

WEEK 34, 2019

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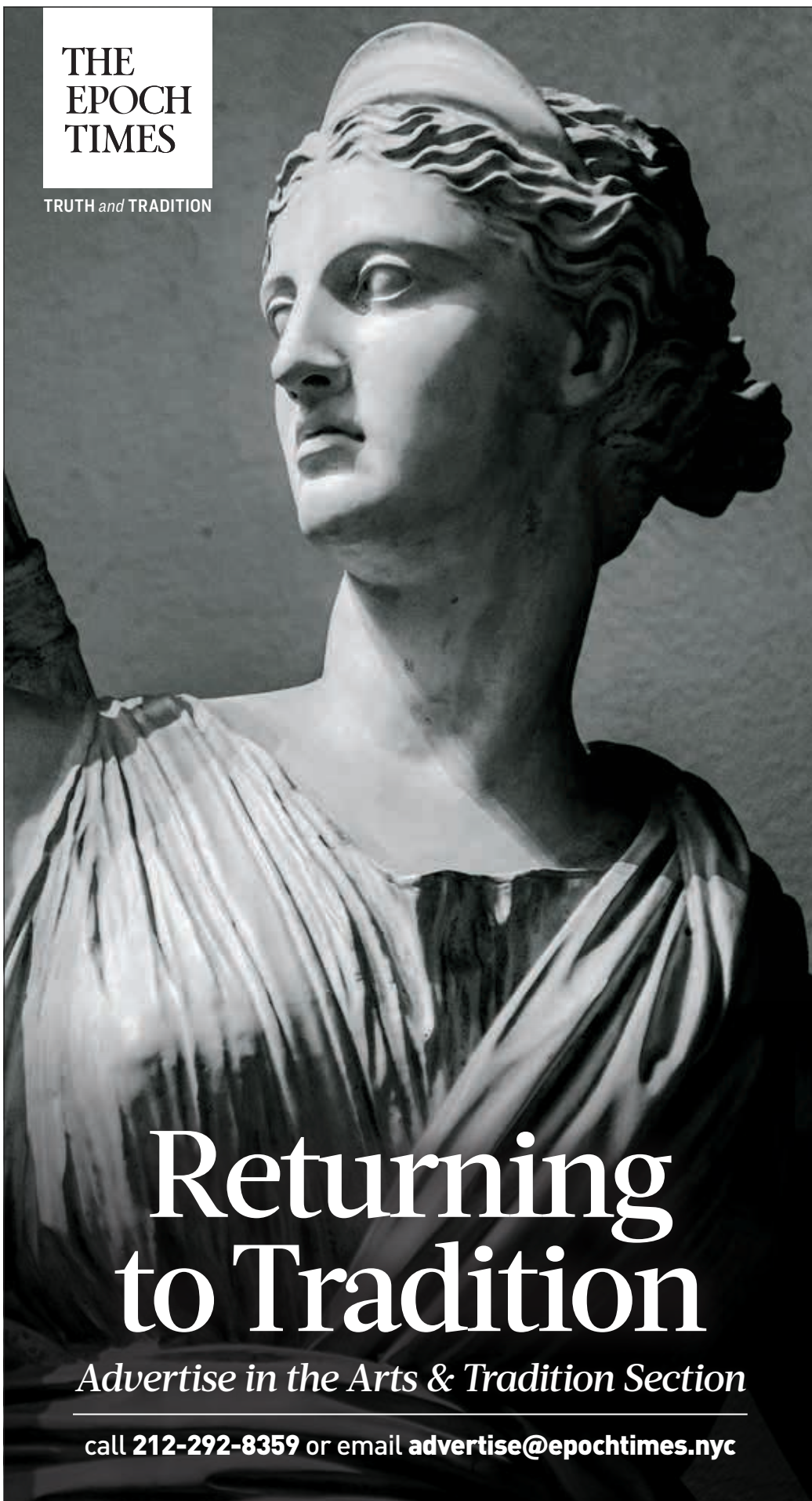
GUIDO COZZI



Master craftsman Renzo Scarpelli cuts a piece of stone to make a commesso Fiorentino. Scarpelli is one of a few craftsmen who continue the rare tradition.

Only in Florence

The Artistry of Semiprecious Stone Paintings...4



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His biographer, Sonia Purnell, writes that Johnson "is blessed with immense charisma, wit, sex appeal, and celebrity gold dust; he is also recognised and loved by millions—although perhaps less so by many who have had to work closely with him (let alone depend on him). Resourceful, cunning and strategic, he can pull off serious political coups when the greater good happens to coincide with his personal advantage but these aspirations are rarely backed up by concrete achievements, or even detailed plans."

What many may not know is that Boris Johnson is the author of the 2014 book "The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History."

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The Prime Ministers In this eminently readable and witty biography, we find a great fan of Churchill. Johnson addresses Churchill's many political failures—the disaster at Gallipoli,

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HISTORY

THE JOHNSON FACTOR

Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his 'The Churchill Factor'



UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson on July 30, 2019, in Cardiff, Wales.

JEFF MINICK

In July 2019, Boris Johnson, the leader of the Conservative Party became prime minister of the United Kingdom. Johnson has stated that he will honor the Brexit Referendum of 2016 and leave the European Union, even if that means a "no deal Brexit."

