

WEEK 31, 2019

# THE EPOCH TIMES

# ARTS & TRADITION



STEFEN SCHUBERT

Tatyana Kulida pauses while painting a portrait from life, in her studio in 2018.

Artist Tatyana Kulida's  
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## THE EPOCH TIMES

TRUTH AND TRADITION

LITERATURE *One Page at a Time:*

# Bringing Back the Old Book

JEFF MINICK

In the 1945 movie “A Tree Grows in Brooklyn,” based on Betty Smith’s novel about immigrants living in Brooklyn, New York, around the turn of the last century, we come across a scene of great import for us today. Francie and her brother Neeley are seated in their tenement apartment with their mother Katie and their grandmother. Every evening, the two children read aloud a page from the Bible and from Shakespeare while the two women sew.

On this particular evening, Neeley complains that no one in the room understands the lines from Shakespeare’s “Troilus and Cressida.” Katie tentatively agrees with him, but then says that the grandmother had long ago told her that these were the two greatest books. Maybe, Katie added, reading them “might even get you a job some day.”

At this point the grandmother, illiterate and poor, wags her finger and declares in her thick Austrian accent, “Dis reading vill not stop.” She then launches into a brief but eloquent defense of education and to learn “to think wit your heart.” She ends by repeating her admonition about the Bible and Shakespeare: “Dis reading vill not stop.”

Unfortunately, this reading, at least of the Bible, has stopped.

**What we need now is greater wisdom and understanding of our past and our traditions, and deeper connections to that past.**

**The Bible as a Foundation**

To be ignorant of the Bible makes it impossible to connect deeply with the last 2,000 years of Western civilization. Painting, sculpture, poetry, music, and philosophy all are embroidered with uncountable references to the Old and New Testaments.

Literature in particular bows its head in homage to this monument of words. Even in the 20th century, writers as diverse as Ernest Hemingway, Marianne Moore, Thomas Wolfe, and Ray Bradbury allude again and again to passages from Scripture.

We might as easily argue that the King James Bible has heavily influenced the craft of writing. For over 400 years, English-speaking peoples read and heard these Scriptures. Looking again to our modern writers, we find, as one of many examples, Hemingway employing some of the rhythms of the King James Bible in his novels and short stories, cadences perhaps unconsciously inculcated in him by his religious mother.

For decades now, guided by the idea of “separation of church and state,” our public schools have either avoided or banned teaching the Bible as literature. By this banishment, as some writers and teachers have pointed out, our schools have removed a foundation stone of our liberal arts, our language, and our history.

Even the atheist and renowned deconstructionist Jacques Derrida taught Scripture to his university students. When asked why he spent so much time teaching the Bible, he replied with something echoing: If they don’t know the Bible, they won’t know much.

Precisely. Without some biblical knowledge, how could any student fully appreciate the mystery and miracle plays of the Middle Ages, the tales of Chaucer, the plays of Shakespeare, the poems of John Donne, and even such modernist works as James Joyce’s “Ulysses” or the poetry of T.S. Eliot?

Our history, too, is filled with references to the Bible. From the Mayflower Compact to the oratory of Martin Luther King Jr., our documents and public addresses bear a biblical stamp. The speeches of Abraham Lincoln in particular come to mind, with his outright embrace of numerous passages from Scripture, and the prose rhythms in his Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural Speech displaying heavy influences from what he called the “Great Book.”

Years ago, we not only banned the Bible from literature classes, but we also erased the centrality of the Bible and religion from the founding of our country. In his online article “More Than a Culture War Rages in America,” Scott Powell of The American Spectator reports on this removal of religion from our public school history books:

In 1986, Dr. Paul Vitz, a professor of psychology at New York University, published the findings of a commission’s study in which he participated to examine the degree and nature of bias in 60 social studies and history textbooks used by 87 percent of public schools across the United States. Not only was there no God being thanked by the Pilgrims in the first Thanksgiving, but the study found that almost every other reference to the Christian influence of early America was systematically removed.

To make no reference to the religious beliefs of a people, to cut out the Bible and religion as major influences on our ancestors, is akin to writing a history of the Crusades without reference to the Cross.

Victor Hugo once wrote that “England has two books, the Bible and Shakespeare. England made Shakespeare, but the Bible made England.” Yes, and England made America.

**Our Cultural Heritage**

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not advocating instruction in the Bible for religious purposes, but for cultural literacy. We have a precedent to guide us in this endeavor. In ancient Greece and Rome, many philosophers, poets, and statesmen came to disbelieve in the Olympian deities, the pantheon of divine and semi-divine figures, yet they nonetheless recognized that Homer’s “Iliad” and “Odyssey,” and Virgil’s “Aeneid” were wellsprings of their culture, and they drank deeply from those waters.

The Bible occupies a similar place in our culture and tradition. Whether we are believers or not, the Old Book is a beam, perhaps the main beam, that undergirds our civilization; only now that beam is broken.



“The Canterbury Tales” would not be understandable without knowledge of the Bible. A detail from “The Canterbury Tales” mural, 1939, by Ezra Winter, in the Library of Congress.



