of tinsel. It was strings of lights that blinked on and off in multicolored glory. It was my father humming Christmas carols and stirring Hawaiian punch and rum into the crystal punch bowl. It was not this.

My mother didn't hear me. She was too pleased with her version of Christmas, a modern one ex-

actly like those she'd seen in magazines and store windows. With a satisfied sigh, she dropped onto the turquoise Danish sofa and watched that light wheel change the tree's color long into the night.

Now, with my father home, I believed the outside world, and my own small inner one, would regain the equilibrium it had lost in his absence.

My mother left her artificial tree in its box, and we once again tramped into the woods for the perfect tree.

We hung tinsel, strand by strand, on its long branches, while my mother muttered about the needles already dropping onto the rug. Christmas carols blared from the hi-fi, and my father sang along, enthusiastically offkey.

Afterward, as we sat in the shadow of the blinking lights, my father asked me what I wanted most for Christmas. Santa would bring me a Chatty Cathy doll and the game of Life. But from my parents all I wanted was a bike. A purple one.

I had never seen a purple bike, but I loved purple. In school, all the girls were crazy for pink, and as the quiet girl who liked to read and wore thick glasses, the one who sat alone in the playground playing jacks during recess, I eschewed pink for purple. Purple pens, a purple notebook, even a stuffed purple dog.

"Well, then," my father said the night I gave him my list, "a purple bike it is."

That night, I went to sleep with the smell of his Old Spice still in my nose and visions of my purple bike in my head.

"I hate to disappoint her," I heard my father whisper the night before Christmas Eve. "But there just are not any purple bikes." "Let's just go to Sears and get her a red one then," my mother said.

By this time, the purple bike had taken on mythical importance to me. Somehow, it represented the promise of a future in which my father stayed home, Christmas trees were always real, and the world was a safe and happy place. If I didn't get it, what did my future hold?

On Christmas morning, I stayed in bed until my mother insisted I get up. I walked slowly into the kitchen, and slower still into the living room. There, gleaming in all its purple glory, sat my bike, with my grinning father beside it. Later I would learn that he had driven all the way to Boston to find it for me.

In two short months, the Beatles would appear on "The Ed Sullivan Show" and my father would retire from the Navy and stay home for good.

The rest of my Christmases for decades to come would be filled with real trees and off-key Christmas carols.

I got on my new purple bike. My father held the handlebars to steady it, and I rode off into my wonderful future. ●

*Ann Hood is the author of "The Knitting Circle." Her new novel, "The Red Thread," will be published by W.W. Norton next year.*



BY ANN HOOD  
WASHINGTON POST

# PRECIOUS JEWELS

**T**here were two things I wanted desperately to give my mother for Christmas in 1962. I wanted to give her a jewelry box. And I also wanted to give her a clean, uninterrupted sentence. I stuttered, badly, and I could tell this pained my mother, even as it pains me to remember. Words got stuck in my throat, then stuck even harder on my tongue. I sometimes stamped my feet, pleading for the word to leave my body. She'd stare at me as if that relentless look would untie my tongue. Sometimes she'd just look away.

But first, the jewelry box.

Elvira Haygood, my mother, was transfixed by jewelry and silky clothing. She had imitation pearls that hung from her mirror; she had bracelets that matched her earrings, earrings that matched the colors of her outfits, outfits that she ordered by mail from Frederick's of Hollywood.

I'd answer the door in our Columbus, Ohio, home, and there would be the mailman, standing there with a big box. "Momma!" I'd scream, and my mother would come upstairs from the basement from doing laundry.

She had been a teenage mother, and she still squealed like a teen. My twin sister, Wonder, and I would gawk at the silky items my mother pulled from the box. We had little money, and I think these small luxuries made my mother feel more rich than poor.

Eight people lived in our home: my maternal grandparents, my mother, myself and my four siblings.

It was late October when my sister and I went hunting for a jewelry box for our mother. We realized it was early for our official Christmas shopping to begin. We knew Momma needed another jewelry box because the one on her dresser was buried beneath the jewelry crawling out of it. We knew just where to find another one, and our child's minds were alert to bargains.

There was a kind of traveling arcade that passed through our neighborhood every October. The peddlers were a scruffy group of souls who set up their wares at Weinland Park Elementary School, which my sister and I attended.

We had spotted the jewelry box a year before, when I was in first grade. Now we hoped it would be there this year. "It was a jewelry box with seashells as designs," my sister remembers. "And it had a red velvet lining."

The vendors must have had a hundred of the things, because right there beneath a tent was a stack of the boxes. I thought they were the prettiest jewelry boxes I'd ever seen. My sister and I had \$2 apiece rolled up in our palms, and we pooled the money and skipped home with our prized gift in a bag. The first phase of my grand Christmas plan was complete.

Now, the second was even more personal: I wanted to give Momma something that might mean more to her than her imitation string of pearls. I wanted to stop stuttering.

I secretly enrolled myself in speech therapy class at school. Twice a week, I would leave the classroom and walk down into the school's basement, where there was a kind of speech lab set up. Some days, I would be the only person in there

with an instructor. A metal device, a big unattractive contraption, was wrapped around my head and onto my ears, and I would hear a voice through the earphones and be instructed to repeat the words back, watching myself in a mirror as I did so. I was half ashamed – schoolmates sometimes peered inside the room and snickered until shooed away by the teacher and half excited: Perhaps the stuttering would go away! I would be able to call out to my mother that the mailman was at the front door without slamming down on any of the words!

Coming home, as Christmas approached, walking through the snow, I dreamed I'd sound just like the voice that I heard through the earphones -- with its smooth and mellifluous words, lovely uninterrupted sentences. I knew I could imitate that voice.

But I'd hit the door and be surrounded by familiar faces, and I'd get stuck all over again, as if there were a red spotlight in my mouth. Some days, I'd break down and cry, trying to dry my eyes before my sister, who knew about the class, saw them. I'd go check on the jewelry box, to make sure Momma hadn't found it in our hiding place.

On Christmas Day -- the house full of relatives and smelling of turkey and stuffing and sweet potatoes and macaroni and cheese -- we all seemed so happy together, our smiles and laughter as bright as the Christmas lights. I'd give a talk, as the children were asked to do, to tell about their gift-giving, to field some questions from the gathered adults. But I sensed no improvements from the speech class, and I tensed up.

I often deferred to my sister when around company; she would take the lead, knowing of my woes. When the time came to open presents, I grabbed the gift to hand to my mother. "Now, where in the world did you get this?" Momma wanted to know. She lifted it up to show other relatives, and they ogled it, too. "I really needed a jewelry box!"

She looked at me and my sister, the twins. We hunched our shoulders. I wanted to explain how we had hatched our grand idea. Eyes were on me. But then the monster started running up and down my voice box, hijacking my words. The sentences wouldn't come. My sister knew they wouldn't come. She stepped in, a hero to me and my excruciating silence, and said, "We got it at the arcade!"

And I nodded, furiously.

Elvira loved her jewelry box, and soon the thing was piled high with rings and necklaces until the items overflowed onto her dresser top. She is in a nursing home these days, bejeweled from the baubles her children give her. Jewelry is all she ever asks for.

Time helped tame my stutter. I became an author. There were speaking invitations to do readings, and I did not want audience members to give me that long and quizzical look my mother had given me as a child.

I did not want folks to stare at me for any reason other than to hear my mellifluous flow of words from each page.

At the nursing home, I hug my mother upon seeing her, and I talk to her in smooth, uninterrupted sentences. It seems to delight her to no end. ●

*Wil Haygood is a Washington Post staff writer.*



BY WIL HAYGOOD  
WASHINGTON POST



## He was devoted to playing board games. His parents were devoted to helping him grow up.

**T**he other day, one of my daughters, in a snit at having been sent upstairs for some infraction, knocked my Casio CQ-81 combination calculator-alarm clock off my bureau and broke it. A silver-gray triumph of late-'70s design, with its green LCD screen angled upward at the same 45-degree angle as the racing stripe on an AMC Gremlin, it looks like a sled for mice. I picture two or three of them, reclining side by side in the angle, squeaking happily as the CQ-81 zooms across the same hilly snowscape that Santa traversed on his electric razor-cum-snowmobile in Norelco's Christmas ads.

The Mouse Sled sat undisturbed on my bureau for years before my daughter got to it, and before that, as I moved from here to there over the past three decades, it sat on other bureaus and desks, on shelves, in drawers and boxes -- all the while dutifully telling the time but rarely consulted, almost never used as a calculator and only once in a long while as an alarm clock. It stopped working, for a few years, then started again, perhaps because I finally changed the batteries. Now, thanks to my daughter, it doesn't work at all. But its real value has always been as a totem, anyway.

My parents gave me the Mouse Sled for Christmas when I was 15, the first of many presents intended to help me in getting organized and making myself presentable: calculators, clocks, watches, belts, ties, dress shirts, sweaters, jackets. My parents still give me presents to help me look and act like a grown-up; only now they do it with my blessing. In fact, I tacitly rely on them to help keep me supplied with work clothes. But back when I was

15, I received the Mouse Sled as a dire portent.

I didn't want an alarm clock. For Christmas and my birthday, I usually asked for war games. These were board-game simulations, with scores of little square cardboard pieces representing military units that players maneuvered on a map marked off with hexagons. A new game, unboxed, smelled like concentrated essence of new book. I would punch out and separate the pieces, place them on the board and then set about mastering the dense rulebook, which featured entries on the order of: "5.87: Unlimbered artillery stacked with non-disorganized infantry in a Brigade grouping (see 4.46-49) can be moved at the rate of the slowest infantry unit in the Brigade over clear terrain, bridges, roads, and, at a penalty of two movement points, streams and brooks (see 3.4-7), except in Rainy Weather scenarios, when special conditions apply (see 8.21)."

I didn't try to find opponents. I played both sides, more than two when necessary. I would spread the board on my desk, which my father's father built, and sit hunched over it deep into the night. My principal failing as a general was a tendency to draw out the opening phases in which the opposing armies jockeyed for position before committing to bloodshed. I shrank from the messiness of engagement, and I wanted to prolong the game. The most important thing about war games was that they took days to play. I wasn't just killing the imaginary troops under my command; without consciously having decided to, I was killing time until I could go away to college, when, I vaguely expected, life would begin in earnest.

Like a soccer team that needs only to lose by fewer than three goals to advance to the next round of the World Cup, I spent my high school years kicking the ball out of bounds, making a shabby pretense of hurrying to put it back in play, running time off the clock. I did my school work, I had friends, I didn't curl up in the fetal position, but I committed as little of myself as I could to

life, and I never took a risk -- social, emotional or intellectual -- that I could safely defer.