Some may also be aware that Johnson is a colorful character. He is well-known for his wit, his sloppy dress, his bicycle riding, his sometimes unconventional personal life, his stunts as mayor of London, and like Donald Trump, for his hairstyle, which in Johnson's case means long, intentionally ruffled, blond hair that we must assume is dyed.

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the return to the gold standard, his misjudgment over Indian self-government, and the abdication crisis, among others—but then writes that Churchill "was associated with so many epic cockups—because he dared to try to change the entire shape of history. He was the man who burst the cabin door and tried to wrestle the controls of the stricken plane."

When we think of Churchill's great deeds, we remember, of course, those dark days of the early years of World War II, when the Nazis had conquered so much of Western Europe and England stood alone against Hitler.

We think of Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain, and the Blitz, and of the bulldog Englishman with the trademark cigar and antique dress who embodied the spirit of British resistance, who vowed never to surrender.

But as Johnson points out, Churchill left his stamp, for good or ill, on our modern world in other ways. He had a hand in the founding of the English welfare state. He detested the Russian governance of Eastern Europe, coined the phrase "an iron curtain" to describe that odious repression, and helped spark the resistance that would eventually lead to the fall of the Soviet Union.

Even before World War II, he called for a "United States of Europe," though according to Johnson and others, he would have vigorously protested the current state of the European Union.

Finally, he helped create the countries of today's Middle East, including the state of Israel.

Johnson brings a solid knowledge of Churchill and his times to this biography. His prose is crisp and clear, he frequently injects humor into his narrative, and he bounces from recounting history to sharing his own experiences and impressions when visiting such sites as the grave of "Woom," Churchill's beloved nanny; that patch of blood-stained earth in France where Churchill served in World War I; and the underground chambers in London from which Churchill directed the war against the Nazis.

More than 100 biographies of Churchill, including those books written by Churchill about himself, record the life of this man of whom Johnson writes that

"there has been no one remotely like him before or since." What sets "The Churchill Factor" apart from all the others, of course, is the fact that Boris Johnson is now himself prime minister.

Both men have an American connection: Churchill's mother, Jennie Jerome, was an American, and Boris Johnson was born to British parents in Manhattan. Both men practiced the craft of journalism. Both are immediately recognizable by their eccentricities of dress: Churchill with his bowlers and bow ties, Johnson with his rumpled dress and disheveled hair, as if he has just risen from a night's sleep. Like Churchill, Johnson has a need to be in the public eye and seeks constantly to advance himself, and so, like Churchill, he has faced charges of political opportunism. And like Churchill, Johnson is generally popular with the public, in part for being unlike other politicians.

And then there are the differences between them. Churchill was a man always on the go, writing millions of words over his lifetime, always involved in politics but at the same time producing 539 paintings as an amateur artist, laying brick at his home, and faithfully loving his wife, Clementine.

Johnson has written books other than "The Churchill Factor," but he has a reputation for being disorganized and at times lazy. He has twice married and twice divorced, and now has his girlfriend, Carrie Symonds, 24 years his junior, living with him at 10 Downing Street.

Like Churchill, Johnson stands at the helm of a government facing a crisis: Brexit. Will Britain remain in the European Union? Will negotiations permit a leave-taking? Or will, as Johnson has threatened, Britain simply walk away from that Union?

In "The Churchill Factor," Johnson has carefully examined the leadership of Britain's greatest prime minister. In his chapter "The Making of John Bull," Johnson writes of Churchill that "he knew how to project his personality, and the war called for someone who could create an image of himself—decisive, combative, but also cheery and encouraging—in the minds of people." Like Churchill, Johnson knows how to project his personality. He then writes: "With his ludicrous hats and rompers and cigars and excess

Like Churchill, Johnson is generally popular with the public, in part for being unlike other politicians.



Just as Winston Churchill was known by his signature cigar, Boris Johnson has his own trademark: unkempt hair.



Winston Churchill, instantly recognizable.

alcohol, he contrived physically to represent the central idea of his own political philosophy: the inalienable right of the British people to live their lives in freedom, to do their own thing."

Whether the British people will continue to live their lives in freedom, to do their own thing, now depends on Boris Johnson. From "The Churchill Factor," we know what qualities Johnson admires in a leader. In the coming months, we will

see whether that admiration transforms itself into action.

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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TRUTH AND TRADITION

The Scarpelli Mosaici workshop is just a stone's throw from Florence's famous Duomo. Here, the Duomo is depicted in a commesso by Renzo Scarpelli.



CATIA SCARPELLI

CRAFTSMANSHIP

ONLY IN FLORENCE

The Artistry of Semiprecious Stone Paintings

The Scarpelli family's soft spot for traditional hardstone mosaics

LORRAINE FERRIER

Everyone who enters the Scarpelli Mosaici workshop in Florence, Italy, is told the story of "commesso Fiorentino" or Florentine mosaic.

"It's a big investment, but it's our mission to teach people about this special art that is only found in Florence," said Catia Scarpelli, commercial marketing manager at Scarpelli Mosaici, in a phone interview.

Surprisingly, around 90 to 95 percent of Scarpelli's customers are American. "American customers come to Florence to find history and tradition," Catia said. Both are found in the Scarpelli Mosaici workshop.