(Top) Ernest Hemingway, pictured here in 1939, used some of the rhythms of the King James Bible in his novels and short stories.

(Above) Abraham Lincoln called the Bible “Great Book.” A statue of young Lincoln by Charles Keck, in Chicago.

(Right) Much of Western literature, art, and American history is rooted in the Bible.



Proverbs 16:16 states, “How much better is it to get wisdom than gold! And to get understanding rather to be chosen than silver!”

Our society possesses plentiful gold and silver. What we need now is greater wisdom and understanding of our past and our traditions, and deeper connections to that past.

Repairing and restoring that beam

will be difficult. No government program will assist in that restoration, and given the temper of our times, we can reasonably assume that few schools will at present undertake to teach the Bible as literature.

No—like so much that needs doing today, if we seek change, we must step up and take responsibility. Perhaps, like Neeley and Francie, we can begin

mending that broken beam by reading one page at a time, one day at a time.

*Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See JeffMinick.com to follow his blog.*



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FINE ARTS

Artist

# Tatyana Kulida's Love of Beauty, Art, and All Things Florence

An interview with a realist artist and atelier founder

LORRAINE FERRIER

Realist painter Tatyana Kulida is simply doing what she loves: creating art from real life and teaching traditional classical art at her Anthesis Atelier in Wellington, on New Zealand's North Island.

Kulida and her young family moved from Italy to New Zealand in 2015, when her second daughter, Flora, named after her beloved Florence, was just 3 months old.

Before the move, both Kulida and her husband, Steffen Schubert, studied and then taught at The Florence Academy of Art.

Kulida was awarded a scholarship from the Art Renewal Center in 2013, and the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum's John F. and Ann Lee Stacey Scholarship for the most promising realist student that same year.

Her work can be found in private collections in the United States, the UK, Europe, and Australia, and in the permanent collections of the New Britain Museum of American Art in New Britain, Connecticut, and the Cameron Art Museum in Wilmington, North Carolina. In her Wellington studio, Kulida is actively evolving her art practice. She explains by phone that each atelier has a certain style of art that informs the viewer as to where its students studied.

For example, The Florence Academy of Art style is not as focused on rendering as other ateliers are, and the paintings have a dark background and strong anatomy.

Kulida is consciously stepping out of The Florence Academy of Art mold.

For instance, her body of work includes water gilding (traditional gilding), faux finishing (using paint to recreate marble, stone, and more), and decorative framing techniques. Or she may create a still life based on nonclassical subject matter: New Zealand's exotic flora and fauna, such as some flax, paua shells, or a large piece of bull kelp that fills the canvas.

Here, she shares key moments in her life, including a little about her upbringing in Crimea, and how hard work, a classical arts education, and above all, an enduring love for art and beauty, has helped her and continues to shape her art.

**THE EPOCH TIMES:** You practiced classical music when you were younger. Can you tell us about that?

**TATYANA KULIDA:** Classical music is a big part of a good Russian upbringing. Many students went to music school; it was something you enrolled in after school.

You would have your main instrument, then choir, music theory, performance, and all sorts of subjects

“Visual arts shouldn't be any different from any classical approach to any classical discipline.”

Tatyana Kulida

wrapped into an 8- to 10-year course. I did 10 years of that. I did pretty well. Because there are so many excellent music teachers, and the students play quite competitively, you have to not simply be very good but brilliant to stick to that profession.

So I chose something else. I ran a little high school newspaper, all in English, which we self-published. By then, my knowledge of English was sufficient to apply to a university abroad, and I received a full scholarship to the Emma Willard School in Troy, New York, which enabled me to go and explore the world at the age of 17.

**THE EPOCH TIMES:** Did you see any cultural similarities when you went to America from Crimea?

**MS. KULIDA:** No. They're actually quite different. In Crimea, we had very little in terms of belongings. It wasn't a culture where you go shopping because it's fun. I probably had three skirts in total, a pair of pants, four tops, and that was it. I didn't even have the mindset that I could possibly need or want more.

When I arrived in America at the fancy boarding school, the young women were driving huge cars, and they were going shopping on the weekend. I could see that I was different, and I didn't have certain things, but it didn't bother me so much that I felt like I was not enough or not sufficient in any way. It was just kind of how it was.

When my parents were raising me, they focused on me discovering and learning things, and that's where my focus was.

I was just driven by pure curiosity. I guess I didn't have much of a fear of things going wrong, because when you're curious then the world is open.

**THE EPOCH TIMES:** Please tell us about your time in Florence as an artist at The Florence Academy of Art.

**MS. KULIDA:** That is my creative home, and that was the most favorite part of my life.

I feel like my being used to living very simply and requiring very little came in very handy, because with just a bicycle and a simple knowledge of cooking, I could go to the market and make conversation.

We spent six years there. It was just a dream come true.

I had my young daughter with me, and things were really difficult financially; I funded part of the course on credit cards.

I remember being in a studio at the academy and thinking how difficult it was for me to get there every day. I had a small child to wake up, get fed, get ready, and get to school, and then get myself in on time to the studio. It

was complicated. But once I was in the studio, it was just pure bliss because all I had to do was what I loved. I just loved every day.

