



# Natural Selections

A NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

## Reopening Rockefeller

NATURAL SELECTIONS EDITORIAL BOARD

At 5 p.m. on March 18th, 2020, [The Rockefeller University shut down](#) its campus due to the impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic on the New York City area. A reduced staff maintained the most essential operations, such as security and power, while the vast majority of research was halted. Only research directly related to COVID-19 was permitted to continue. Four days later, Governor Cuomo issued an executive “[New York State on PAUSE](#)” order closing all non-essential businesses and canceling all non-essential gatherings in the state.

For more than two months, the majority of Rockefeller employees and researchers have stayed home in various levels of isolation and quarantine. Our collective efforts to stem the spread of the virus appear to have had an impact. The [Regional Monitoring Dashboard](#), which evaluates COVID-19 spread and pandemic readiness, shows that nine of New York’s ten regions have met the requirements to begin phased reopening. Even though New York City has not yet satisfied the requirements for reopening, it is hard to keep ourselves from projecting into the future and imagining what a new normal will look like for Rockefeller.

On May 4th and 5th, Rockefeller University President Rick Lifton hosted a virtual Town Hall for students and post-docs to discuss the campus shutdown and address questions from the community. While there are few specifics regarding exactly how or when Rockefeller will reopen, Lifton was able to speak to some common concerns. *Natural Selections*

also reached out to others in the administration for comment.

*How has the shutdown affected Rockefeller University?*

In the midst of the shutdown, a small cohort of Rockefeller scientists have continued their benchwork. These scientists are studying COVID-19, in keeping with Rockefeller’s long-standing tradition of conducting “science for the benefit of humanity.” Although, according to Lifton, there are only about 125 individual researchers physically working on campus, they represent [twenty laboratories](#) studying everything from COVID-19 prophylaxis and therapeutics to understanding the course of infection and disease severity.

However, for many scientists, the Rockefeller University shutdown dramatically decreased the amount of research being done. Core facilities are closed and non-COVID-19 bench experiments are prohibited. Graduate students have expressed concerns that the shutdown may impede their progress, delaying their ability to meet milestones for a timely graduation. Lifton addressed these concerns, expressing that the expectations for progress have been adjusted. Sid Strickland, Rockefeller’s Dean of Graduate and Postgraduate Studies, has echoed these sentiments, encouraging students to [contact the Dean’s Office](#) to discuss any issues they may have.

While there is no blanket policy, it is understood that individual circumstances will vary, and students would not necessarily be expected to meet the same deadlines as were established before the pandemic. “One of the great attributes of

Rockefeller is that we are a small institution that can deal with issues on an individual basis,” Strickland said. “We know all of the students personally and care deeply about their well-being. If anything is concerning any student, please reach out to us anytime.”

Researchers expressed similar concerns regarding the need for extensions in fellowships granted by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). In the Town Hall with students, Lifton said there was a precedent for this kind of support—in 2008 after the financial crisis, billions of dollars were set aside to help NIH funding recipients. Lifton and others in the Rockefeller administration are now advocating for funds to be similarly allocated.

*When should Rockefeller reopen?*

Before reopening Rockefeller, Lifton said, we would need evidence of a recovering city. This is in line with Governor Cuomo’s orders that regions are to remain shut down until they have met the seven metrics for reopening according to the Regional Monitoring Dashboard. At the time of this writing, New York City had met five of the seven metrics for reopening, with our hospital capacity still below 30%. The expectation is that New York City will meet the requirements to begin reopening in the first half of June. Rockefeller will begin restarting non-COVID-19 research activities on June 1st.

The newly formed [Rockefeller University Research Restart Committee](#) will evaluate the conditions at Rockefeller and determine exactly how to proceed with a [phased-reopening](#) of campus. Strategies for reducing risk to employees include

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staggering work hours, establishing laboratory capacities, and/or encouraging remote work where possible. While the details of each phase of reopening are unclear, we know that it will not be an immediate return to pre-pandemic operations. Reopening will be incremental, guided by the changing conditions and information.