Scarpelli Mosaici artisans make remarkable commesso. Lively, painterly images, which many a painter

might find challenging to accomplish with a paintbrush, leap out of the hardstone mosaics.

Commesso is not to be confused with Roman mosaic, whereby squares or rectangles tessellate (fit together exactly) to make an image. In commesso, semiprecious stone veneers, some from the local Tuscan landscape, are cut into different shapes and sizes to form a picture—no pigment or paint is added.

Nature provides the color palette. The shades within each stone guide an artist as to where a piece needs to go. An artist can take a week, or even a few months, to find a stone that's the right color and shade for a particular picture, Catia said.

The commesso Fiorentino technique has been around since the Renaissance. The first recorded piece of commesso Fiorentino

was in the late 14th century, but it wasn't until the 16th century that it gained popularity through the Medici family.

First, the second grand duke of Tuscany, Francesco I, commissioned Italian mannerist painters to make commesso, or "pittura di pietra," paintings in stone. Then in 1588, Ferdinand I, the third grand duke of Tuscany, opened the Opificio delle Pietre Dure (hardstone workshop), which was purely for commesso work.

In the 17th century, most of the mosaic produced at Opificio delle Pietre Dure was for the Medici funeral chapel at the church of San Lorenzo. Florentine artists were employed in courts across Europe as commesso gained popularity in the 18th century.

Finding Commesso by Chance

Catia's father, Renzo, is one of a hand-

ful of master craftsmen still practicing commesso in Florence. Yet he came across the art purely by chance.

At the age of 13, he knew that staying on at school was not for him. He didn't know exactly what he was going to do for work, but whatever it was, he had to be working with his hands.

One day, he happened upon a master craftsman standing in the doorway of his workshop. Curious, Renzo asked him if he could come inside and see what they were doing. Renzo had always been artistically gifted and was so fascinated by commesso that he asked the master if he could come back often and learn. The master agreed but told him to bring his father to the workshop to discuss the apprenticeship.

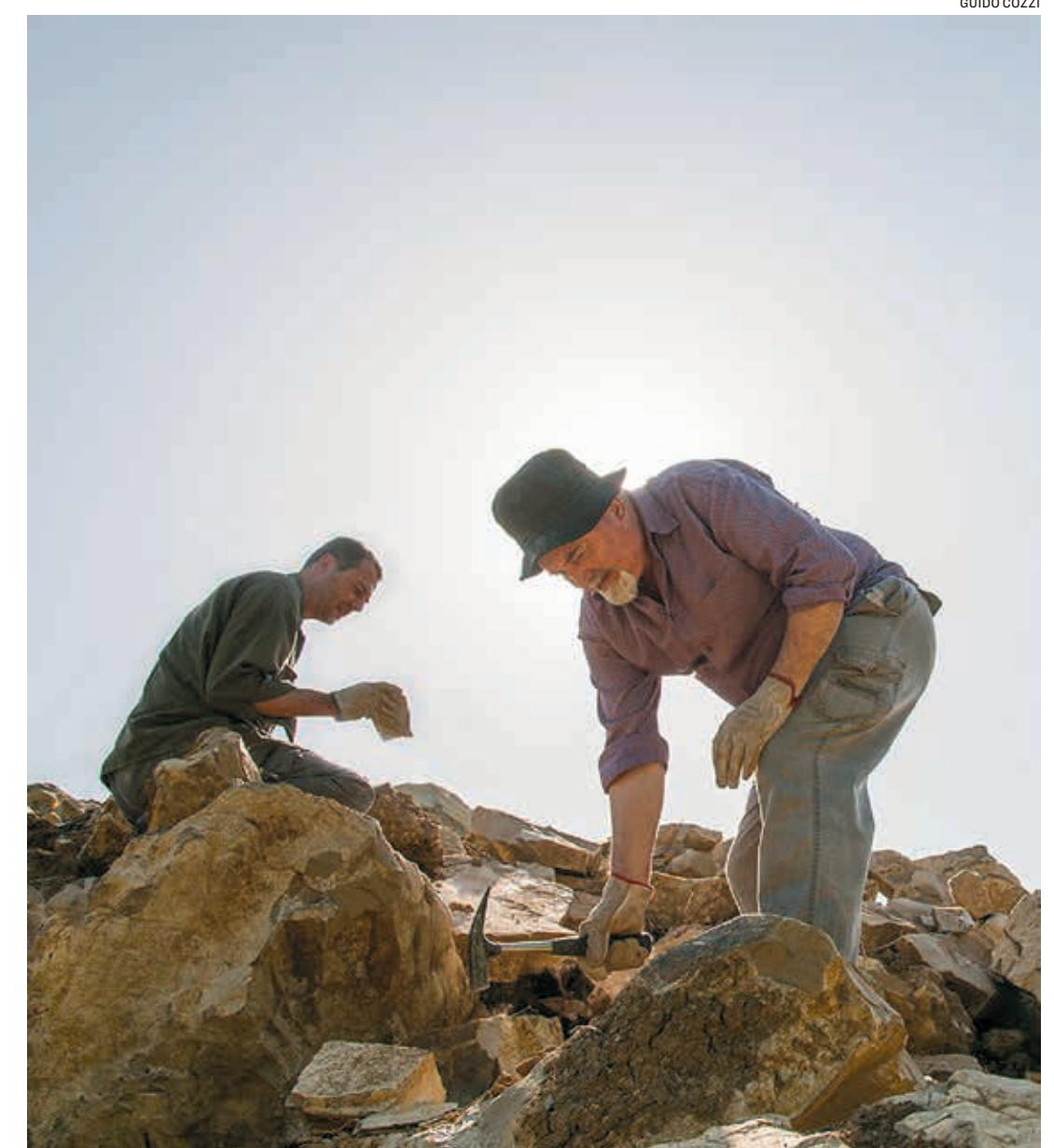
Renzo's father, however, was far from pleased: "You want to be an art-