We go back to Florence every year with my older daughter, so she can keep up with her friendships, and so I can go and just immerse myself in the beauty. Because every corner you turn and everywhere you look, you have centuries worth of craftsmanship, and the people there have a passion for what they do, whether it's making shoes, or buildings, or ice cream. It's just all divine.

**THE EPOCH TIMES:** Please tell us about what you teach at your Anthesis Atelier in Wellington.

**MS. KULIDA:** The way I look at classical education is that this is the way to learn your grammar, your scales, and your technique before you can write your novel or your symphony, or whatever the case may be.

When I went to music school, we did a lot of straight off practice, just hours of working out whatever it was: how to position your fingers, where to put your feet, stretching the muscles, and more. This is all very similar. Visual arts shouldn't be any different from any classical approach to any classical discipline.

My foundation program is based on the Bargue copy. These are a series of drawings that French painter Charles Bargue developed from antique sculptures and 19th-century sculptures, in collaboration with his teacher, the French painter Jean-Léon Gérôme. The drawings illustrate certain things about visual information that we artists use in terms of how we communicate a three-dimensional form onto a two-dimensional surface.

The student starts with small exercises in pencil and then goes on to larger ones. And we also explore different mediums, building up the muscles in the hands, developing precision of the eye, and also the memory, because when you're communicating shapes and putting these sorts of visual puzzles together, the memory is an important part of the training.

Then we progress to drawing from plaster casts. Students set up plaster casts and observe how the shapes work in a live setup: what the shadow shapes are, and how the values communicate the particular movements of the form.

**THE EPOCH TIMES:** One of the testimonials on your website says: "I learned more in two weeks than a whole year in art school." Why do you think that is?

**MS. KULIDA:** This is just my observation. This is not necessarily a criticism of art schools or whatever, because my 12-year-old is in the school



Tatyana Kulida in her studio in Wellington, New Zealand, in 2018.

system here in New Zealand. I see what she's doing in her art class.

My impression is that they are doing a type of survey of materials, mediums, or styles.

So they would do something and say, "Let's do it in the style of New Zealand artist Colin McCahon." Or another time, they'd say, "Now we're going to use some mixed media and make a collage in the style of ...," whoever it may be.

The issue is that when you're trying different styles from various people, you never have the opportunity to become yourself. You become a "something," similar to how contemporary artists would say, "Oh, I'm an impressionist" or "I'm a ..., whatever it is.

Whereas for us to pick up a certain style now, it's a sort of mimicry. It's not sincere. It's not original. It's not your way that came out of you; it came out of copying.

At the atelier, we talk about harmony and how to see that, and to really make something beautiful, how it comes down to harmony. Straight copying and the mechanical copying method don't allow the artist to have an awareness of that harmonic

sense.

**THE EPOCH TIMES:** You've lived in a few different countries: Crimea, America, Italy, and now New Zealand. Who have you found is interested in classical painting?

**MS. KULIDA:** It's a little bit tricky, and it has to do with upbringing.

A lot of people that do appreciate and like my work come from Europe, or have been educated in Europe, or have traveled extensively to Europe.

New Zealand is obviously a young country; they're in the teenage rebellious stage, where they want to reject everything that came before. In a way, New Zealand art followed its European roots and the artists infused that European influence with the native landscape and Maori culture, but the artists now really want to create something of their own.

Certainly, there's a big population who like big paintings with bright colors and something very abstract, but it also has to do with their expectations about what art can bring to them. If the consumption of art is driven by the "wow" factor, and then you move on after a few minutes or a few seconds, then there's certainly

“I only use natural light and I don't use photography; my subject has to be in front of me.”

Tatyana Kulida

Tatyana Kulida paints a portrait of her eldest daughter, Jaclyn, in 2018.

plenty of artwork that can achieve that.

I do aim and hope to produce artwork that can be looked at again and again, and be a presence rather than an interior decorating element. It's a tall order.

**THE EPOCH TIMES:** Please tell us about your art practice.

**MS. KULIDA:** I either have a model who will come in at about 9 or 10 o'clock and would be with me for about three hours, or I paint something else like a still life.

If I have a model, I do something else in the afternoon. But that would be all. I usually do no more than two things in one day. It's usually a two- to three-hour session, at least, on whatever it is. If I paint flowers, I would do a whole day for two to three days in a row because they die quickly.

Usually, I have about four or five portraits on the go.

I also have a few sculptures on the go for when the light is not good for painting. I only use natural light, and I don't use photography; my subject has to be in front of me. I feel like a photograph represents a single view of the subject—one second's worth of that subject's presence, whether it's a flower or a person.

If I composite several hours, several sittings, several expressions, several choices of how the petal is open, or how the mouth is turned, or where the gaze is pointed: If I have all of those choices and changes composited into one painting, that's what creates the depth that you might be seeing in the work.

It's that kind of time travel, that extra dimension, that goes way beyond the straight copy of the subject.