My parents picked up on my stalling tactics. I remember my father, still in suit and tie after a long day at the office, pausing at the doorway of my room late one evening. I was at my desk, bent over a map of Borodino or Tobruk, moving pieces and plotting to outsmart myself. After a while, I became aware of him and looked back over my shoulder. He said to no one in particular, "Always playing games. He's always playing games."

Now, 30 years later, I can name the unnameable unease that filled me when I unwrapped the Mouse Sled on Christmas morning. As a gift, it was both a gentle smack on the back of the head -- wake up! -- and a firm handshake welcoming a probationary adult to a life ordered by work rather than play. My parents, immigrants who worked like sled dogs and instructed by example rather than preaching, were urging me to take the measure of time: It's passing, don't fritter it away; use it well by using up what's inside you, harvesting the crop so that more can grow. Among the most important gifts they have given their sons is an awareness that life is short and work is good for you.

Now I have the Mouse Sled on my desk in the office at home, where I write. One corner is dented and cracked. When I put in the batteries, a hissing noise comes out of the alarm clock's tiny speaker, but nothing appears on the screen. The perp who broke it sneaks covert looks at it when she comes into the office. She can't figure out why she's not being punished. She's only 8; in a few years, especially if she begins to show signs of thinking that she needs only to lose by fewer than three goals to advance to the next round of life, I'll tell her the story of the Mouse Sled. It probably won't ever tell time or multiply again, but it could still wake somebody up. ●

*Carlo Rotella is director of American studies at Boston College.*

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## He didn't put much thought or cash into picking the perfect present. And Mom knew it.

"Shoot!" I said, or something like it, and smacked the steering wheel with my palm. "What?" Tom asked. It was 8:45 on Christmas Eve, and I was driving him back to his parents' house after a movie out on the Air Force base where both our fathers were stationed. "I still have to get a Christmas present for my mom." "Uh, oh. That's not good."

"I know it's not good," I said, but I also knew that after the 50-cent movie, I had a single buck in my wallet and a handful of change in my right pocket. I had also wantonly and guiltily wasted a quarter on a box of popcorn.

I whipped the car off the bypass and into Bellas Hess, a discount store my mother liked. Jogging around the nearly deserted store, dodging a few lingering customers watched over by irritated clerks eager to close out their registers and hurry home to their own Christmas Eves, I had no illusions about getting my mother something thoughtful. All I wanted was something that wouldn't make her mad, something that would discharge my filial obligation.

The overhead lights at Bellas Hess flicked on and off. The loudspeakers announced it was five minutes past closing. I had one minute before the registers closed. I snatched up and bought the one thing I could afford that I thought was barely passable as a gift for a grown woman.

The manager, standing at the door, unlocked it so I could leave, and Tom, who had spent the last 20 minutes rooting through the record bins, was outside, waiting.

"What'd you get?"

I held out the box, the cheap cardboard freckled with bits of bark. Inside, swathed in long shreds of paper from an Asian newspaper, were salt and pepper shakers shaped like light bulbs. The faux threads of the light bulb screwed off so the salt and pepper could be poured into the thick, wavery glass.

"What? You couldn't buy her a vacuum cleaner or a box of Kleenex?" Tom asked.

"I know it's not so damn good. I had a buck and enough to cover taxes. It was this or a six-pack of gum."

That red-and-white striped box of popcorn weighed on my conscience, as did spending money on the movie itself.

The next morning, I hoped Mom would, with maternal forbearance, hide her disappointment, the sense of being blown off with a cheap gift, a gift that said to her, "Your son doesn't want to spend money on you." She looked briefly at the sad glass shakers and set them aside without saying a word.

The day after Christmas, she told me they were ugly. I said I liked them. I thought they were clever -- salt shakers shaped like light bulbs! So she called my bluff. She gave them to me. I thanked her and

took them, each of us sullenly supposing we had gotten the better of the other. By failing to act like the thoughtful adult that I wasn't yet, I had disappointed her so much that she could not stop being petulant. She was my mother, and I had not spent enough money on her present.

When I got married, five years later, I insisted on using the shakers at least occasionally. My then-wife, who also hated them, finally forced me to throw them away, and by then the stupid salt shakers had become so ponderous with meaning -- my thoughtless, bad taste, and obstinacy -- that I dropped them in the trash can with relief so profound it approached joy.

The Christmas after I gave Mom the shakers, my first year in college, I spent \$20 on Mom's present. That's not much now, but then it was half a week's salary from my after-school job at a dry goods warehouse.

I don't remember what I gave her, just what it cost. When I came home from my second job, the day after Christmas, I found a note propped on my pillow. My mother told how much she appreciated her gift and how I shouldn't be wasting my money on gifts for her. She knew how hard I worked for it. "I love you, Mom."

She died three years later. Five years after she died, I was burning my old notebooks in a trash barrel in my then-father-in-law's back yard, when one of the notebooks curled open in the flames to reveal my mother's note, which I had taped into the pages. I started to reach into the fire and rip out the charring page. But I didn't. I read it till the words turned brown, then black, and vanished into ash. ●

*Andrew Hudgins's teaches at the Ohio State University.*

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## They decided not to spend any money. So she gave him the one thing he couldn't give himself.

**I**t was the first Christmas of the new millennium, and for my husband and me, the beginning of a new phase in our lives. After years of trying unsuccessfully to have children, we were adopting our first baby.

"Let's give each other something that doesn't cost any money," I suggested one evening, desperate to extract more meaning from our annual gift-giving ritual.

"Works for me," Kevin responded.

He was as excited by the opportunity to save some cash as anything else. He had proposed for our first Christmas together in 1992, just eight months after his father (the nice man who prepared my taxes that year) introduced us. Topping that gift was pretty tough, but we certainly had spent our fair share on clothes, shoes, jewelry, perfume, golf and spa memberships for one another through the years.

I always stumbled into the holidays unprepared. And the last-minute bustle of it all -- wading through crowded shopping centers in search of the right size, right color, right gadget for family and friends -- drained my energy and bank account.

The holiday stress intensified when Kevin and I moved from New Orleans to Maryland in 1995 and had to transport those packages home each year for celebrations with our parents and extended families.

Over time, the presents Kevin and I gave each other seemed more like an afterthought, some item picked up in that last dash to the department store. One year, he forgot the malls closed early on Christmas Eve and was empty-handed and embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, baby," he said, though no words could erase the hurt.

But for Christmas 2000, I wanted none of that -- no material expectations. The season was about giving, and I longed to give Kevin something thoughtful and heartfelt, something that captured the depth of my appreciation for the committed, cool-headed partner he had been.

In the early years, our marriage was not a smooth, effortless dance. But he was always there for me.

There to talk me around the Beltway every time I got lost on the way to a job assignment or a hair appointment in the days before navigation systems.

There to muffle my cries when the phone call came from Louisiana early one morning with news that my uncle Paul, like a brother to me, was dead of AIDS at age 39.

There to see my family and me through the deaths of two more of my mother's brothers, both in their 40s, each funeral about a month apart.

There through the dashed hopes of treatments for infertility -- my surgeries, the in-vitro fertilization procedures, the heartbreak.

"I married you to be with just you. Anything else is gravy," he told me when I needed reassurance that we were a family, even if it remained just the two of us and my stepdaughter for the rest of our time.

It didn't take me long to settle on Kevin's gift.

I remembered how I'd pronounced my independence from the beginning of our marriage, resisting familial, religious and societal tradition by keeping my name. It wasn't a rejection of his name or a political statement, just a simple choice to continue being the woman I'd been all along: Lisa Frazier.

My byline was my brand, I pronounced to him in those heady days when my career occupied the largest space in my life. I'd just gotten my dream job as a columnist, and, quite frankly, I wasn't about to change the name readers had come to know.

Kevin wasn't troubled at all. Most times, he didn't even bother to correct the occasional stranger who assumed he was Mr. Frazier. Neither did he insist to church friends that he was "head of our household" when they hinted that he should put his foot down and demand that I submit like a good Christian wife. And we both got a kick out of it when my mom -- the hat-and-heels-wearing Mother Frazier in the rigid Church of God in Christ -- addressed every letter, every package, every card she sent to me as "Mrs. Kevin Page."

I took an afternoon off work to arrange Kevin's gift and wrote him a letter on a sheet of bone-colored linen paper left over from old résumés. I rolled the letter, diploma-style, tied a thin piece of gold ribbon around it, made a bow and crimped the ends.

On Christmas Eve, the entire Page clan, about 10 of us, attended midnight Mass before gathering at my in-laws' house.

With Christmas lights blinking all around us, I lifted the diploma-style package from under the tree and handed it to Kevin. The fireplace crackled, and the chatter hushed as Kevin slipped off the gold ribbon. His eyes moved slowly across the page:

Dear Kevin, I could have bought you a sweater, shirt and tie, or another gift that would have required no more than some cash and a trip to the mall. But on this very special Christmas, in keeping with our agreement, I decided to do something more special and everlasting. ...

He pulled out the second sheet, a copy of the renewed driver's license that carried my gift: my new name, Lisa Frazier Page.

Kevin looked up at me, so stunned he couldn't speak. He didn't have to.

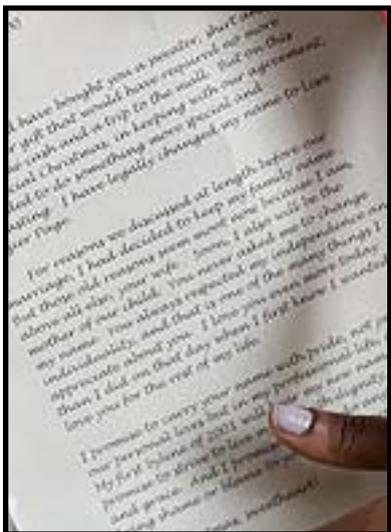
Towering over me at 6 feet, 2 inches tall, he opened his arms and pulled me to him.

"Thank you," he whispered, kissing the top of my head.

I closed my eyes, basking in the moment, not knowing then that someday our shared name would easily identify us as the family of six we would become.

I closed my eyes, basking in the moment. I'd changed; we both had. I was ready now to become a parent, and the shared name would easily identify us as family -- my husband and me and the babies yet to come. ●

*Lisa Frazier Page is an editor at The Washington Post Magazine.*



BY LISA FRAZIER PAGE  
WASHINGTON POST

One of our long-running political stories is the economic assault on the young by the old. We have become a society that invests in its past and disfavors the future.

This makes no sense for the nation, but as politics, it makes complete sense. The elderly and near elderly are better organized, focus obsessively on their government benefits, and seem deserving. Grandmas and Grandpas command sympathy.