*How will we keep the Rockefeller community safe once we reopen?*

Frequent testing of all Rockefeller employees for SARS-CoV-2 would be essential for maintaining the safety of Rockefeller employees as asymptomatic carriers can spread COVID-19. In his Town Hall meetings, Lifton emphasized the need to identify emerging infections, trace contacts, and isolate those affected in order to keep the campus healthy. The university currently has an Abbott point of care instrument and an on-campus test site on the tennis courts. Although testing is currently low-throughput, an aspirational goal is to eventually be able to test all Rockefeller employees twice per week.

In addition to testing, [preventative measures](#) such as mask-wearing, social distancing, and diligent hygiene will be necessary to provide a safe work environment. Lifton said the university will insist on social distancing and has already [mandated mask-wearing](#) in all areas, with the exception of private offices occupied by a single person. The Office of Research Support has issued [safety guidelines](#) to Heads of Laboratories, each of whom will designate a Research Restart Officer within the laboratory responsible for safety training and enforcement.

Amy Wilkerson, Associate Vice President of the Office of Research Support, said that in addition to oversight by the Research Restart Officer, "Security, Plant Operations, and [Laboratory Safety and Environmental Health] personnel, who are regularly in the labs to provide service and support, will also report non-compliance. Failure to comply will result in loss of access to campus." However, Wilkerson said, "Everyone will be responsible for working safely." Unsafe working conditions can be reported directly to the relevant supervisor or by emailing [restart@rockefeller.edu](mailto:restart@rockefeller.edu).

A common concern is how we can maintain six feet between one another in spaces designed to facilitate interactions. The River Campus, for example, is

designed so that researchers must walk through multiple laboratories in order to reach their individual workspaces, with laboratory benches and desks clustered together within each laboratory. Even in the older buildings, laboratory bays often position researchers back to back, and common areas feature couches and group seating areas. While these designs were appreciated in the time before COVID-19, they may require some reworking to fit with the new social distancing model.

Alex Kogan, Associate Vice President of Plant Operations, is working with the Rockefeller administration to address these concerns. "There are many means to reduce risk," Kogan said, including establishing laboratory capacities and staggering work hours to ensure social distancing. And while laboratories are inherently enclosed spaces, Kogan assured us that Rockefeller's laboratories are supplied with 100% outside air, exchanged eight to twelve times per hour. Kogan also said that Rockefeller is "looking into spreading out common space furniture, limiting the number of people in break rooms, conference rooms, etc." But, according to Kogan, the most important factor in ensuring employee safety will be community compliance with COVID-19 safety guidelines issued by the university.

*What does Rockefeller's future look like?*

Over the past two months, there has been a massive transition to remote work and virtual meetings. Everything from weekly group meetings, to the Friday Lecture Series, to Rockefeller's [convocation](#) are being held virtually. Although the Zoom format may be a little impersonal to some, it has allowed for continued scientific communication during the shutdown and made some seminars more accessible to our community. While working from home and virtual meetings may have been rare in the past, we expect these will become part of the new normal for many at Rockefeller, even as in-person seminars return.

Todd Wells, Lead Media and Design Support Specialist of Rockefeller's Information Technology Department, spoke with *Natural Selections* about continuing to offer remote options after the campus reopens. Wells said that "both Caspary and Carson Family Auditoriums are equipped with integrated camera systems that are Zoom and webcast ready, as are many of the conference rooms, especially on the River Campus," and there are plans

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## Editorial Note

*Natural Selections* would like to say a special thank you and farewell to our Editor-in-Chief, Sarah Baker, who successfully defended her thesis at The Rockefeller University in March.

Sarah joined the editorial board as a Copy Editor in the fall of 2017 and became Editor-in-Chief in February of 2019. A prolific author, Sarah regularly contributed articles to *Natural Selections* in addition to her roles on the editorial board.

We have benefited tremendously from Sarah's leadership and the culture she created at *Natural Selections*. While we are sad to see her go, we wish Sarah all the best in her future endeavors and thank her for her service.



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to similarly upgrade other campus meeting rooms. “We have already broadcast many events in both formats, even before the lockdown, and we expect this to become much more common as we continue to adapt how we host events in response to the pandemic.”