So very rarely would I work from photographs. I have done that. For example, when I painted the former New Zealand prime minister, as he's very limited on time. I did a good chunk from life and a lot of it from photographs, and then I finished it from life so that I made sure that I retained the lively quality of the piece.

I certainly prefer to just look at the real thing. There's nothing better.

*This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.*



(Left) Lucy Revill, author of The Residents blog, stands next to her portrait in progress on Tatyana Kulida's easel.

(Right) Tatyana Kulida, in red, teaches a master copy and portraiture intensive workshop in her studio on Cuba Street in Wellington, New Zealand.

To learn more about Tatyana Kulida's atelier, visit AnthesisAtelier.com





“Flora,” circa 1654, by Rembrandt. Oil on canvas, 39 3/8 inches by 36 1/8 inches. Gift of Archer M. Huntington, in memory of his father, Collis Potter Huntington, 1926.

FINE ARTS

# Rembrandt: The Art of Empathy

Rembrandt’s paintings draw you into the joys and struggles of his subjects

portrait of Rembrandt’s deceased wife, Saskia. Flora offers flowers in her hand, symbolic of the spring’s bountiful blessing. Since she’s turned to her side, not offering the harvest gift directly to you, she exudes modesty. Her blessing seems indirect and subtle, as if she’s saying, I’m here when you need me.

“[Rembrandt] wasn’t making women look like Greco-Roman statues that had come to life,” Adam Eaker said in a phone interview. Eaker is the exhibition curator and assistant curator in the department of European paintings at The Met. That break from idealism “was one of the most revolutionary qualities of Rembrandt,” he said.

While Flora’s poise is effortless and natural, her appearance isn’t perfect. She has slight bags under her eyes, a double chin, and looks fairly common. Like a lady of the day, she wears a billowy blouse, hat, and some jewelry.

Rembrandt’s contemporaries criticized his “lack of flattery, [and] very unsparring realism,” Eaker says in the exhibition’s audio guide. He elaborates in the audio presentation: “In his own day, [Rembrandt] certainly

was not universally acknowledged to be the best. By the time he dies, he had gone bankrupt. He’d really fallen out of favor ... People were outraged by this lack of idealism, the roughness of the paintings.”

But Flora’s spirit is timeless, and her gentility wraps you in tranquility. Paradoxically, Rembrandt vividly conveys his subjects’ inner worlds by realistically depicting their outer ones.

**Emerging From Mud**  
In “Portrait of Gerard de Lairese,” Rembrandt painted a fellow artist, disfigured with disease.

“De Lairese—his appearance reveals his condition, particularly in the degradation of his nose, also his sunken eyes,” Eaker says in the audio guide. The illness would eventually cause blindness, forcing de Lairese to shift professions from painter to writer.

Though he had previously been a fan of Rembrandt, after the painfully realistic portrait, de Lairese described Rembrandt’s work as “liquid mud on the canvas.”

“We can sympathize with de Lairese, [since] many of us would not want to have a completely realistic depiction of our own physical flaws,” Eaker says in the audio guide. Rembrandt’s depictions could be described as unapologetic, yet they aren’t harsh or mean-spirited. There’s often a matter-of-factness to his works; he’s not demeaning subjects, but he is trying to transmit what he sees. In the case of “Gerard de Lairese,” you can see a slight embarrassment, sadness, or even insecurity from the sitter.

Rembrandt has shown mastery of communicating his subject’s vulnerability. He illustrates imperfection and pain, which in turn evokes the viewer’s empathy. It’s impossible to stand as a judge of de Lairese and his sickness, because Rembrandt draws you intimately into the subject’s raw emotional truth.

**Respect and Admiration**  
Rembrandt’s “Herman Doomer” illustrates a unique handsomeness, not in the subject’s physical attractiveness but in his grounded, well-presence. Herman Doomer was a luxury cabinetmaker, specializing in imported ebony pieces fashionable in 17th-century Amsterdam. Hisson apprenticed under Rembrandt.

This is Rembrandt’s most detailed, realistic painting in the exhibition, almost photograph-like. But unlike a cold photograph, made by machine not hand, Rembrandt imbues Doomer with warmth.

“It seems that there was a real degree of respect on Rembrandt’s part for this fellow craftsman and fellow artisan. You see that in just how wonderfully the picture is painted,” Eaker said to me. This work was the single most expensive Dutch painting ever sold in the 19th century. “When it was given to The Met, it was a real coup for us in building our collection.”

Rembrandt unabashedly shows Doomer’s age with fine wrinkles around his eyes and in his face, like road maps of years spent toiling away, refining his craft as a furniture maker. Those facial imprints are accentuated with a mere suggestion of a smile, as Doomer emanates warmheartedness.

“It just shows you everything you would want in a Rembrandt portrait,” Eaker said. “So, the exquisite painting of the rough, the realistic conveying of this man’s middle-aged appearance, and then you also have a real sense of his character, his intelligence.”