Everyone knows that the resulting "entitlements" dominate government spending and squeeze education, research, defense and almost everything else. In fiscal 2008 - the last "normal" year before the economic crisis - Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid (programs wholly or primarily dedicated to the elderly) totaled \$1.3 trillion, 43 percent of federal spending and more than twice military spending.

Because workers, not retirees, are the primary taxpayers, this spending involves huge transfers to the old.

Comes now the House-passed health care "reform" bill that, amazingly, would extract more subsidies from the young. It mandates that health insurance premiums for older Americans be no more than twice the level of younger Americans.

That's much less than the actual health spending gap between young and old. Spending for those aged 60-64 is four to five times greater than those 18-24. So, the young would overpay for insurance which - under the House bill - people must buy: 20- and 30-somethings would subsidize premiums for 50- and 60-somethings. (Those 65 and over receive Medicare.)

Not surprisingly, the 40-million member AARP,

## Assault on the young

### We have become a society that invests in the past and disfavors the future

By Robert J. Samuelson  
Washington Post

the major lobby for Americans over 50, was a big force behind this provision. AARP's cynicism is breathtaking. On the one hand, it sponsors a high-minded campaign called "Divided We Fail" and runs sentimental TV ads featuring children pleading for a better tomorrow. "Join us in championing your future and the future of every generation," ended one AARP ad.

Meanwhile, AARP lobbyists scramble to shift their members' costs onto younger generations.

Although premium changes would apply mainly to people using insurance "exchanges," the differences would be substantial. A single person 55-64 might save \$3,490, estimates an Urban Institute study. By contrast, single people in their 20s and early 30s might pay from about \$600 to \$1,100 more.

For the young, the extra cost might be larger, says economist Diana Furchtgott-Roth of the Hudson Institute, because the House bill would require them to purchase fairly generous insurance plans rather than cheaper catastrophic coverage that might better suit their needs.

Whatever the added burden, it would darken the young's already poor economic prospects. Unemployment among 16- to 24-year-olds is 19 percent.

AARP justifies the cost-shifting as preventing age discrimination. Premiums based on age should be no more acceptable than premiums based on medical expenses reflecting race, gender or pre-existing health conditions, it says. The House legislation bans those, so it should also ban age-based rates. AARP thinks premiums for someone 22 and someone 62 should be identical.

This is unconvincing. All insurance aims to protect against risk - but within groups facing similar risks. Put differently, most insurance is risk-adjusted. Auto insurance premiums vary by age; younger drivers pay higher rates because they have more accidents. Homeowners' policies for similar houses cost more in high-crime areas.

This is not "discrimination;" it's a reflection of risk and cost differences. On health insurance, we may choose to override some risk adjustments (say, for pre-existing medical conditions) for public policy reasons. But the case for making age one of these exceptions is weak. Working Americans - the young and middle-aged - already pay a huge part of the health costs of the elderly through Medicare and Medicaid.

These will grow with an aging population and surging health spending. Either taxes will rise or other public services will fall. It's true that premiums for older people would be higher. But this might have a silver lining: Facing their true health costs, older Americans might become more eager to control spending. ●

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# Peacetalks: It's up to Netanyahu

BY JIM HOAGLAND, WASHINGTON POST

**F**ew things are as dangerous in the Middle East as well-intentioned outsiders. They invariably bring unintended consequences upon those they would guide to a better life. Ask Job. Or consider the case of Mahmoud Abbas, whose hurt and fury over foreign meddling has triggered his threat to quit as Palestinian leader.

No one could accuse President Obama or Judge Richard Goldstone of South Africa of harboring ill will toward the president of the Palestinian Authority. But their separate worthy initiatives have resulted in pushing Abbas into a political dead end that complicates the chances for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The Obama administration's approach to the Middle East peace process is on shaky ground. Plan A was to get concessions from Arab states to balance an Israeli freeze on settlement construction.

After months of being stiffed by both sides, the administration expects that Israel will finally offer some movement on the settlements issue in the days ahead and clear the way for "final status" negotiations that would start with provisional borders for an independent Palestinian state.

But the Arab mood has darkened significantly in the interim. The Arabs say that the encouraging rhetoric of Obama's Cairo speech in June has been washed away by his failure to deliver a total settlement freeze that includes East Jerusalem -- a condition that the new Israeli offer will not meet. A total freeze has become an Arab precondition for resuming negotiations with Israel.

Israelis, on the other hand, are newly confident of U.S. support, which rattles the Arabs even more. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu got a cold shower from Obama and congressional leaders when he visited Washington in May. He was told that he should accept the principle of a Palestinian state, which he grudgingly did last summer.

But Netanyahu emerged from a Nov. 9 White House meeting with Obama able to claim credibly that the two men had talked as allies about Middle East peace and Iran's nuclear program.

What changed? Part of the answer is Goldstone and his U.N.-commissioned report, which accuses Israel of committing war crimes during its winter assault on the Gaza Strip. Whatever the Goldstone report's merits -- and they are lessened by its delib-

erate demonization of Israel's motives and milquetoast exculpations of Hamas's actions -- it seems to have been written with no feel for the political consequences it would bring for the peace process.

On Capitol Hill, misgivings about Netanyahu were buried in a reflexive gathering around Israel under U.N.-inspired attack. The Goldstone fracas also

The Egyptian turn (caused more by internal succession problems than regional factors) has also antagonized Saudi Arabia, which is locked in an increasingly open and hostile war of words with Iran, Hamas's most important patron.

This is a combustible mix of betrayals, failures and intentions gone awry. So Netanyahu may yet



President Barack Obama brings Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (L) and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (R) together for a handshake  
Photo: EPA

helped push the politically sensitive Obama White House back toward a more supportive, traditional U.S. attitude toward Israel.

Abbas -- not glimpsing the quagmire he was lurching toward -- went along with Washington's request to ask the United Nations to delay taking up Goldstone's report, only to back down when Jordan and Egypt joined Hamas in unleashing ferocious criticism of Abbas in their media.

"He is hurt and angry," says an Arab official who has talked to Abbas recently. "He has been let down by everybody, especially Egypt."

throw Abbas a lifeline on settlements if only to keep his weakened opponent in office.

Israel's long occupation of Palestinian territory has helped produce the cynicism and weak leadership on both sides that confound would-be international shapers of peace and moral rectitude.

Outsiders cannot resolve this conflict: Only an Israeli decision to end that occupation in fast order can lead to the security Israelis need and deserve, and to the dignity that Palestinians seek through a state of their own. That is the broader, more vital decision that Netanyahu needs to make. ●

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**W**hile military officers wait for President Obama to conclude his agonizingly slow review of Afghanistan policy, they've been reading a paper by an Army Special Forces operative arguing that the only hope for success in that country is to work with tribal leaders.

This tribal approach has widespread support, in principle. The problem is that, in practice, the United States has often moved in the opposite direction in recent years. Rather than supporting tribal leaders, American policies have sometimes had the effect of undermining their ability to stand up to the Taliban.

The paper by Maj. Jim Gant, "One Tribe at a Time," has been spinning around the Internet for a month. It contends that in an Afghanistan that has never had a strong central government, "nothing else will work" than a decentralized, bottom-up approach.

"We must support the tribal system because it is the single, unchanging political, social and cultural reality in Afghan society," he insists.

Gant recounts his experience leading a Special Forces "A-team" in Konar province in 2003. His soldiers briefly became part of the Pashtun tribal family, fighting alongside a local leader whose followers straddled the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. It's a passionate story that evokes an Afghan warrior culture that has enticed foreign adventurers for 150 years.

But will this tribal strategy work? The United States thought so in 2003 and 2004, when Gant and many others were sent out with small teams to chase al-Qaeda and Taliban insurgents. Back then, I'm told, the Special Forces teams had more than 5,000 tribal fighters under arms.

But U.S. officials began to worry that by arming the tribes, they were encouraging Afghanistan's old curse of warlordism. So after Hamid Karzai's election as president in 2004, they focused instead on developing Afghanistan's national army and police. They persuaded the Tajik tribal militia known as the Northern Alliance, a key ally against al-Qaeda, to lay down its weapons.

Unfortunately, this top-down strategy left the tribes vulnerable to the Taliban, which was rebuilding its networks. As the Taliban's influence spread, U.S. strategists looked again to the tribes as a counterinsurgency force. They were encouraged by the example of Iraq, where the Sunni tribal movement had stopped al-Qaeda's advance.

As tribal politics have come back in fashion in Afghanistan over the past year, a number of experiments have been launched. The Afghan Public Protection Program is working with tribal leaders in Wardak province and elsewhere. The Community Defense Initiative is recruiting and training local militias in western Afghanistan.

Across the country, CAAT units (short for Counterinsurgency Advisory and Assistance Team) are working on local development and security projects.

The U.S. approach in Afghanistan now is a mix of national and local, government and tribe, top-down and bottom-up. There are frantic plans to expand the national army and police, even as the Northern Alliance rearms its fighters.

That's one reason Gen. Stanley McChrystal's strategy is confusing -- it's going in several directions at once, looking for game-changing opportunities to halt the Taliban's advance.

This jumble of ad hoc ideas isn't necessarily a bad thing: Similar experimentation in Iraq helped



Tribesmen along the Afghan border  
Photo: EPA

BY DAVID IGNATIUS, WASHINGTON POST

## Afghan tribes to the rescue?

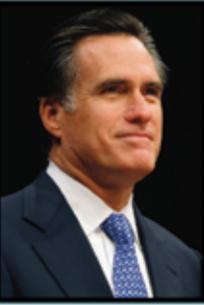
produce the unlikely network that finally began to improve security there. But it requires a basic decision by the White House that the fight in Afghanistan is worth the human, economic and political price. In the end, Obama will have to roll the dice.

Even Maj. Gant, the gung-ho Special Forces operative, agrees there's only a limited time to make any policy work: "Make no mistake," he writes, "the people (or politicians) of the US will get tired of the war and will eventually make the US military pull out." ●

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**T**is the season to start your Christmas shopping, and some of you probably are already developing strategies for gift-buying online, or excursions to Nordstroms, Saks, or Neiman-Marcus.

Well, before you hit the internet or the highways, we would like to urge you to pause and ponder the importance of doing more of that shopping right here in our beachside community.

If every resident of 32963 purchased one extra gift from one of the many *great* shops here on the beach, it could turn a holiday shopping season that has many merchants a bit nervous into a great one.

In an effort to encourage you to refocus your holiday shopping plans and support our 32963 businesses, we have come up with the **First Annual Vero Beach 32963 Holiday Contest**.

There will be two prizes.

**Prize Number One:** \$500 in beachside dining will go to the person who buys *Christmas gifts from the greatest number* of beachside retailers. (In other words, buying from the most beachside shops.)