GUIDO COZZI



GUIDO COZZI



GUIDO COZZI

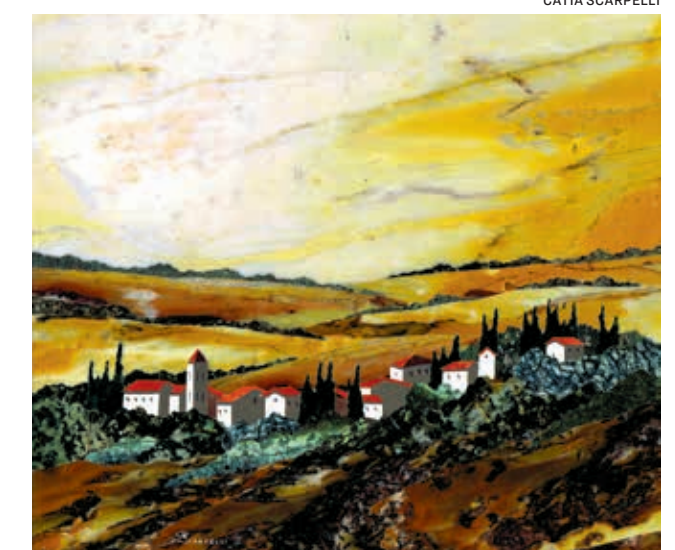
(Clockwise from top left) The commesso craftsmen at Scarpelli Mosaici in Florence, Italy.

Searching the Tuscan landscape for the right stones for a commesso Fiorentino composition.

The Scarpelli family, (L-R) Renzo, Catia, Gabriella, and Leonardo, in their workshop in Florence, Italy.



SCARPELLI ARCHIVE



CATIA SCARPELLI



GUIDO COZZI



GUIDO COZZI

(Clockwise from top left) "Friends" by Leonardo Scarpelli.

Renzo Scarpelli's commesso of an Italian rural landscape.

Ponte Vecchio, the famous Florence landmark, in a commesso by Leonardo Scarpelli.

"Storm" by Leonardo Scarpelli.

ist! You will never see your children," he said. But Renzo was determined, and his obvious enthusiasm for the role melted away his father's apprehension. Renzo even worked nights in a print workshop to pay his own way through a professional art school to learn fine art and decoration.

After many years at the workshop, Renzo said to his master, "I've learned to cut stone, but I haven't made my own commesso."

"Now you are ready to leave," his master said. "You will discover your art in your own workshop." Renzo left the workshop after 11 years as an apprentice, without being paid a penny.

He opened his first workshop in another town, with financial backing from his girlfriend's (now wife's) par-

ents. It wasn't easy, but his passion, hard work, and his family's faith in him all paid off.

"We have to thank him for everything that he did without any money at all," Catia said.

A Traditional Workshop in the Heart of Florence
Now, the Scarpelli Mosaici workshop can be found in the center of Florence, near the famous Basilica of Santa Maria del Fiore, commonly known as the Duomo.

Most companies are moving out of Florence because of the high overhead. Although expensive, Scarpelli's move to a workshop in downtown Florence was a necessary one, Catia said. It was necessary for her father to realize his dream: to work in the

heart of Florence once again and to be in direct contact with his customers. He wanted them to see artisans making commesso, just as he had seen them as a boy.

In Renaissance times, the master would traditionally have helpers in the workshop. The same is true at Scarpelli Mosaici. Two of Renzo's craftsmen were once his apprentices, one of whom is about to turn 60 and has been working with Renzo since he was 16 years old. Even the shop assistant has been working at Scarpelli Mosaici for 12 years. It's easy to see why Catia says, "They are all a part of the family."

Catia is not the only blood relative involved in the business. Her mother, Gabriella, helps with sales and makes her own stone jewelry; and Catia's

brother, Leonardo, has inherited his father's artistry as a gifted commesso master craftsman.

Renzo tends to make more traditional commesso, and Leonardo favors a more contemporary approach to his art.

At any time of the year, seven days a week, you can see the artisans at work in Scarpelli Mosaici. "It's not a show," Catia explained. "It's natural for us [to work this way], like it used to be in the past," she said. It's a way of working that Catia believes is largely "now lost in Florence and all over the world."

Catia hopes that one day we can return to how craftsmen worked when her father was a child: working next-door to each other and sharing one another's skills.

To find out more about commesso Fiorentino, visit Scarpelli Mosaici



MICHAEL RIESER

◀ Faith was central to Sigrid Undset's character Kristin Lavransdatter. The Heddal Stave Church, built in 13th-century Norway.