*J.H. White is an arts, culture, and men’s fashion journalist living in New York.*

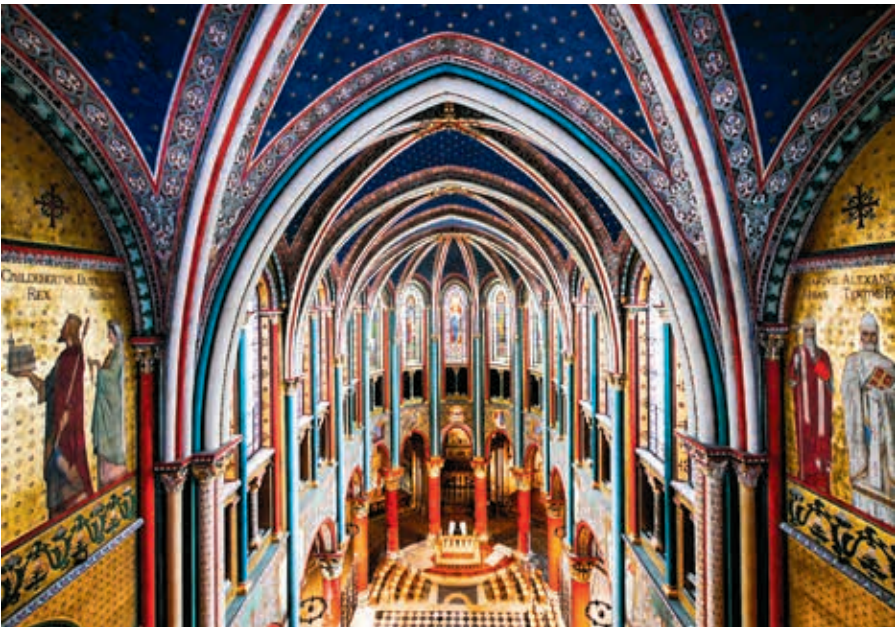


(Left) Portrait of Herman Doomer, 1640, by Rembrandt. Oil on wood, 29 5/8 inches by 21 3/4 inches. H.O. Havemeyer Collection, bequest of Mrs. H.O. Havemeyer, 1929. (Right) Portrait of Gerard de Lairese, 1665–67, by Rembrandt. Oil on canvas, 44 3/8 inches by 34 1/2 inches. Robert Lehman Collection, 1975.



BEHOLD THE BEAUTY

# A Parisian Gem: Saint Germain des Prés



The richly decorated interior of Saint Germain des Prés in Paris is undergoing essential and extensive restoration work.

LORRAINE FERRIER

Fourteen centuries have taken its toll on Saint Germain des Prés, the oldest church in Paris. Built in 543, the church has been through a lot. Revered by Christians, attacked by Vikings, and desecrated during the French Revolution, the church has been ruined, rebuilt, and restored more than once.

Today, Saint Germain des Prés is a prime example of medieval architecture and 19th-century decoration.

In the early 1800s, in the aftermath of the French Revolution, the church lay in ruins. The French painter Hippolyte Flandrin was commissioned by the city of Paris to redecorate it. Flandrin’s murals, executed between 1842 and 1864, are the most notable of the church’s 19th-century decorations, according to the American Friends for the Preservation of Saint Germain des Prés.

Flandrin used the encaustic, or hot wax, painting technique invented by the ancient Greeks, whereby wax is melted and then mixed with pigments and resins to the required consistency. Heat is then applied to the surface of the painting to blend any of the marks made by the brush or spatula. The painting’s finish is similar to that of an oil painting.

The paintings in Saint Germain des Prés depict historic and biblical figures and scenes. The paintings in the Monk’s Choir show the apostles; the sanctuary depicts scenes from the Passion and key figures in the church’s history. The nave shows figures and scenes from the Bible: One painting by Flandrin’s brother, Paul, is from the New Testament, and the remainder are from the Old Testament.

The church’s architectural highlights are the 11th-century central nave and porch. These are all that remain of

the Romanesque basilica built around 1000.

Saint Germain des Prés also has the oldest bell tower in Paris, completed in 1014. The apse and sanctuary completed in 1150, show the Gothic style of architecture with features such as the sanctuary’s three tiers, large arcades, and high windows.

Forty Romanesque capitals sit on top of the columns. Echoing the decorative themes of the paintings with their historical and biblical scenes, the carvings on the capitals also display scenes of monastic life, and plants and animals to inspire and educate the largely illiterate populace of that time.

In order for the beauty of the church to continue to enthrall and educate future generations, a mammoth preservation project has been underway since 2016.

*To find out more, including how to donate, visit Preserve-SaintGermain.org*

FILM REVIEW

# A Low-Brow Comedy That Barely Scratches the Surface of Ageism

IAN KANE

“Supervized” stars Tom Berenger as Ray, in a new, young-at-heart comedy film that purportedly explores ageism. Directed by Steve Barron (“Coneheads,” “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles”), the film explores what it would be like if our favorite superheroes went to old folks’ homes after reaching their retirement ages.

Back in his prime, Ray, also known as Maximum Justice, was one of the most popular superheroes of all and was used to saving the world from all manner of dastardly plots. However, after he started getting up in years, an organization known as The Federation placed him in a nursing home, which for some unexplained reason is located in Ireland.