**Prize Number Two:** \$500 in oceanside dining will go to the person who buys *the greatest number of Christmas gifts* from beachside retailers. (In other words, buying the most total gifts.)

You can win in either of two ways – and neither requires spending a lot of money. Total spending is *not* a factor in winning either prize (though if you can afford it, we would love to encourage you to buy big gifts).

For Prize Number One, you can walk down Ocean Drive, stroll back up Cardinal, stop at Pelican Plaza or the Village Shops on your way home, and buy a gift

here, a couple of gifts there, and rack up purchases from a dozen 32963 shops (*we are not guaranteeing that a dozen shops will be the winning number, so you had better visit a few more*).

For Prize Number Two, you can go to a favorite shop (or couple of shops), buy two dozen gifts for family members and friends, then visit a new shop you have never been in before and get a couple more presents (*again, two dozen gifts may win – or it may not, so better buy another one or ten to be on the safe side*).

To enter our contest, **save your sales receipts**. You will need sales receipts to win.

Once you have finished your shopping (but no later than Christmas Eve, when all our beachside shops will be closed anyway), email us ([contest@verobeach32963.com](mailto:contest@verobeach32963.com)).

If you are competing for Prize Number One, tell us in your email how many beachside shops you bought gifts from in the four week run-up to Dec. 24<sup>th</sup>.

If you are competing for Prize Number Two, tell us in your email how many total gifts you bought from 32963 shops in the days between Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve.

If you are the winner, we will contact you on December 28<sup>th</sup> and ask you to bring your sales receipts to our office so we can verify your purchases. Names and photos of the winners will appear in our Dec. 31 edition.

As the shopping season starts, merchants across the country are worried. Americans' estimate of the total amount they will spend on Christmas gifts this year has fallen precipitously over the past month, according to the Gallup organization, and is now about the same as last year, which was one of the

worst holiday retail seasons in recent memory.

Given the state of the economy, this will be a particularly touchy Christmas season for many local merchants.

There is really not a lot that those living here on the barrier island can do to change the national picture. A couple extra purchases at Bloomingdale's is not going to make much of a difference. But by choosing to shift more of our Christmas shopping to beachside merchants, we can make this a good year – possibly even a great year – for the local retailers that are such a key part of our community.

We are not doing this because the beachside merchants are all advertisers. Sure, a couple dozen 32963 shops that we care about advertise in **Vero Beach 32963** – and we are mighty appreciative of their support.

But whether they advertise with us or not, these are our friends and neighbors, and we all have a stake in the health and vitality of our beachside business community.

While things have not been great here these past couple of years, things have been a great deal worse elsewhere. One way to keep the island economy perking along is to support local businesses. Perhaps more than in recent years, Vero beachside businesses need the support of fellow residents.

Maybe this shop locally thing doesn't matter much to you. Maybe it's not your responsibility. Maybe you could not care less about our prizes.

Well, we would urge you to think of shopping locally as a Christmas gift to our barrier island – and perhaps you just might win a great dinner or two as our Christmas present to you. ●

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# UNDERSTANDING CHINA



BY MARTIN JACQUES

The West has gotten it wrong on China for decades – even as it embraces a market economy, it has shunned Western-style freedoms. And its power is only growing.

**T**he dynamics of President Obama's trip to China were markedly different from those evident on visits made by President Clinton and President George W. Bush. This time the Chinese made clear that they were unwilling even to discuss issues such as human rights or free speech. Why?

The relationship between the countries has changed: America feels weak and China strong in their bilateral ties. This is not a temporary shift that will reverse itself once the U.S. has escaped from its mountain of debt. Rather, it is the expression of a deep and progressive shift in the balance of power between the two nations, one that is giving the Chinese -- though studiously cautious in their approach -- a rising sense of self-confidence.

Nor should we be surprised by the Chinese response. They may have appeared more conciliatory on previous visits by American leaders, but that was largely decorative. The Chinese have a powerful sense of their identity and worth. They have never behaved toward the West in a supplicant manner, for reasons Westerners persistently fail to understand or grasp.

Ever since the Nixon-Mao rapprochement, and through the various iterations of the Sino-American relationship over the subsequent almost four decades, there has been an overriding belief in the West that eventually China would become like us: that a market economy would lead to democratization and that a free media was inevitable. This hubristic outlook is deeply flawed, but it still prevails, albeit with small cracks of self-doubt starting to appear.

The issue here is much deeper than Western-style democracy, a free media or human rights. China is simply not like the West and never will be. There has been an underlying assumption that the process of modernization would inevitably lead to Westernization; yet modernization is not just shaped by markets, competition and technology

but by history and culture. And Chinese history and culture are very different from that of any Western nation-state.

If we want to understand China, this must be our starting point.

The West's failure to understand the Chinese has repeatedly undermined its ability to anticipate their behavior. Again and again, our predictions and beliefs about China have proved wrong: that the Chinese Communist Party would fall after 1989, that the country would divide, that its economic growth could not be sustained, that its growth figures were greatly exaggerated, that China was not sincere about its offer of "one country two systems" at the time of the hand-over of Hong Kong from Britain -- and, of course, that it would steadily Westernize. We have a long track record of getting China wrong.

The fundamental reason for our inability to accurately predict China's future is our failure to understand its past. Although China has described itself as a nation-state for the last century, it is in essence a civilization-state. The longest continually existing polity in the world, it dates to 221 BC and the victory of the Qin. Unlike Western nation-states, China's sense of identity comes from its long history as a civilization-state.

Of course, there are many civilizations -- Western civilization is one example -- but China is the only civilization-state. It is defined by its extraordinarily long history and also its huge geographic and demographic scale and diversity. The implications are profound: Unity is its first priority, plurality the condition of its existence (which is why China could offer Hong Kong "one country two systems," a formula alien to a nation-state).

The Chinese state enjoys a very different kind of relationship with society compared with the Western state. It enjoys much greater natural authority, legitimacy and respect, even though not a single vote is cast for the government.

The reason is that the state is seen by the Chi-

nese as the guardian, custodian and embodiment of their civilization. The duty of the state is to protect its unity. The legitimacy of the state therefore lies deep in Chinese history. This is utterly different from how the state is seen in Western societies.

If we are to understand China, we must move beyond the compass of Western reality and experience and the body of concepts that has grown up to explain that history. We find this extremely difficult. For 200 years the West, first in the shape of Europe and then the United States, has dominated the world and has not been required to understand others or The Other. If need be it could always bully the latter into submission.

The emergence of China as a global power marks the end of that era. We now have to deal with The Other -- in the form of China -- on increasingly equal terms.

China, moreover, is possessed, like the West, with its own form of universalism. It long believed that it was "the land under heaven," the center of the world, superior to all other cultures. That sense of self, which has engendered a powerful self-confidence, has been persistently evident over the last 40 years, but with China's rise, it is becoming more apparent as the country's sense of achievement and restoration gains pace.

Or to put it another way, when the presidents of China and the United States meet in Beijing in 2019, with the Chinese economy fast approaching the size of the American economy, we can be sure that the Chinese sense of hubris will be far stronger than in 2009.

But long before that, we need to try and understand what China is and how it behaves. If we don't, then relations between China and the United States will never move beyond the polite and the formal -- and that will be a bad omen for the future relationship between the two countries. ●

*Martin Jacques is the author of "When China Rules the World: the End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order."*

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Linda, Diego and Diego Ortega Jr., 22 months, have a look around the 33-foot Grady-White Express 330, the largest boat on display at the show.

# Vero Fall Boat Show is a draw for young and old

BY JULIE TARASOVIC & ALINA LAMBIET, STAFF WRITERS, PHOTOS: TOM MCCARTHY JR.



Joel Rockwell climbs up to the deck of a pontoon boat on display at Riverside Park while other enthusiasts peruse the selection at the 26th Annual Vero Beach Fall Boat Show.



**T**he 26<sup>th</sup> Annual Vero Beach Fall Boat Show docked at Riverside Park November 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, offering water enthusiasts a peek at the latest products and services available.

From canoes and kayaks to deck boats, pontoon boats, and shallow water skiffs to offshore fishing boats and cruisers, local dock builders, lift installers, marine supply retailers and much more, the show went off without a hitch.

“The overall size of the show was up this year over last,” said Brain Cunningham, general manager of Vero Marine Center, which organizes the show. “Mother nature cooperated. It was a great weekend. We were busy, steady, the whole weekend.”

Spread out under the Barber Bridge at Riverside Park, 10 boat dealers from Indian River and St. Lucie counties were there with their boats on display as well as about 23 other vendors of marine-related products.

Even in the down economy, exhibitors were enthusiastic about displaying their product lines, and finance and insurance representatives were on hand to break down the details of owning a boat.

Mike Beck, owner of Kayaks Etc., said business was pretty good so far this year. “We aren’t selling as many kayaks but we are very busy with our tours and rentals.”

The largest boat was Vero Marine’s 33-foot Grady White Express -- a combo fishing boat cruiser that has twin Yamaha, 350-horsepower outboard engines.

The smallest was a “beautiful little sailboat,” said Cunningham, a Trinka 9-footer with “lots of details, lots of teak” from Johannsen Boat Works.

And there was everything in between from kayaks and canoes to river fishing boats.

What was hot this year? Cunningham vouches for his Grady White Express. It saw a lot of traffic.

“It was definitely the dirtiest after the show,” he joked.

People seemed a lot more optimistic about the market and boating, in general, said Cunningham.

One vendor, who sold fishing tackle and rods, said he met his weekend’s sales goal by noon on Saturday.

“And he was still selling after 5 p.m. on Sunday,” said Cunningham. “Truly, most people I spoke to were really upbeat this weekend.” ●



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*and others...*

***Farmers Market Saturday Morning and Parade Saturday Night***

Louis Schacht sets out some grapefruits at the Farmers Market Oceanside while his mom, Janet Schacht, pours orange juice samples.



BY JULIE TARASOVIC, CORRESPONDENT, PHOTOS BY TOM MCCARTHY JR.

## Growing up: Family-run citrus grove celebrating 60 years

**S**un, sand and a Saturday morning stroll would make anyone thirsty. No worries. Drop by the beachside Farmer's Market on Ocean Drive and let the Schacht family quench your craving.

Sixty years of experience in the citrus business, and they can squeeze a cup of orange juice worthy of any connoisseur.

"We've been doing the beachside Farmer's Market since it started in November 2008 and it's really been great for our business," said Louis Schacht, a third generation citrus grower of the Schacht family groves.

"Being a vendor here has given us the opportunity to connect with people on the island who may not know much about us," adds Schacht.

While it started out as a commercial citrus operation in 1950 when Schacht's grandfather first came to Vero, the family turned its attention to the gift fruit shipping service in 1970 and never looked back.