While teleconferencing and remote work can help to reduce the spread of the virus, working from home can be challenging for employees with families, especially those with children. Without

childcare, working from home or even returning to work may be untenable. Lifton acknowledged that reopening the Child and Family Center (CFC) would be imperative for allowing employees with families to return to work, but there are significant challenges: the CFC typically follows the [public school system](#), which is closed for the remainder of the academic year. In addition, many CFC teachers have their own children to care for, and no childcare available to them. While unresolved, the issue of childcare at Rockefeller is at the forefront of the administration’s mind.

Very little is certain, and nearly everything is subject to change. Every day we have more information about how COVID-19 is affecting our community, and best practices shift with our understanding of the disease. Communication will be critical for ensuring a safe return to research and a healthy future. Rockefeller has demonstrated its commitment to [communicating with the campus](#) community, and we are hopeful that the university will continue to prioritise our collective safety as we reopen our campus. ■

## Pets of Tri-I: Working from Home with Pets Pt. 2

GRETCHEN M. MICHELFELD



Charlie | photo courtesy of Ainslie Durnin

Heading into June, many of us in the Tri-I community are still working from home, grappling with the uncertainty of tomorrow’s news, the loneliness of quarantine, or the frustrations of too much family togetherness. Our pets continue to be comforting companions.

As a Patient Representative at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC), David Jay Smith Chang works from home four days a week. His two dogs, eight-year-old Maxwell (who is half Pomeranian, half Pekingese) and Reno Sweeney (a five-year-old Pekingese) have become role models, reminding him how important it is to stay grounded.

“They are present in the moment, enjoying where they are, fearless,” Chang told me. “The amount of emotional support they give me is incalculable. They are willing to provide love 24/7.”

Chang’s colleague, Karen Wexler, the Associate Director of Patient Relations at MSKCC, finds that seven-year-old Daisy (a domestic shorthair “tuxedo”

cat) makes it much easier to work from home.

“Although she has disconnected me from more than a few calls by walking on my keyboard or playing hockey with

my iPhone, she usually gets settled into the morning workflow after a nice tear around the apartment and a light breakfast,” Wexler said.

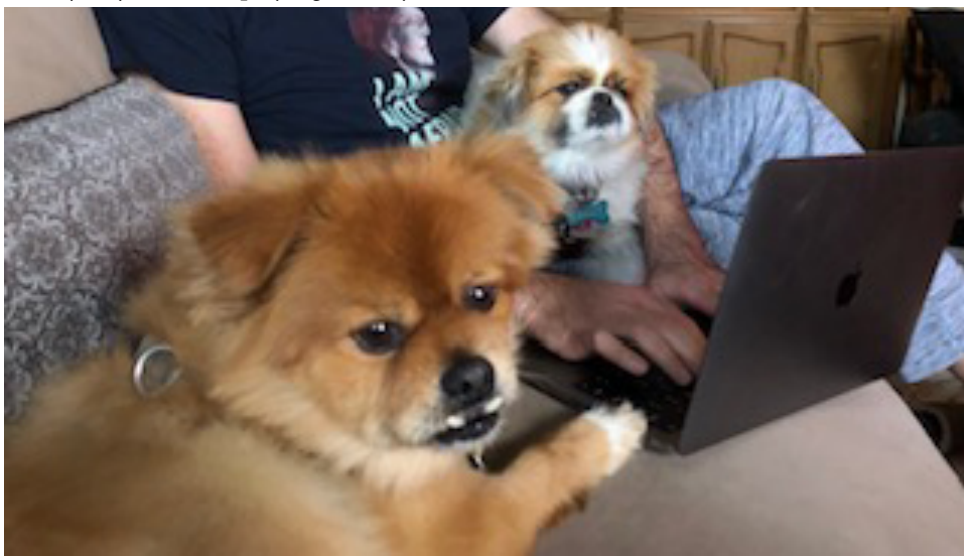
Daisy can also be a considerate colleague. According to Wexler, “Recognizing the confidential nature of her mother’s work, Daisy is great about taking some time on her own. She will sometimes stay in bed until 2 p.m. So dedicated, that one!” Daisy is also great at helping Wexler choose which “work from home” overalls to wear each day and whether or not to employ the Oxford comma in her letter-writing.