Instead of defeating powerful, evil foes, Ray spends his time nowadays playing cards with longtime super-sidekick Ted (Beau Bridges), who is also known as Shimmy, and Pendle (Louis Gossett Jr.), also known as Total Thunder, who are also residents of the home.

If Ray manifests his powers at all, it’s in order to manipulate certain things in the home, such as telepathically changing the TV channel instead of having to fetch the remote. In a nutshell, Ray’s character seems to be preoccupied with the past. He frequently looks back at his younger days as a once-famous, masked crime-fighter.

Some drama kicks off when, one day, Madera (Fionnula Flannagan), also known as Moonlight, shows up as one of the nursing home’s new residents. Since both Ray and Pendle were romantically linked to Madera in the past, a love triangle begins to form, but not for long.

The film’s second act commences with the mysterious death of one of Ray’s fellow superhero chums, Rainbow Warrior (Clive Russell). Ray spots a nursing home orderly carrying the corpse out the back door and depositing it in a laundry truck. Soon after, he witnesses some local kids using the same powers that Rainbow Warrior once had, which heightens his suspicions that something foul is afoot.

Ray begins to investigate the matter, but his cohorts are hesitant to believe him. As a



(L–R) Fionnula Flanagan, Beau Bridges, Tom Berenger, and Louis Gossett Jr. in “Supervized.”

**‘Supervized’**  
**Director**  
Steve Barron  
**Starring**  
Tom Berenger, Beau Bridges, Louis Gossett Jr., Fionnula Flanagan  
**Rated**  
R  
**Running Time**  
1 hour, 30 minutes  
**Release Date**  
July 19  
★ ★ ★ ★ ★

matter of fact, pretty much everyone thinks that he’s just a delusional old fart. A general consensus eventually forms: Ray is fabricating an imaginary threat in order to get the attention he once commanded.

As a screenwriter myself, I know firsthand how hard it is to write comedy. As they say in the film industry: “If you can write comedy, you can write anything.” It’s one of those talents that’s very hard to develop; usually you either have it or you don’t.

This film’s screenplay was co-written by Andy Briggs and John Niven, and their brand of comedy is peculiar. The film’s humor is raunchy, but not in a sophisticated or nuanced way. Like with much of American film comedy these days, just about everything is in-your-face slapstick, with little in the way of subtlety.

For instance, there’s a scene in which some old male superhero residents are gawking at a female resident who is well-known for her “super-breath” powers. This inspires one of them to make a comment about what her sexual abilities must be like. The whole joke is built upon an oh-so-subtle sight gag shot: She accidentally triggers her powers that result in her dentures flying across the room.

This sort of tacky, low-brow humor permeates the film, with various generic gags rotating with trite old-people jokes. In fact, all of the bawdy bits seem to function as a

crutch, instead of examining why Western culture stigmatizes old age.

To the film’s credit, all of this cringe-worthy filler is counterbalanced by some pretty good performances by the main cast members. Berenger and Bridges stand out because once they get into the film’s flow (around the second act), they genuinely seem to be having fun. Clearly, though, they deserve more dignified material.

Their “best buds ‘til the end” chemistry works, and Bridges plays the humble sidekick who always wanted more acknowledgment, while Berenger’s character always received the lion’s share of the public’s adulation and still thinks he should.

## The cringe-worthy filler is counterbalanced by some pretty good performances by the main cast members.

Unfortunately, “Supervized” plays it super-safe. After seeing the film, my head was filled with so many unanswered questions: Why don’t Western societies generally treat their older populations with the same reverence as other regions? Why are older superheroes necessarily comedic, and why are they automatically relegated to an old folks’ home? Why couldn’t we see some examples of still-powerful elderly superheroes who can kick butt (and still have comedy—albeit of the smarter kind)?

Ironically, in a world that portrays today’s superheroes as perpetually youthful, it was Frank Miller’s “Dark Knight” comic book series—which portrayed Batman as an aging, paunchy, but still potent hero—that revolutionized the comic book industry back in 1986.

That four-issue, limited series single-handedly transformed how the public perceived comics and elevated them from what was originally considered childish entertainment to mature, adult-oriented fare. Maybe the creators of “Supervized” should have taken note of this.



# Faux Sensei Teaches Fake Masculinity

MARK JACKSON

Here’s a minuscule comedy about a meek man-boy who joins a martial arts dojo in search of mature masculinity, but winds up being toxically masculine instead. It’s supposed to be funny. But it’s just so not.

Casey (Jesse Eisenberg) is a skinny, ineffectual, neurotic nebbish. (Eisenberg’s entire filmography is a veritable display case of nebbishes; his is a nebbish wheelhouse.) Casey’s an L.A. accountant. He has no social skills, owns a tiny wiener dog, and works at a deadly boring cubicle job.

**The main problem with ‘The Art of Self-Defense’ is that it can’t decide on its tone.**

Heading home late one night, he gets jumped by a motorcycle gang and roundly stomped. Like the 90-pound weakling in the Charles Atlas ads on the backs of 1960s comic books, Casey decides he’s mad as hell at being bullied, and he’s not going to take it anymore.