As the citrus industry in Indian River County gets smaller because of development and disease, Schacht focuses on being the best small grower and gift shipper of premium citrus.

"Our mail business does very well," explains Schacht. "Retail is good too and with the addition of selling our products at the Farmer's Market, we are busy all the time."

Selling alongside 40 plus other vendors to Saturday morning's market-ready customers, it's clear that people want fresh goods.

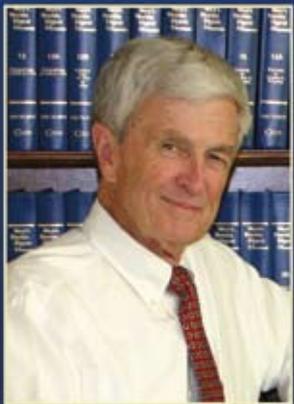
"Locally grown. People appreciate it and want to

support local businesses," said Schacht. "They want to meet the people that are growing and selling the fresh fruits and vegetables that they are eating."

Schacht knows he has the advantage of being a smaller grower in the county. "Our acreage, now about 280, is manageable. We have plenty of fruit without the worries of the larger commercial growers struggling to keep their groves disease free."

Being a family-run business also has the advantage of carrying no overhead. "It's mainly my dad, myself, my mom and my brothers (when they are in town) who run the day to day operations. We employ a few fruit pickers and contract out the rest to go to commercial packers," said Schacht.

With the holiday season just around the corner, Schacht is busy filling orders and greeting customers



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with his father, Henry, at their store on 12<sup>th</sup> Street. The grove store offers fresh squeezed juice, bagged fruit, candies and jellies.

Situated on a beautiful 18-acre lake west of town, Schacht also offers grove tours.

“I try and schedule tours for Fridays but I’m not going to turn anybody away if they just walk in and want to see the operations,” said Schacht. “We ship about 5,000 gift fruit shipments every year from here. We don’t treat our citrus with any unnatural waxes or gases like you get in the grocery store. Just a mild soap and water solution.”

In addition to the gift shipping and the beachside farmer’s market, Schacht has begun selling to a few of the local clubs.

“We now provide The Moorings and Orchid Island Club with our juices and fruits. It really comes down to the taste test,” said Schacht. “And they chose us.”

“I’m trying to get my feet wet with this side of the business. Chefs at these establishments are just too

busy to go around and taste test the juices, so I bring it to them. Costa d’Este and the Vero Beach Hotel and Spa may also come on board,” said Schacht.

And with the market jamming with shoppers until spring, Schacht doesn’t have much time to think about planning a 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration for the business. “We’ll have a big family party at some point,” said Schacht. “Maybe when we slow down after May 10<sup>th</sup>!”

And what about the next 60 years?

“Just keep growing and selling – that’s priority. We aren’t looking to get bigger. We just want to keep producing the best quality citrus we can,” said Schacht. “The hope for all citrus growers everywhere is that scientists will come out with a tree that is resistant to diseases. They are working on it.”

In the meantime, Schacht and his wife, Kelly, welcomed their first child, daughter Hannah, in July, adding to the three other Schacht grandchildren. “We’ve already got our fourth generation of Schacht family citrus growers on the way!” ●

Schacht Groves products are available at two locations seasonally, Nov. 1 through May 10: the grove store and packing house, Monday-Saturday 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Sunday 12 p.m. to 4 p.m., 6100 12<sup>th</sup> Street, Vero Beach, (772) 562-5858 or (800) 355-0055; or at the Vero Beachside Farmer’s Market, Saturday mornings from 8 a.m. to noon on Ocean Drive (across from Humiston Park): [www.schachtgroves.com](http://www.schachtgroves.com).

Photo top: Rubin Bryant, who has worked under three generations of the Schacht family, picks navel oranges at Schacht Groves. Photo middle: Henry F. Schacht sorts through the oranges as they get processed through the Schacht Groves packing house. Photo bottom: Freshly poured cups of Schacht Groves’ orange juice wait to be sampled at the Farmers Market Oceanside.



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**T**his story of a Maine town trapped under a dome shows Stephen King at the height of his powers.

Running through Stephen King's 1,100-page doomsday novel – and you will run through it – one of your first thoughts will be: That didn't feel like an 1,100-page novel. And, really, can there be a higher compliment for a novelist?

The most immediate comparison for **Under the Dome** among King's prodigious 40-plus titles is "The Stand," an epic account of a killer virus. This time around, ever au courant, King summons up a malicious medley of contemporary horrors: ecological disaster, religious fundamentalism, government corruption, clueless citizenry, and, most chilling of all, civil liberties quashed by fear.

For those living under, well, a dome of late, the novel works from a simple premise: What if a small town found itself cut off from the rest of the world by a clear, impenetrable roof?

At first blush, it feels like a dated sci-fi notion. Early chapters almost have a slapstick feel as a private plane crashes into the suddenly arrived barrier and a woodchuck is cut in half just as the dome envelops Chester's Mill, Maine, and slides deep into the earth.

These early pages flutter by in breezy fashion, despite some grim proceedings. A classic King passage describes the fallout from the plane crash. "It also rained body parts," he writes. "A smoking forearm ... landed with a thump beside the neatly divided woodchuck."

Cars crash into the unforgiving dome, taking lives and scaring survivors. A humming force field at its edge blows pacemakers to pieces, silences iPods, and shuts cameras.

King assembles a sprawling cast, sprinkling in all of the good and bad of any 21st-century American town. Here is a demagogue pulling the town's strings with a blend of self-righteousness and cor-

ruption, there is an addled pharmacist who never bothers to question anything. OxyContin and crystal meth rear their ugly heads, but so, too, do ingenuity and compassion.

Secrets of sins big and small color everyone's behavior, invariably serving to tip matters closer to chaos.

As King begins to set his cast in motion, the darkness descends, literally and figuratively. In the tidy span of a week, civilization's thin veneer goes up in flames. Most terrifying, it's what the people of the town do to one another that leads to the subsequent mayhem and horror.

As in "The Stand," King's new novel breaks society down into two sides. Most people fall into the care of Big Jim Rennie, the town's second selectman and first finagler. Rennie collects favors and debts the way LeBron James collects slam dunks: without peer. He's raided the tax coffers, established a mammoth drug-running operation and, as the dome casts aside the outside world, establishes a police state that would make Pol Pot envious.

Rennie smashes justice and burns down the town newspaper. He instigates rationing and food riots alike, aided by the greedy depravity of a few violent teenagers and the unthinking complicity of most of his constituents.

Opposing Rennie and his ever-expanding team of thugs is an island of misfit toys led by a disillusioned Iraq war veteran-turned-short-order cook named Dale Barbara. He's joined by the victimized newspaper publisher, a minister wrestling with her faith, three perceptive teenagers, and the police chief's widow, among others.

Throw in an aging professor and his young lover, instantly orphaned kids, small-town snoops, cranks, kooks, addicts, optimists, shady capitalists, and a conspiracy theorist or two and – poof! – watch the propane find a perfect match to send society up in flames.

In a matter of days, the environmental reality

sets in, too. Fall in Maine means crisp temperatures, but under the dome it feels like an endless Indian summer. Forget famed foliage in Chester's Mill. Instead, the leaves go limp and brown. Streams dry up, animals turn suicidal, and pollution clings to the dome, giving the sky and stars an eerie hue that leaves everyone unsettled.

Then, too, there is the pop-culture environment, the one King has long conjured in his stories to hammer home the sense of ordinary people in extraordinary situations. Throughout his career – and long after he became a millionaire many times over – King has retained a dead-on sense for summing up how Americans think and live. (There's a reason Entertainment Weekly tapped him as a regular columnist several years ago.)

Here he's at it again, with references to Wolf Blitzer and Anderson Cooper as they give CNN's version of the dome story to the rest of the world. The citizens of Chester's Mill drive Honda Odysseys and Toyota Priuses, they read Nora Roberts and they name-drop Homer Simpson. Ad jingles and Red Sox victories run through their heads even as bizarre, terrifying circumstances rain down.

Midway through the novel, Rennie, turned homicidal in pursuit of ultimate civic authority, reflects "on murder's similarity to Lay's potato chips: it's hard to stop with just one." There's even a nice bit of metafiction as Lee Child's thriller hero Jack Reacher lands a cameo.

Count Shirley Hazzard among the many who have sniffed at King for putting a premium on entertainment at the expense of literature.

It's a tired debate that's gone on for several decades, and debates over the definition of literature are inherently dull and pointless anyway. Better to say that few can match King when it comes to capturing the American mood. Minus the pretension and navel-gazing, thank you very much, Mr. King.

With this novel, he somehow manages to keep the flab out of a book suitable for stopping the door

## BOOK REVIEWS

of an airplane hangar. And it closes with a grim aftermath that makes the breakdown of society almost quaint by comparison.

As the final page declares, King wrote "Under the Dome" in 16 months. In the afterword, he thanks his wife and editors for helping him pare the novel down to a more digestible size. Translation: This monster was written in a fury.

It's a fun and clear-headed fury, though. This is King humming at the height of his powers, cackling at human folly, taking childish glee in the gross-out and all the while spinning a modern fable that asks some serious questions without sounding preachy.

If the fury left a few excessive typos and a dog's name that mistakenly changes on occasion, well,

these are (mostly) forgivable sins. After all, few of us can resist such nightmares and dreamscapes. ●

*Under The Dome* by Stephen King  
Scribner, 1,074 pp., \$35  
Reviewed by Erik Spanberg  
Christian Science Monitor

**A** literate and absorbing chronicle of the tennis star's lifelong search for identity and serenity, on and off the court.