LITERATURE

'Kristin Lavransdatter': Time Machine to Medieval Norway

JEFF MINICK

The greatest of novelists—Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Jane Austen, Mark Twain, and others—sweep us off to a time and place utterly different from our own. We read the books of these writers with one foot in the world of the ordinary—home, work, children, meals—but with the other planted firmly in the dream world furnished to us by the writer. The soirees and balls of Anna Karenina's Saint Petersburg envelop us; the murder of Huck and Jim carries us down the Mississippi.

In "Kristin Lavransdatter," Norwegian writer Sigrid Undset accomplishes this same literary miracle. From the first pages of this trilogy, which helped Undset win the Nobel Prize in 1928, we are transported back in time to 14th-century Norway, with her imagination and exquisite language becoming our time machine.

Here, for example, is a passage from volume II, "The Mistress of Husaby," in which Kristin is remembering scenes from her childhood:

This was the time of year when her mother and the serving maids were wont to sit of the evenings in the weaving-house. And her father and the men too would come in and sit down by the women with their own tasks—mending leather gear and farm tools, and carving in wood. The little house was filled full with folk, and talk ran on quietly and easily amongst them. When one had gone over to get him a drink from the ale-tub, he asked ever, before he hung up the ladle again, if any other had a mind to drink—'twas a firm, fixed rule.

In this simple scene, we find motifs that run throughout this saga: the constant work, the

camaraderie between men and women, and the traditions that govern even small daily acts.

The Trilogy

Undset's story focuses, of course, on Kristin. In volume I, "The Bridal Wreath," we first meet Kristin when she is a girl, beloved by her father, Lavrans, and her mother, Ragnfrid.

Her parents are acquainted with hardship, having suffered the loss of three sons and the crippling of Kristin's sister, but they steadfastly maintain their religious faith and their affection for one another in the face of these adversities.

Despite being betrothed to Simon Darre, a neighbor's son, Kristin falls in love with Erlend Nikulausson and eventually succeeds in wedding him, leading to the tragedy that becomes her life.

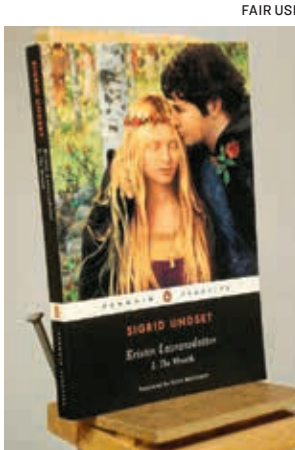
In volume II, "The Mistress of Husaby," Kristin bears seven sons; helps raise two other children; offspring of her husband's former mistress, now dead by suicide; manages the estate; and contends with the reckless Erlend; all the while trying to practice her Catholic faith.

Volume III, "The Cross," brings us the separation of Kristin and Erlend after a terrible argument over Erlend's mismanagement of their land and wealth.

Kristin then undergoes other arduous trials, including the death of her eighth son, an infant; accusations of adultery; and the violent death of Erlend. She turns her farm over to one of her grown sons and his wife and retires to an abbey, where she dies tending to those fallen ill with the Plague.

So what do we gain from reading this narrative of a woman's life?

First, as already stated, Sigrid Undset enriches our lives by taking us deep into a culture now buried in the sands of time. She had studied Norse manuscripts and Latin texts, had visited churches and ruins, and had a passionate interest in archaeology. She brings this rich knowl-



FAIR USE

◀ The first book in the trilogy "Kristin Lavransdatter" by Norwegian writer and Nobel Prize winner Sigrid Undset.



FAIR USE

◀ Volume II, "The Mistress of Husaby," from "Kristin Lavransdatter."



FAIR USE

◀ Volume III, "The Cross" by Sigrid Undset.

edge into "Kristin Lavransdatter" and breathes life into this distant era.

Next, we enter here a world where faith is not something practiced only on Sunday or hidden away, but is deeply entrenched in the people. They live by a calendar of saints' days, they are unembarrassed to proclaim their love of Christ, and they walk surrounded by miracles, angels, and demons.

We moderns may scoff at their naïveté and their superstitions (many of these latter have nothing to do with Christianity), but while we have made great steps in our scientific and technological advances, some of us finish "Kristin Lavransdatter" and wonder what we have lost. What qualities of life are now invisible to us?

Finally, we have in Kristin one of the greatest literary figures of all time. She is a passionate, beautiful woman who too often thinks with her heart instead of her head, makes some terrible mistakes, and brings pain to others, in particular her adoring father.

And yet Kristin also battles against her baser impulses, attempts to rectify the harm she has done, suffers remorse and guilt, and struggles with and then embraces her religious faith. Here is Woman in full—daughter, bride, wife, and mother.

The Author

Like her heroine, Sigrid Undset also suffered many trials. Her marriage fell apart. One of her children suffered from mental instability, and a son died fighting the Nazis.

After finishing "Kristin Lavransdatter," Undset entered the Catholic Church, a conversion that caused scandal in Lutheran Norway. When the Germans invaded Norway, her long-time opposition to Hitler forced her to flee. (Her books were by then banned in Germany.) And after many trials, she settled until the war's end in the United States, and then returned to Norway.