On a more serious note, Wexler credits Daisy with helping her feel human during this time of social distancing. “I live alone [and] my partner is isolated in Los Angeles, so Daisy’s presence is essential to my feeling another breathing being next to me.”

Ainslie Durnin of Rockefeller University’s Development Office feels lucky to be sheltering in place with her five-year-old lop-eared rabbit, Charlie.

“Charlie loves that I am home all day

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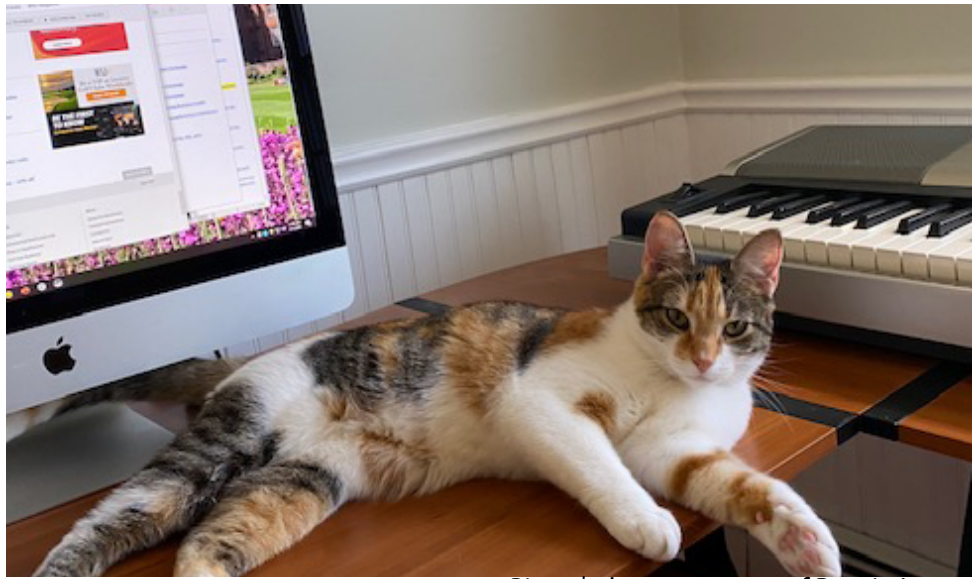
David, Maxwell, and Reno Sweeney | photo courtesy of David Jay Smith Chang





*Karen and Daisy* |  
photo courtesy of Karen Wexler

every day,” Durnin said. “Every morning we sit on the floor together. I have a cup of coffee while he enjoys lots of treats and cuddles. He loves Life cereal and will sit on my lap while he munches his breakfast. For much of the day he naps, moving from one favorite spot to another, but whenever I emerge from my office for a break, he will follow me around the house.”



*Pippa* | photo courtesy of Bernie Langs

Durnin pointed out that Charlie can be a bit of a demanding coworker. “If my attention is not forthcoming, he will go into his bunny house and throw a temper-tantrum, scratching and throwing his food dish around to make lots of noise. He actually did this in the middle of my husband’s virtual thesis defense a few weeks ago!” But mostly Charlie is “sweet, funny, and quirky, and he fills our home with love and joy.”

Bernard Langs, also of the Rockefeller University Development Office, said his one-year-old calico cat, Pippa, is overjoyed to have the whole family home

with her all day.

“My wife and I are working from home remotely, and my daughter is finishing her final college semester via Zoom classes,” Langs told me. “Pippa roams from one of us to another while her much older ‘sister’ Roberta sleeps all day.