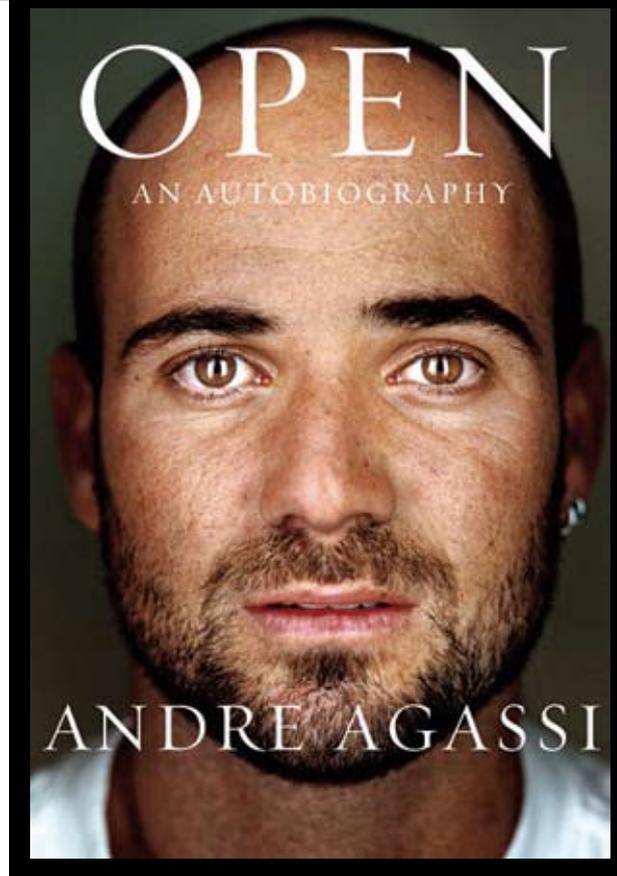
The photograph of Andre Agassi on the cover of "Open," his just-published autobiography, was taken by Martin Schoeller, an Annie Leibovitz disciple. The book begins with a quote from Vincent van Gogh; Barbra Streisand is thanked in the acknowledgments. The ghostwriter is J.R. Moehringer, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter who formerly worked for The Times.

In other words, "Open" is not your typical jock-autobio fare. This literate and absorbing book is, as the title baldly states, Agassi's confessional, a wrenching chronicle of his lifelong search for identity and serenity, on and off the court.

The journey began not long after Agassi's truncated childhood. His father, Mike, a former boxer from Iran who settled in Las Vegas, was an overbearing sports parent. An obsessed drillmaster, Mike tried to mold his kids into stars. Only the youngest made it big, although he had little choice in the matter.

"No one ever asked me if I wanted to play tennis," Andre Agassi writes, because "what I want isn't relevant." A prodigy who traded volleys with Björn Borg at age 8, he came to dread the ball machine, nicknamed "the dragon," that his father concocted for endless hitting sessions.

In seventh grade, Agassi was shunted off to Florida to be tutored by controversial coach Nick Bollettieri. He'd dropped out of high school by age 14. The absurd scenes here describing Bollettieri's academy, which Agassi calls a "glorified prison camp," read like something from David Foster Wallace's novel "Infinite Jest."



When Agassi turned pro, he had plenty of game and a teenager's inarticulate bravado. He donned denim shorts, wore an earring, and added frosted highlights to his mullet. (It was the 1980s.) The media interpreted this as the "real" Andre, the rebel without much cause. One of his endorsements, which carried the unfortunate tag line "Image Is Everything," came to represent what many believed was his essential flaw.

By turns angry, fragile and apathetic, Agassi routinely lost important matches and seemed unable to handle pressure. Worse, he offered excuses for every defeat.

At the 1990 French Open, site of his first Grand Slam final, he wore a hairpiece to conceal his thinning hair. Concerned that the wig would fly off, he played tentatively and lost to an inferior opponent.

"Open" is rife with self-damning revelations. Agassi acknowledges using crystal meth throughout 1997 and then lying about a positive drug test to avoid punishment by tennis authorities. He confesses that he tanked certain matches.

After taking the court and winning without any underwear, he goes commando for the remainder of his career.

Agassi repeatedly notes that he "hates" tennis. It's telling that, for years, no one believed him -- after all, slamming a fuzzy ball was making him millions -- but the solitary existence on the circuit haunted him. "In tennis you're on an island," he writes. It is "the loneliest sport."

He credits a cobbled-together support system with saving him from a Jennifer Capriati-like flame-out; at various times, the crew included coaches (for years, former highly ranked player Brad Gilbert), trainers (Gil Reyes) and friends (Streisand). According to Agassi, they enabled him to face his demons and, finally, to perform to his immense potential. Before retiring in 2006, he captured all four Grand Slam titles, and eight total Slams.

Agassi never managed to eclipse Pete Sampras, his Palos Verdes-raised rival and winner of 14 Slams. Agassi respected the grinding brilliance of Sampras, but abhorred his single-minded pursuit of tennis immortality. "I envy Pete," he writes. "I wish I could

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emulate his spectacular lack of inspiration, and his peculiar lack of need for inspiration.”

“Open” offers plenty of inside-the-locker-room intrigue, and its candor extends to Agassi’s personal life. Of his marriage to actress Brooke Shields, he writes, “I have a thought no man should have on his wedding day: I wish I were leaving too. I wish I had a decoy groom to take my place.”

Eventually, Agassi connected with his soul mate: tennis hall-of-famer Steffi Graf. They shared similar upbringings: Graf’s father was as maniacal as Agassi’s dad. The description of the fathers’ ini-

tial meeting -- the two men nearly come to blows arguing about forehands and backhands -- would be amusing if it weren’t so pitiable.

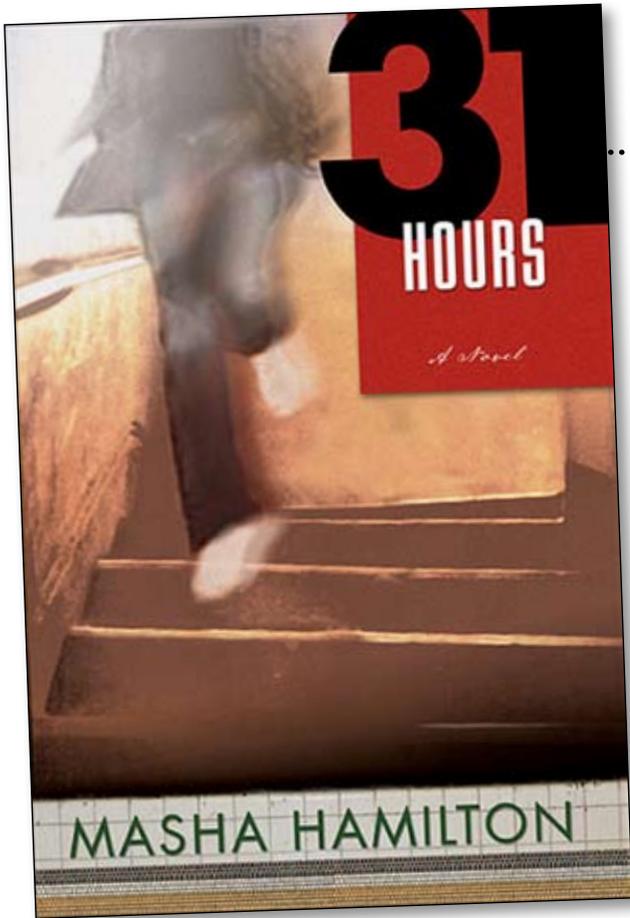
Agassi has publicly praised the contributions of the latest member of his team: Moehringer (who is uncredited in the book by his own choice). They met and agreed to work together after Agassi was entranced by Moehringer’s acclaimed memoir, “The Tender Bar.”

This was a wise choice, indicative of Agassi’s hard-won maturity. Moehringer is a masterful storyteller, and both “The Tender Bar” and “Open” explore similar themes: the horrifying toll of parental neglect; the roller-coaster quest for self-identity; the all-too-human need to connect with others; the messy ways we cope with life’s inevitable setbacks; the possibility of metamorphosis and redemption.

The latter resonates throughout “Open.” As Agassi better understands his love-hate relationship with tennis and grudgingly embraces his stature, he undergoes a profound shift. The self-centeredness of “What do I have to do to be No. 1?” gives way to “What can I do to help others?”

The answer for Agassi, the high-school dropout, has been to finance and build a public charter school that serves low-income youth in Las Vegas. Like “Open” itself, it’s an inspiring achievement. ●

*OPEN* by Andre Agassi  
Knopf, 400 pp., \$28.95  
Reviewed by David Davis  
*Los Angeles Times*



It’s the desperate story of a disenchanted young American coached by Islamic radicals plotting an act of terrorism in New York City. Hamilton has used both her considerable empathy as a writer and her experience in the Middle East to create an intimate portrait of 21-year-old Jonas Meitzner.

It’s not easy to like him for what he intends to do, much less admire him, but Hamilton makes us aware of his humanity.

The novel follows Jonas -- buying last-minute supplies, worrying, trying to reassure himself through the rituals of prayer and cleansing -- as he prepares to carry out a suicide bombing mission.

At last, alone in his nearly empty apartment, he thinks he will call his girlfriend and say goodbye. “He punched the number . . . and heard nothing. He tried the speed dial for his mother, and then for his father, and then, staving off desperation, he tried to call a couple of friends he hadn’t seen in months.”

Finally, he understands that his handlers have disabled his phone. It’s excruciating to watch him realize how completely he’s been separated from anyone he knows.

While Jonas is reckoning with the choice he has made, Hamilton interweaves the stories of his potential victims and the people who love him.

His mother, Carol, solidly kind and responsible, wakes up in the middle of the night, certain that something is profoundly wrong with her son.

We also see Vic, who became Jonas’s lover on a rainy morning in a tent by a lake in the Adirondacks. These portraits show us the well-intentioned figures lining Jonas’s road to ruin and their helpless position as bystanders.

In the hours before his planned attack, Jonas eats a gyro and loves the taste of it. He remembers his mother, the smell of her. He recalls making love with Vic.

Sensitive, lonely and full of the anger and doubt many young people feel, Jonas seems in Hamilton’s hands not a stranger, not an impenetrable figure of dread whose behavior is beyond our understanding, but the ordinary, fragile child of ordinary, fragile people.

You don’t exactly want to look at the story of what happens to Jonas, but Hamilton has made it very hard to tear your gaze away. ●

*31 Hours*  
The final acts of a terrorist before he attacks  
by Masha Hamilton  
Unbridled, 229 pp., \$24.95  
Reviewed by Carrie Brown  
*Book World*

**M**asha Hamilton’s career as a foreign correspondent in the Middle East gives her new novel, “31 Hours,” the authority of a true witness.

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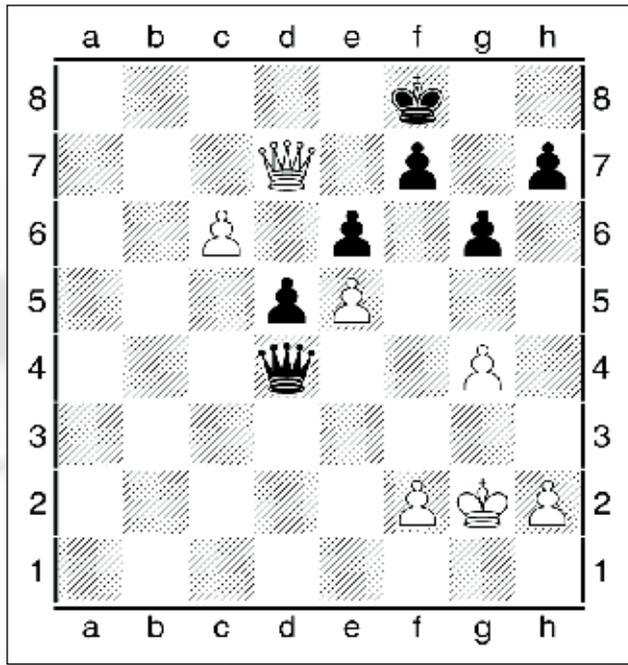
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## FOR THE LOVE OF CHESS BY HUMBERTO CRUZ - CHESS COLUMNIST



Despite having the move and an advanced pawn, White cannot win.