She was critical of women's emancipation, which brought her criticism in return, and also addressed what she regarded as the moral and cultural decline of the West in the wake of World War I.

A Handmaiden of God

As Kristin lies dying, she removes her wedding ring and gives it to a friend in token of a promise she has made. The ring has left an imprint on her finger, an "M" standing for "Mary Virgin's holy name." This sign causes Kristin to examine her conscience:

A handmaiden of God had she been—a wayward, unruly servant, oftenest an eye-servant in her prayers and faithless in her heart, slothful and neglectful, impatient under correction, but little constant in her deeds—yet had he (Erlend) held her fast in his service and under the glittering golden ring a mark had been set secretly upon her, showing that she was His handmaid, owned by the Lord and King who was now coming, borne by the priest's anointed hands, to give her freedom and salvation—

Kristin's thoughts serve as her epitaph and as a theme of the book: suffering, mistakes made, sins committed, and yet always the hope for mercy and peace.

A final note: Two translations of "Kristin Lavransdatter" are available to readers. The first, which I own and from which the above quotations are taken, is the Charles Archer and J.S. Scott translation. Archer renders Undset's writing in a quaint, antique English, attempting to reflect the language of the 14th century. A newer translation by Tiina Nunnally, which I have not read, shook off this more formal prose.

◀ 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.



Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

Can America Solve Its Boy Problem With Estrogen Vaccinations?

'Good Boys' has got it all wrong

MARK JACKSON

You know, I love movies about kids. My favorite is 1986's classic "Stand by Me," about four boys who go on a hike to bear witness to the body of a dead classmate, killed by a train, that the cops haven't found yet. It's a powerful rite of passage; they become aware of the fleetingness of mortality.

So I was looking forward to "Good Boys," about three 11-year-olds who call themselves "The Beanbag Boys." (They sit around in beanbag chairs playing cards and video games a lot.)

They also like to curse. Or rather, the writers (Lee Eisenberg, Gene Stupnitsky), director (Gene Stupnitsky), and producer (Seth Rogen) of "Good Boys" revel in having these little boys curse more than any other movie you've ever seen: It's all children speewing nonstop F-bombs.

Normally, I'm a huge fan of (producer) Seth Rogen. But in the pre-trailer to this movie, where Rogen, talking to the young cast members, curses up a storm and then suggests there should be no R-rating on "Good Boys" because these self-same stars of the show would then, technically, not be allowed to see their own movie, at this point, I started getting a bad taste in my mouth.

Blackmail and Childproof Bottles

Max (Jacob Tremblay), Thor (Brady Noon), and Lucas (Keith L. Williams) have been besties since kindergarten. Nice boys, sweet boys, good boys. Isn't that the title? Not the cool kids.

The cool boys are in the Scooter Squad.

When the Beanbag Boys go up against the Scooter Squad in a beer-swigging competition (the record is three swigs), Thor (who likes being in the glee and drama clubs) can't handle his beer, and the Scooter leader starts calling him "Sippy Cup."

Meanwhile, Lucas, the chubby black Beanbag Boy, finds out that his parents are divorcing. And then Max gets invited to a spin-the-bottle party by the school's pint-sized king of cool, Soren (Izaak Wang).

Now the pressure is on, because Max's main crush, Brixlee (Millie Davis), is going to be there. Problem is, Lucas has no experience whatsoever with the type of cootie-infested kissing that will probably happen there.

There's a completely backward societal movement happening, where American boys are being marginalized.

The Beanbag Boys manage to get Max's dad's drone taken hostage by two teen girls (Molly Gordon, Midori Francis). You see, the boys were trying to drone-film them in order to capture instructional kissing footage of them messing around with their boyfriends.

The boys try to negotiate to get the drone back. (It's dad's work drone; it's serious business!) But they end up with a blackmail standoff, because they take one of the girl's



Lucas (Keith L. Williams), Max (Jacob Tremblay), and Officer Sacks (Sam Richardson) in "Good Boys."

purses hostage to get even, which contains a childproof bottle of party drugs.

Guess what? This is the film's main conflict. And much, much mileage is gotten out of little boys not being able to open the childproof bottle containing drugs.

Will the boys manage to navigate their way to the local mall and buy a new drone before dad (Will Forte) gets home? Will Max figure out the dreaded French kiss?

Anything Redeeming?

In addition to the nonstop 11-year-old F-bombs, you've got little white and Asian kids talking like gang members on a drive-by shooting ("Yo dawg!"). The fact that it's bluster, and they don't generally know what they're talking about, is more sad than hysterical. Not weepy sad, more, "sigh" What's the world coming to?" sad.

And you don't even want to know what the boys find in Max's parents' bedroom.

The other thing is, the gang-like posturing and endless swearing are now what pass in America for the traditional boyhood-to-manhood rite of passage. Because that's no longer mainstream knowledge. It's not understood that these kids can't just leapfrog over that, and obtain manhood, merely by lowering their morals, cursing up a storm, and acting tough. Becoming men was meant to elevate moral standards, not lower them.

"If you don't initiate the boys, they will burn down the village to feel the heat" is an African proverb that sums up the lack of a real, tried-and-true, traditional rite of passage that's missing from modern society. Its lack is what's exacerbating and fueling the popular term "toxic masculinity."