As we wait to find out when Rockefeller and her sister institutions will fully reopen, *Natural Selections* would love to hear from more of you about working from home with your pets. Feel free to contact Gretchen M. Michelfeld ([gmi-chelfel@rockefeller.edu](mailto:gmi-chelfel@rockefeller.edu)) with your stories and photos. ■

## Lace Up for Immune Health

ANNA AMELIANCHIK

Exercise is critically important for physical and mental health because it helps stave off diseases related to obesity and reduces the symptoms of anxiety and depression. However, there is reason to believe that exercise might also protect against infectious diseases. In fact, a [2010 study](#) showed that near-daily aerobic activity and the perception of being physically fit significantly reduced the frequency and severity of respiratory infections in both men and women during a twelve-week study period. Although we don’t know whether physical activity can help protect us against SARS-CoV-2 specifically, studies in exercise immunology, a relatively new but increasingly important area of scientific research, show that exercise may give your immune system a significant boost.

Short bouts (under sixty minutes) of moderate and vigorous exercise, such as walking, running, or cycling, may enhance the activity of innate immune cells, such as macrophages and natural

killer cells. Macrophages help the body fight infection by engulfing and destroying invading pathogens (e.g., viruses and bacteria). Macrophages also secrete molecules that promote the activation of natural killer cells which can detect and kill infected cells to stop the infection from spreading.

In addition, aerobic exercise can help orchestrate the adaptive immune response by mobilizing two main types of lymphocytes: T-cells and B-cells. T-cells kill infected cells and use messenger molecules, known as cytokines, to increase the overall activation of the immune system. T-cells can also directly activate B-cells, which help us fight off bacteria and viruses by producing antibodies that “tag” invaders and help other immune cells eliminate them. In the short run, exercise may enhance immunosurveillance by recirculating immune cells found within various tissues and organs in the body, such as the lymph nodes and spleen, back into the bloodstream. In the

long run, regular exercise may help ward off infection by redistributing immune cells to the organs favored by viruses and bacteria, such as mucosal membranes and the lungs.

Early-stage research shows that exercise may also promote defense against infectious diseases by increasing the production of antioxidants. Our bodies produce an antioxidant molecule known as extracellular superoxide dismutase (EcSOD), which breaks down free radicals that damage cell membranes, proteins, and DNA. Elevated EcSOD in blood and vital organs, including the lungs, may protect against acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), a common and often lethal complication of COVID-19.

Finally, exercise may boost your immune system indirectly, by reducing stress and improving sleep. In fact, aerobic exercise reduces the levels of stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cor-



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tisol, which can interfere with our immune system's ability to fight infection. Regular exercise can also help normalize disrupted sleep, which is crucial for the proper function of immune cells.

If you reside in New York City, you might not be able to get back to your gym or your favorite fitness class for a while, but there are several excellent alternatives that can help you stay fit and boost your immune defenses while social distancing:

*Walk, run, or cycle responsibly.*

If you are an avid runner, continue to enjoy this solitary form of exercise, but take precautions, such as wearing a face covering and staying at least six feet away from other people in parks and on

sidewalks. If wearing a surgical mask or a thick cloth mask while running is uncomfortable, consider investing in moisture-wicking multifunctional headwear. If you are new to running, make sure to start easy (several apps, including Nike Run Club and 5K Runner: Couch to 5K might help) and choose the right pair of running shoes to avoid injuries. Finally, if running is too hard on your joints, a brisk walk or a bike ride will offer similar benefits as long as you practice social distancing.

*Replace a stair stepping machine with actual stairs.*

If your building or street has a mostly-empty staircase, fire up your legs and glutes by walking or jogging up and down the stairs, giving yourself a thirty second break between circuits. Mix it up

by doing additional exercises such as calf raises, squats, or seesaw lunges at the top of each flight.

*Do bodyweight exercises at home.*

With a little bit of space and some imagination, you can reach your fitness goals even during a pandemic. Follow workout classes on YouTube or Instagram Live, take advantage of Nike's promotion that allows you to access Nike Training Club Premium for free, or start a fun exercise challenge with your friends. Rockefeller's own Tim Blanchard offers strength/cardio classes via Zoom (you can also access [Tim's classes](#) on YouTube). If mountain climbers and burpees aren't your thing, you can get your heart rate up by joining TikTok dance challenges. Who knows, you might even become the right kind of viral! ■

## Culture Corner

### Painter as Cinema: Gerhard Richter and *Never Look Away*

BERNIE LANGS



One of the difficult processes of being solidly past sixty years of age has been the near-weekly grieving for the passing away of cherished, long-time film, television, and music personalities. Many of my favorite musicians are over seventy years old, and although they are leaving our common "stage," there are many recent recording artists whom I respect that can at least partially fill the void left by their absence. It was only when I decided to write this article about one of the world's greatest living artists, Gerhard Richter, that I realized that within the genre of the arts, the number of genius painters has dwindled down at breakneck speed to a handful of survivors. And as for a new generation carrying the creative torch, I can't think of a single talent anywhere close to their level of accomplishment.