### Saving a game with perpetual check

When everything seems lost, perpetual check can come to the rescue. In chess, a perpetual check occurs when one of the players can literally give check to the opponent forever. Although the checks will not lead to checkmate, perpetual check can nevertheless be a saving resource for the player who is behind in the game. Helpless to escape the checks, the player with the superior position will not be able to exploit his advantage and the game will end in a draw.

Technically, there is no such thing in chess as a draw by perpetual check. But perpetual check will eventually lead to a threefold repetition of position, which does force a draw if either one of the players asks for it. The rule is that, if the same position occurs three times during a game, with the same player to move each time and the same number of available moves (including castling and "en passant" pawn captures), a draw claim must be upheld.

In the diagram to the left from a game at the Indian River County Chess Club, White is on the move but cannot avoid perpetual check by Black. Whatever White does, Black will begin a series of endless checks with his Queen. Try it yourself for fun. The actual game continued

47.Qd6+ Kg7 48.h3 Qe4+ 49.Kg3 g5 50.c7 Qf4+ 51.Kg2 Qe4+ 52.Kh2 and draw agreed (Black can play 52...Qc2).

Humberto Cruz is a United States Chess Federation correspondence chess master and certified tournament director. He can be reached at [askhumberto@aol.com](mailto:askhumberto@aol.com).

## THE BRIDGE COLUMN BY PIETER VANBENNEKOM - BRIDGE COLUMNIST

Flustered Flo is nothing if not brave. Most of the competition in a recent pairs tournament had been content to stop at 6 Spades, but she bid 7 Spades on a deal diagrammed below.

Flo held the East hand and was the Dealer; nobody vulnerable.

The bidding:	East	South	West	North
	2 Clubs	Pass	2 Hearts	Double
	2 Spades	Pass	3 Spades	4 Clubs
	4 NT	Pass	5 Diamonds	Pass
	7 Spades	All pass.		

South led the 10 of Clubs, which was ducked all around and East won with the Ace.

Flustered Flo with the East hand took the Ace of Trumps on the second trick, found the bad trump split, then played the 10 of trumps, forcing South to play the Jack, which she won with Queen in dummy. She came back with a small trump and drew South's remaining trumps.

Then she went to the dummy with the deuce of Diamonds and successfully finessed the Queen, winning the next two Diamond tricks in her hand. Since she couldn't get back to the board to collect the good 7 of Diamonds and dump her losing Heart, in the end, she lost a Heart trick and went down one.

"You can count yourself lucky that I'm not the kind of partner who yells at you for pushing us up too high," her partner Loyal Larry said. It turned out that most everyone else had indeed stopped at 6 and made it.

But then Flo found out that her eternal nemesis, Smug Sam, had also big 7 Spades with the same East hand – and made it, for tops.

Flo went up to Sam at the end of the tournament: "How did you make those 7 Spades?" she asked. "I couldn't find a way."

"Easy," replied Sam, smugly. "Of course you assume that the Queen of Diamonds is in the North hand with all the points, because he kept on bidding, but you can also assume he pretty much had to be void in Spades, the only thing that could have given him the courage to bid that high."

"Therefore, to guard against the 4-0 trump split, you have to start setting up the ruff of the losing Heart out of your hand as of the second trick. If the trumps split 4-0, you need every one of the trumps on the board, a small one to ruff a Heart and then have Queen-little available to pull one finesse on the Jack and still be able to draw all trumps."

"So I led the Ace of Hearts at Trick Two, ruffed the six of Hearts in dummy at Trick Three, came back to my hand with the Diamond finesse on the Queen, and then led the 10 of trumps for the finesse on the Jack."

### Guarding against worst-case scenario

NORTH			
WEST		EAST	
♠ Q 8 5	♥ 3	♠ A K 10 9 7 4	♥ A K 6
♦ A 10 9 7	♣ Q 9 7 6 5	♠ J 6 3 2	♦ K J 2
		SOUTH	
		♥ 8 7 5 2	♣ A
		♦ 6 5 4	
		♣ 10 3	

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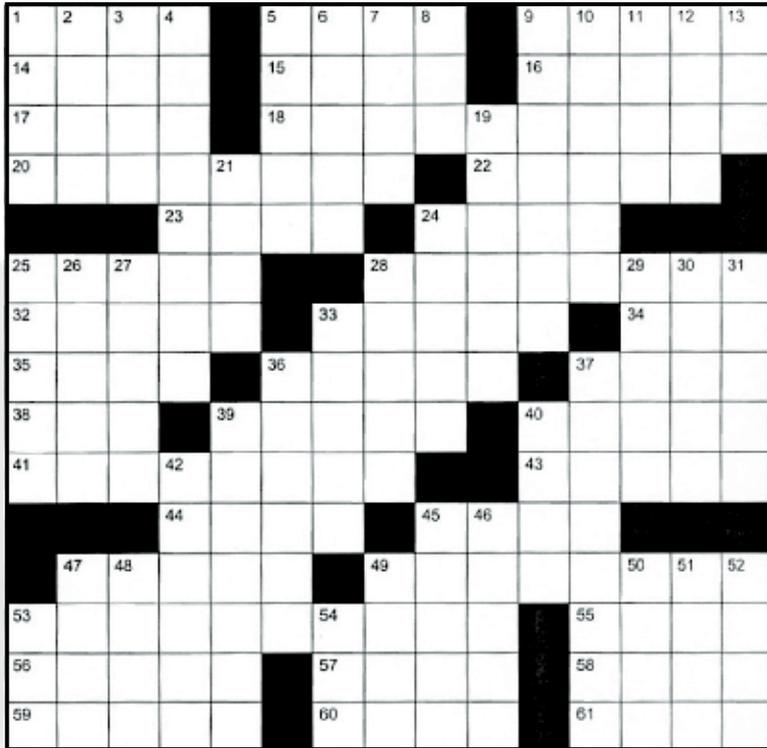
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# Crossword

SOLUTIONS TO LAST ISSUE ON PAGE 75

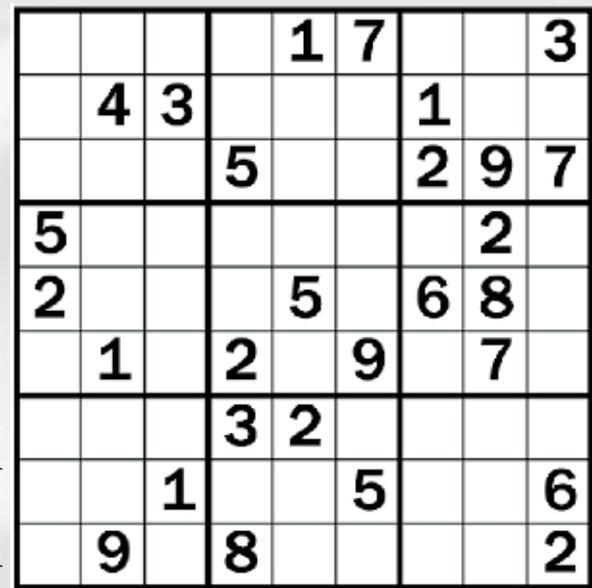
## SHARP



The Christian Science Monitor | By Joe Cunningham | Edited by Charles Preston

- ACROSS**
- 1 Ethereal instrument
  - 5 Dawdles
  - 9 Employer
  - 14 Milky stone
  - 15 Very light brown
  - 16 Labor group
  - 17 Southwest cliffs
  - 18 Kind of play
  - 20 Blotted out
  - 22 Belonging to Cain's brother
  - 23 Earth's rotations
  - 24 Broken husks of cereal grain
  - 25 Open assertion
  - 28 Hero sandwiches
  - 32 "The Outcast of Poker Flats" author
  - 33 Insipid
  - 34 Contend
  - 35 Iowa's Skunk River city
  - 36 Informal language
  - 37 Sheltered inlet
  - 38 Sprinted
  - 39 Listened to
  - 40 Extra card in a deck
  - 41 Move across
  - 43 Consumers
  - 44 Radiate
  - 45 Camping gear
  - 47 Actress Shearer
  - 49 A convenience
  - 53 Storied blonde
  - 55 Region
  - 56 Heavenly hunter
  - 57 Korean leader
  - 58 Small brook
  - 59 Surrounded by
  - 60 German city on the Rhine
  - 61 Loud cry
- DOWN**
- 1 Residence
  - 2 Highest point
  - 3 Coarse file
  - 4 Rounds of applause
  - 5 Describes a colt
  - 6 Land units
  - 7 H.S. senior, soon
  - 8 Celestial body
  - 9 Spouse
  - 10 Have in mind
  - 11 Gold coin
  - 12 Long periods of time
  - 13 Not sq.
  - 19 Venturesome boldness
  - 21 Appellation
  - 24 Distinctive kind
  - 25 Diagram
  - 26 Populist politician \_\_\_\_ Alexander
  - 27 Sphere of activity
  - 28 Harsh light
  - 29 Call forth
  - 30 Abundant stream
  - 31 Prophets
  - 33 Explosion
  - 36 Continued story
  - 37 Mint geranium
  - 39 Finishing a garment
  - 40 Ceremonious month
  - 42 Dancer Gwen \_\_\_\_
  - 45 Captured
  - 46 Industrial city in the Ruhr Valley
  - 47 Standard
  - 48 Sundry assortment
  - 49 Reverberate
  - 50 Pa. port
  - 51 Dickens character
  - 52 Statuesque
  - 53 Tibetan gazelle
  - 54 Sphere

# Sudoku



By Ben Arnoldy, The Christian Science Monitor

★★★★☆

### How to do Sudoku:

Fill in the grid so the numbers 1 through 9 appear just once in every column, row and three-by-three square. See example (right).



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**NOTE:** Everyone knows about Mr. K, but not too many know about Mr. H and Mr. L.