In fact, the movie has the ever-so politically correct "Bully Squad" that Lucas becomes a part of—a little group of yellow-vested students who accompany bullied children into school. This only exacerbates the shame of the weaker students, magnifying the bull's-eye on their backs, and leaving the bullies

'Good Boys'

Director
Gene Stupnitsky

Starring
Jacob Tremblay, Keith L. Williams, Brady Noon, Molly Gordon, Midori Francis, Lil Rel Howery, Will Forte, Izaak Wang, Josh Caras, Millie Davis, Chance Hurstfield, Enid-Raye Adams

Rated
R

Running Time
1 hour, 29 minutes

Release Date
Aug. 16

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

licking their chops for encounters when the Bully Squad is not present. That's not doing boyhood any favors either, in the long run.

There's a completely backward societal movement happening, where American boys are being marginalized; where mothers are actually resenting their sons when they see signs of testosterone. Let's outlaw testosterone, shall we?

America seems to be headed toward some kind of fantasy of a Yin—rather than Yin-Yang-based, homogenized planet. Maybe there will be some kind of estrogen vaccination that boys will be required to have in schools, because their God-given testosterone makes them too inconveniently conflict-y.

That won't make them "Good Boys," or even better boys. They'll be bad boys, because they won't be boys at all. Is that we want? A world of only girls? Are we going to tamper with genetics, try to fool Mother Nature, exterminate bullies, and stamp out boys?

Why don't we try resurrecting the tried-and-true tribal and societal traditions, which have gone missing—the ones that previously provided the answers for the problems that today have everybody scratching their heads?

FILM REVIEW

Devotion Over Spectacle

A touching, post-apocalyptic father-daughter story

IAN KANE

We live in an ADD-afflicted society, where people seem to be in constant need of stimuli. The audience reaction to the opening moments of a new post-apocalyptic, indie drama, "Light of My Life," illustrates this issue perfectly.

The film begins with Caleb (Casey Affleck) and his young daughter, whom he calls Rag (relative newcomer Anna Pniowsky of TV's "The Hot Zone"). Every night before going to sleep in their little tent, dad tells daughter a bedtime story, which he seems to make up on the spot.

This particular story is a wordy tale about a human boy named Art and a female fox named Goldie, and their encounter with Noah's Ark. Rag interrupts a few times and tries to retell it to suit herself, a testament to the rebelliousness that comes from prepubescence. This 10-plus-minute story contains a few slyly placed metaphors but was evidently too boring for a few friends of mine. Several yawns and deep sighs ensued.

What's at Stake

A little later, after encountering a stranger in the forest, Caleb gets upset at Rag for revealing herself instead of hiding, as she is always told to do.

"He's a doddering old man," she quips. "Him, and everybody he knows." Caleb wisely replies, ending the argument before it even begins.

Dad's overly cautious nature is due to a global pandemic that broke out almost a decade before, later revealed as the "QTB Virus." For reasons never explained, the virus singled out females and almost wiped out all of them.

Understandably, Caleb cuts off most of Rag's hair, dresses her as a boy, and calls her "Alex" in front of others. Girls are quite in demand now because of their scarcity.



SABAN FILMS

◀ Daughter (Anna Pniowsky) and father (Casey Affleck) caught in a post-apocalyptic world, in "Light of My Life."

'Light of My Life'

Director
Casey Affleck

Starring
Casey Affleck, Anna Pniowsky, Tom Bower

Rated
R

Running Time
1 hour, 59 minutes

Release Date
Aug. 9

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

As the two make their way through the hauntingly beautiful forests of the Pacific Northwest, survival-minded Caleb reminds his daughter to keep her survival instincts sharp: Check her compass so that she knows where she's heading, stash her survival bag, and so on.

Meanwhile, Rag remains precocious, gently rebelling against her father's wishes when she can, but eventually acquiescing because of the bond they share, and well, he's also her parent.

Unfortunately, these insubordinate incidents all too clearly foreshadow the role reversal later in the film as a cinematic twist. Playing this thematic shift a little closer to the chest would have made it that much more surprising.

At a certain point, Caleb and Rag happen upon a seemingly abandoned house. After clearing it, Caleb is fine with moving on after a little rest, but his daughter has grown weary from the constant roaming and wants to settle in. After a bit of nagging, Caleb caves in, and the two set up a home in the dusty farmhouse.

When a pack of drifters begins to break into the dwelling, Caleb and Rag are forced

back on the run. No matter where the two go, they are always in danger of Rag's secret being discovered.

The Treatment

Composer Daniel Hart's minimalist score plays well with Adam Arkapaw's understated, naturally lit cinematography, and both suit the poignantly nomadic existence of father and daughter and their desperate circumstances.

Occasional flashbacks detail heartrending moments of Caleb and his long-gone, disease-stricken wife (Elisabeth Moss, "The Handmaid's Tale"), which lend credence to the sincerely somber and contemplative nature of the film—written and directed by Affleck.

One thing that struck me about Affleck's direction is that he likes to take time with his scenes. Some might say that many of the film's shots are lengthy to the point of self-indulgence. Personally, I consider these drawn-out scenes as a nice way to shift gears and slow down. They give me time to contemplate—maybe even wonder what I'd do in similar situations, especially considering that a global pandemic isn't outside the realm of possibility.