He’s on the verge of buying “a gun that fits in my hand” (store clerk: “You’ll be wanting a handgun, then”) but joins a karate dojo instead, with a cult-of-personality type

sensei (Alessandro Nivola).

Sensei is a veritable fount of faux sensei-sayings. Sort of like Bruce Lee’s “Be like water, my friend,” except that he’s more like the buffoon-sensei extraordinaire in “Napoleon Dynamite”—Rex Kwan Do. “Kick with your hands and punch with your feet,” says sensei. Riitlight.

Sensei coaches Casey in all the ways one should be a manly man, all the while dispensing with bon mots of misogyny. Casey should listen to metal music instead of “adult contemporary,” vacation in manly Russia and not soft France, learn German (not French), replace the wiener dog with a German Shepherd, and various such nuggets of brilliant manly information.

Casey is also invited to the top-secret evening classes with the other students who are showing potential, where all kinds of ridiculous violence goes on.

**Fight Club Lite**  
The main problem with “The Art of Self-Defense” is that it can’t decide on its tone. It’s supposed to be some kind of deadpan, quirky, dark-ish, farce-lite, chuckle-lite, vaguely amusing, slightly whimsical, sort-of-entertaining parable.

All of which serve, inadvertently, to render its escalating instances of hyperviolence as not even remotely believable—just sort of incongruous, shocking, and off-putting. It’s a comedy formula that’s hard to get right.

But basically, in this telling, toughening up



**‘The Art of Self-Defense’**  
**Director**  
Riley Stearns  
**Starring**  
Jesse Eisenberg, Alessandro Nivola, Imogen Poots, Steve Terada, Phillip Andre Botello, Leland Orser, David Zellner  
**Rated**  
R  
**Running Time**  
1 hour, 44 minutes  
**Release Date**  
July 12  
★ ★ ★ ★ ★

through karate reveals that Casey + confidence = not a very nice guy. This kind of self-centered, rather cruel individual is the rotten pearl outcome of this toxic dojo oyster, with its insane sensei and ridiculous old-school masculinity. Real Asian old-school dojos weren’t about this kind of nonsense; they were about balance. This is some Western foolishness.

So, you know, huh? What’s the point? The downtrodden nebbish has lived, until now, a life of resentment and, once empowered, becomes ruthless and takes what he wants? Kinda like user-and-abuser-pyramid-scheming Keith Raniere, and multimillionaire and girl-trafficker Jeffrey Epstein?

And if that’s the story—why a comedy? And especially, why one so stubbornly low-watt and low-weird? It neither tells an uplifting story of a boyhood-to-manhood rite of passage, nor does a believable job of presenting a sensei who pretends to be Mr. Miyagi (from “Karate Kid”) while having Cobra Kai in his dark heart. He’s a con-man sensei. Like Keith “The Vanguard” Raniere, who made his acolytes wear different colored sashes to indicate their rank—which he stole from his childhood judo dojo belt-system.

But that’s just not funny.



ESSENCE  
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CHINA



# Portals to Hidden Worlds in Ancient Chinese Legends

SU LIN

William Blake wrote, “To see a world in a grain of sand. And a Heaven in a wild flower.” The Buddha talked about three thousand realms, and in the view of Taoism, the human body is a cosmos. There are stories from ancient China of people entering vast worlds through small openings.

### A World Inside a Gourd

There was an official named Fei Changfang in Runan who was in charge of bazaars during the Eastern Han Dynasty. An old medicine seller at the market always had a gourd hanging at the door of his shop. Every day when the bazaar closed, the old man would jump into the gourd. None of the vendors at the bazaar or the people in the city saw this except for Fei Changfang, who happened to witness it from the second floor one day. Astonished, he called on the old man with meat and wine. The old man asked him to come back the following day. Fei returned the second day as instructed. The old man jumped into the gourd together with him. Although the mouth of the gourd was small, there was a vast and beautiful world inside it.