**ACROSS**

- 1 Advice maven
- 5 Cubs' home, for short
- 8 Should that be the case
- 12 Osso buco meat
- 16 Non or dec finish
- 17 Verve
- 18 He talked to Wilbur
- 19 Way off?
- 20 "Devilish" work by Mr. L
- 24 Prefix with dollars
- 25 Raison d'\_\_\_
- 26 Ponderosa guy
- 27 Test shows
- 31 Farming prefix
- 32 Olympic chant
- 34 Luggage inspection org.
- 37 Become familiar with
- 39 Classic work by Mr. H
- 43 Space novel by Mr. L
- 45 Seek redress from
- 46 24-part epic
- 47 Resistance to change
- 48 Mr. H co-wrote a few, including "Jane Eyre"
- 51 With Wow, an infomercial product
- 53 Cockapoo, e.g.
- 54 Garfield's owner
- 55 Spread's other name
- 56 "Weird" Al tune
- 58 Tristan's love
- 61 Blubber or butter
- 62 Hospital drips
- 65 Seven-book series by Mr. L
- 70 Swindled
- 71 Long, long time
- 72 Spoiler

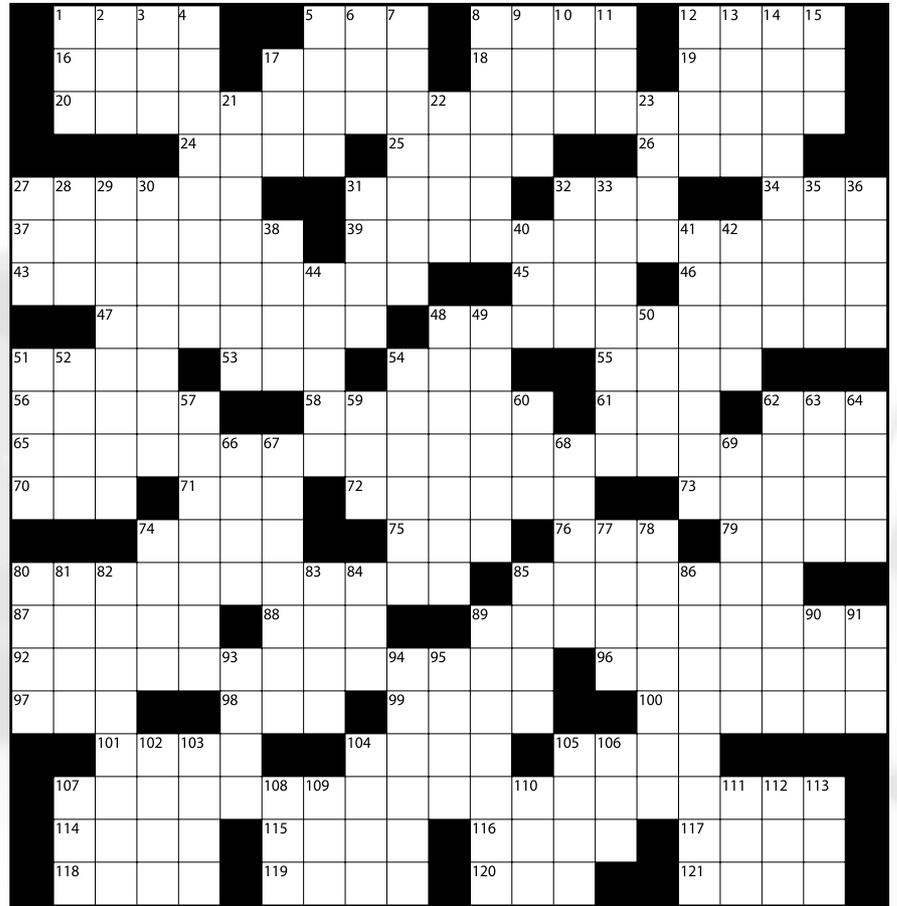
- 73 Accelerator, for example
- 74 Sea bird or Irish river
- 75 Volleyball need
- 76 Math subj.
- 79 Stable youngster
- 80 Film starring Anthony Hopkins as Mr. L
- 85 Run out of town \_\_\_
- 87 Em and Bee
- 88 Assayer's sample
- 89 Classic album featuring Mr. H on its cover (and lots of other people, too)
- 92 Philosophical work by Mr. H
- 96 Stiller film, "Meet the \_\_\_"
- 97 Chaotic stuff
- 98 Shogun capital
- 99 Soothing stuff
- 100 Artemis, to Apollo
- 101 Bring up, or something to bring up
- 104 "O patria mia," e.g.
- 105 First name in stunts
- 107 Interesting factoid about Mr. H and Mr. L

**DOWN**

- 1 Hood's pistol
- 2 Kin of "ick!"
- 3 Wade's opponent
- 4 Disturb
- 5 Queenly role for Liz
- 6 Hem's partner
- 7 Former Acura

- 8 Ad-libbed bit
- 9 Unoccupied
- 10 64 Down, to French chefs
- 11 Keats creation
- 12 Bill killer
- 13 Unhitched people
- 14 Rudimentary runway
- 15 USN officers
- 17 Embarrass the host, e.g.
- 21 Eclair filling
- 22 Trac II alternative
- 23 Break the ice?
- 27 Drivel
- 28 Cyan add-on
- 29 Lassoed
- 30 Club's invitation to new comics, \_\_\_ night
- 31 Incantation start
- 32 Word on a coin
- 33 Bids bon voyage to
- 35 Strip on a bed
- 36 Throws in
- 38 Now aware of
- 40 Subj. for aliens
- 41 FBI device
- 42 Hodgepodge
- 44 Eat heartily
- 48 Sondheim's reunion musical
- 49 Start a paragraph
- 50 Feudin' side, maybe
- 51 Actor Green or Rogen
- 52 "Very funny"
- 54 Cheerful
- 57 1980 Bette Midler hit
- 59 Connery's title
- 60 Legal suffix
- 62 Lazy
- 63 Tablet bottle
- 64 Grains in a pinch
- 66 Ex-Disney CEO \_\_\_ Miller
- 67 Minimum wash job

- 68 Praying figure, in art
- 69 They tell you how to fix things
- 74 1999 Ron Howard film about a reality show
- 77 Reindeer herder
- 78 1982 sequel to a high school musical
- 80 Mirthful Mort
- 81 Military chopper
- 82 Bacterium that needs no oxygen
- 83 Pisa's river
- 84 Homer's neighbor
- 85 Gawk at
- 86 Fool's day
- 89 Actor Everett et al.
- 90 Calif.'s 101, e.g.
- 91 Ukr. or Lith., once
- 93 Bookworm, maybe
- 94 Macmillan or Wilson
- 95 Mrs. Tiger Woods
- 102 007 attended it
- 103 "Hello, sailor"
- 104 Yemeni port
- 105 In your lifetime
- 106 Germany's second generation of rockets during WWII
- 107 Inclement
- 108 Wii chip designer
- 109 Middle of the "Able ... Elba" palindrome
- 110 Night flyer
- 111 Three-digit code indicating a charge call (as for puzzle answers)
- 112 Halfway between midnight and noon
- 113 Elementary school basics



**MR. H AND MR. L**  
By Merl Reagle

6				2			3	7
							1	9
			3		9			
8	5			7		9		6
			2					
		2		3			1	5
			8		1			
9		5						
3	7			6				1

Puzzle by telegraph.co.uk

★★★★☆

Row →	4	3	2	8	1	6	7	5	9
	5	6	9	3	7	4	8	1	2
	1	7	8	9	5	2	4	6	3
Three-by-three square →	3	4	7	2	8	5	6	9	1
	2	1	6	7	4	9	3	8	5
	9	8	5	1	6	3	2	7	4
	7	9	1	4	3	8	5	2	6
	8	5	3	6	2	1	9	4	7
	6	2	4	5	9	7	1	3	8

Column

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## The end is not near by Jay McNamara

Mankind has always expected the end of the world. So, there have been many dramatic expositions of doomsday, playing upon peoples' fears and beliefs.

These days, the latest entry in the doomsday genre, the movie "2012," comes with the news that the Mayan calendar's 5,125-year cycle ends on December 21, 2012. The Mayans were brilliant astronomers and calendar-keepers, but there is no reason to believe they forecasted the end of life. It's more likely they thought that on December 21, 2012 a new cycle would commence.

If you are looking for scientific evidence against the coming apocalypse, there are at least two good sources, NASA and CERN. Both have made statements allaying fears. CERN is short for the European Center for Nuclear Research.

This is the gang with the Large Hadron Collider, the one that shoots sub atomic particles at super speeds so computers can watch what happens when they crash. CERN has contributed its own end-of-the-world fear that the collider would create a black hole that would swallow the earth. It hasn't happened yet.

Another noted effort was created by Orson Welles, a man of considerable talents. I had the occasion to cross paths with him late in his career.

In 1938, Welles' radio episode "War of the Worlds" had immediate and startling impact. In contrast to recent Hollywood attempts at doomsday scenarios, with extensive use of digital wizardry, Welles was able to elicit extreme fear from its greatest source, the imagination.

In the show, Martians had landed in New Jersey (no NJ jokes, please) and were taking over the place. In the real world, people responded wildly, getting in their cars and fleeing. It wasn't until a few days later that sanity prevailed. Welles' fame was wide and instant.

Welles later made a bigger name for himself in Hollywood. His "Citizen Kane" still pops up as the best movie ever made, with Welles in the starring role. He went on to create some big flops, too.

And so it happened that the great man, needing a few bucks to support his life style and alimony payments, arrived on Madison Avenue. He became the voice-over announcer for Eastern Airline commercials. His voice was extraordinary. It could import great weight to the most banal set of words.

The airline had bought a fleet of new L1011 planes and was looking for a dramatic way to introduce them. A clever commercial was devised. It was a one-camera shot of a plane, beginning from a great distance. Only Welles voice could be heard as the camera zoomed closer. Orson would be placed on the tail of the plane so that viewers would see him in the final moments of the spot.

On a sunny morning, a limo was dispatched to Welles Los Angeles home to bring him to the desert where the plane sat. Everything about him was big including the box of expensive cigars he carried before him wherever he went. He had to extend his arms in order to reach around his ample girth.

As the lifting device was deployed to raise Welles to the great height of the tail section, a second vehicle arrived on the scene. It was a van filled with Disney characters; Mickey, Minnie, Donald, Pluto, etc. Part of the commercial emphasized Eastern's status as the official airline of Walt Disney World.

Welles erupted when he saw the characters. "What are these bleeping animals doing here?" Coming in that stentorian voice of his, the question was high comedy to everyone but him. He decided he wouldn't do the commercial. Then he was reminded of the bills that were due for his expensive marriages and those cigars.

Soon, he was borne aloft with his fellow actors. He was so angry that he nailed the reading on the first take and was soon back in the limo and out of there. Although he hated the experience, it wasn't the end of the world for him. And December 21, 2012, won't be the end for us either.