Unfortunately, this style also tends to draw from moviegoers' sighs and the impatient tapping of fingers, including from my friends.

Perhaps folks were expecting some mash-up like "28 Days After World War Z," with zombies launching themselves through the air at fleeing citizens.

Gratefully, "Light of My Life" is bereft of flash and pomp and instead relies on its all-most reckless intimacy.

For the more patient amongst us, this film is a fascinating and heartfelt story about a father and his daughter in an all-too-possible, dark future.

◀ Ian Kane is a filmmaker and author based out of Los Angeles, California. To see more, visit DreamFlightEnt.com

ESSENCE
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CHINA

AN ANCIENT CHINESE STORY: Arrogance Ruins a Chance at Immortality

ANONYMOUS

During the Tang Dynasty, a man named Zheng Youxuan lived in Chang'an City. Zheng's family had status as nobility, while the family of his neighbor, Lu Qiushi, was poor and of a lower social class.

Zheng studied together with Lu's son. Arrogant about his own family background, Zheng often talked to Lu's son in a condescending tone. He said to Lu's son one day, "Your father is not in the same social class as my family, yet we study with the same teacher. Although I don't say anything, don't you feel ashamed?"

Lu's son felt horrible upon hearing this, and a few years later he fell ill and died.

As a 'Friend'

Several years after that, Zheng passed the imperial examinations and became an administrator in Tangan County. He befriended a 20-year-old man named Qiu Sheng. The two young men saw each other every day and often traveled together.

Qiu's father was a successful businessman whose properties numbered in the tens of thousands, and Qiu did not hesitate to share his wealth with Zheng. He often gave Zheng money and anything else Zheng might need.

However, Qiu was not from a noble family. Because of their class difference, Zheng frequently treated Qiu impolitely, despite Qiu's generosity and kindness toward him.

One day, Zheng held a dinner party and invited all of his friends except Qiu. During the party, someone faulted Zheng for

this, asking him why Qiu wasn't invited even though they were so close and ate together every day.

Zheng felt guilty and immediately invited Qiu to the party.

After Qiu arrived, Zheng gave him a large cup of wine and asked him to drink it all. When Qiu replied that he could not drink the entire cup, Zheng became angry and berated him.

"You are merely a man from the streets, knowing only the awl and knife. Why don't you shed your lowly status and live like a noble? You should consider yourself lucky to be in my company, yet you dare refuse to drink the wine I offer?" Zheng said.

So saying, Zheng got up and left the party.

Qiu, feeling insulted, lowered his head and also left. Soon afterward, he resigned from his official post, shut his door, and refused to see or communicate with anyone. Within a few months, he died.

Admiring Immortals

In the following year, Zheng was dismissed from his post and took up residence in the Mengyang County Temple. There, he heard that the famous Taoist Wu, a virtuous cultivator of the Tao, lived on Shumen Mountain, so he went on horseback to the mountain to seek discipleship with him.

Taoist Wu told him, "Since you admire immortals, you should live in the mountains and not be deceived by the human world."

Zheng was delighted and said: "You have truly obtained the Tao.

May I please be your messenger?"

The Taoist agreed and allowed Zheng to stay. After 15 years, however, Zheng became less diligent.

"If you are not determined in cultivation, then you are just wasting your time on the mountain," Taoist Wu told Zheng.

Zheng thus left the mountain and spent his days aimlessly in Mengyang County for a long time before making his way back to Chang'an City.

The Truth Revealed

On his journey to Chang'an, Zheng passed through Bao City. There, he stayed at an inn where he met a handsome boy who looked about 12 years old. Zheng talked with the boy and found him to be very intelligent and eloquent.

During the conversation, the boy asked Zheng, "We have been friends for a long time—do you still remember me?"

"No, I don't," Zheng replied.

"I was once the son of Lu Qiushi in Chang'an," the boy said. "We studied together. Because you

thought my family was poor and lowly, you looked down on me."

The boy continued: "Later, I was born into the Qiu family and became your friend. I gave you all the money and things you needed.

You didn't thank me but instead berated me as a man from the streets. Why were you so arrogant?"

Shocked, Zheng bowed and apologized. "Those were indeed my sins. You must be a saint. If not, how can you know the hap-



penings from two previous lives?" Zheng said.

"I am a true Taoist from Taiqing Heaven," replied the boy. "Because you had a fated connection with Taoism, the gods sent me to the human world to be your friend and to teach you the skills for becoming an immortal in the future. But you were too arrogant and did not get the chance to learn those skills. What a pity!"

After these words, the boy vanished.

Zheng suddenly understood all of those past events, but it was too late. He hated himself and felt immense shame. In the end, he died of sadness and regret.

Translated by Dora Li into English, this story is reprinted with permission from the book "Treasured Tales of China," Vol. 1, available on Amazon.

(Left) A sculpture of a Chinese immortal, in Beijing. Despite a fated connection with Taoism, arrogance caused Zheng Youxuan to lose his chance at becoming an immortal.

(Top) "Lofty Hermitage in Cloudy Mountains," 14th century, by Fang Fanghu. Ink on paper, Honolulu Academy of Arts.



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