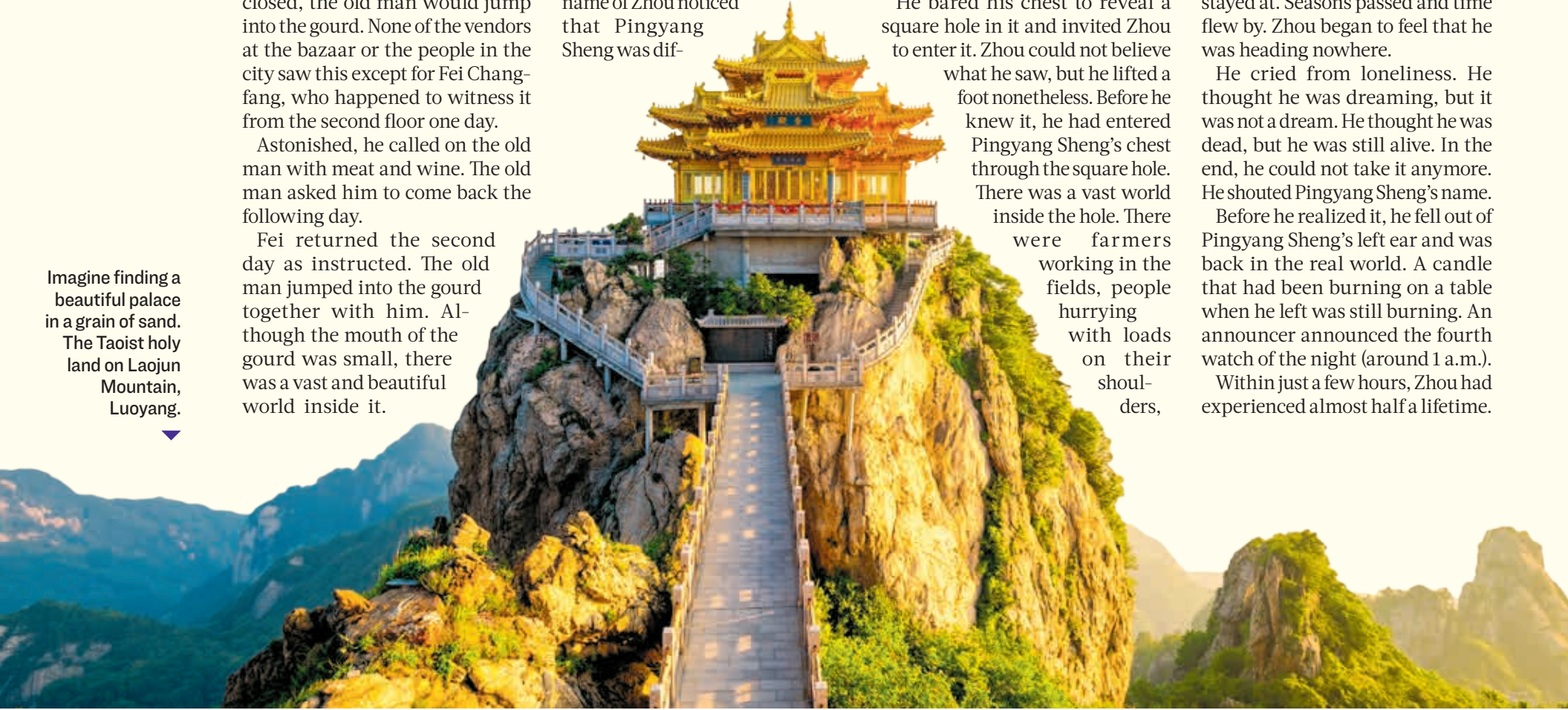
There were delicacies and velvety wines everywhere. The two men had a few drinks before they came back out. Fei became a disciple of the old man and started practicing Taoism.

### A World Inside a Human Body

A story about Pingyang Sheng was recorded by Le Jun in the Qing Dynasty. Nobody knew where Pingyang Sheng hailed from. It was said that he had gotten lost when he was a child, and when he came home at the age of 15, he had lost the ability to talk. He neither combed his hair nor bathed. He had no shoes on, only tattered clothes. He did not eat or drink water. A scholar by the surname of Zhou noticed that Pingyang Sheng was different from others. He tried to find out the reason behind his peculiar behavior, but to no avail. One day, Zhou was taking a stroll in a field after a rainstorm when he caught sight of Pingyang Sheng. The latter did not get bogged down in the mud, and his feet did not even get dirty. Zhou followed him to an old temple and peeked at him from behind a door. He saw the Buddha statues get up to receive Pingyang Sheng and have a conversation with him, and he realized that Pingyang Sheng was able to talk. The following night, Zhou bowed to Pingyang Sheng and asked to be his disciple. Pingyang Sheng laughed. He said that he was not an immortal, and what Zhou had seen were just magic tricks. He bared his chest to reveal a square hole in it and invited Zhou to enter it. Zhou could not believe what he saw, but he lifted a foot nonetheless. Before he knew it, he had entered Pingyang Sheng's chest through the square hole. There was a vast world inside the hole. There were farmers working in the fields, people hurrying with loads on their shoulders,

and children running around. There was also a bazaar selling all kinds of wares. Flora and fauna thrived. Zhou had no problem living in the world inside the square hole. In fact, he felt so at ease that he almost forgot he was inside Pingyang Sheng's chest. After three days, Zhou came to a glowing palace. Everybody in the palace wore glamorous clothes. They had flavorful food and tea made with snow water. Peacocks, phoenixes, and cranes were dancing at the door. There was no wind, but enchanting music could be heard. Zhou traveled a long distance in the world inside the square hole. He lost count of the number of inns he stayed at. Seasons passed and time flew by. Zhou began to feel that he was heading nowhere. He cried from loneliness. He thought he was dreaming, but it was not a dream. He thought he was dead, but he was still alive. In the end, he could not take it anymore. He shouted Pingyang Sheng's name. Before he realized it, he fell out of Pingyang Sheng's left ear and was back in the real world. A candle that had been burning on a table when he left was still burning. An announcer announced the fourth watch of the night (around 1 a.m.). Within just a few hours, Zhou had experienced almost half a lifetime.

Imagine finding a beautiful palace in a grain of sand. The Taoist holy land on Laojun Mountain, Luoyang.



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