*View of new works by Gerhard Richter at the Marion Goodman Gallery in 2012; image originally appeared at that time in a Culture Corner art review in Natural Selections*

I tend to read a limited amount about the personal life of contemporary painters outside of books and articles. I try to focus more on the works themselves in the context of art history. In some ways, the mystery of living American legends such as Jasper Johns (b. 1930), Ed Ruscha (b. 1937), and Frank Stella (b. 1936) might be diminished in my eyes, should I read details on what they do day-to-day for amusement or how they fare as family men (think the disappointment of knowing about Picasso's personal traumas).

Two of the best living painters are German and both have made it a point at times to starkly depict subjects centered around their country's horrific Nazi history and the avoidance by everyday peo-

ple of individual responsibility for crimes against humanity.

Each time I have viewed a large, multi-faceted work by Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945), I have been stunned and awakened to a world not quite recognizable, but in some way tangible while horrifically unreal. His many dark textures and use of thick substances in his choice of paints and other materials literally jump off his canvases and emerge far beyond the emotional, colorful gobs of tortured oils used by van Gogh. As you take in Kiefer's ordered madness, you realize that the overload is systematically planned, and that he is as strong in personality as an

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artist can be and could never conceivably end up like poor Vincent. In February 2020, *The New York Times Magazine* ran a [lengthy feature](#) on Kiefer, where the famous and eccentric Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard met up with him on several occasions to learn his working process while attempting to discover the motivations of his soul. Knausgaard reports back to his readers about this mission and highly personal quest to draw back the wizard's curtain of Kiefer's private incentives and succeeds in exposing the character strengths and perplexing weaknesses of the artist. Kiefer is presented as a confident, eccentric genius but with flaws that at times render him callous and vacant.

In my opinion, the world's greatest living artist is Gerhard Richter (b. 1932). Richter gives interviews from time to time for the *Wall Street Journal* about art and life, and I look forward to them, few as they are. Richter has had an interesting career, making his name with early monochromatic, photorealistic paintings that dig to the core of the beholder in an unfathomable manner. He later moved on to paint everything from color charts to large abstract canvases and even turned to using electric lights in his works. My favorite paintings are his early large photorealism depictions of scenes and portraits from family snapshots, and his [Forty-eight Portraits](#) (1971-1972) series where with the precision of early twentieth century official academic portraiture and a palette of black and white tones, he created representations of well-known writers and composers such as Kafka and Mahler. Richter's early work also featured slightly blurred canvases showing candles that seem to slowly waver on viewing. His [Woman With an Umbrella](#) is a portrait of the grieving Jackie Kennedy, composed in a startlingly different way than Warhol depicted her in his many silkscreen pieces.

Although I enjoy and revel in Richter's magical, photorealistic work, there has always been a lurking disturbance in each painting that I never truly attempted to understand or define until I viewed the fifteen works at the Museum of Modern Art that make up [October 18, 1977](#). MoMA's website notes that the paintings "evoke fragments from the lives and deaths of the Baader-Meinhof group and reflect Richter's distrust of painting's ability to accurately represent the world, a recurring subject of his work." One cannot view these images of a terrorist group, three of whom were found dead in their jail cells on the series' title date, and ignore their unsettling underpin-

nings. Richter may consider himself the artist of removal, yet by choosing such a controversial subject and presenting it in such eerie fashion, he makes an absolute statement. But what exactly is that statement and how much meaning does the viewer bring to it from their own heart and mind? That has always been an interesting aspect of looking at art, but in this case, the mere looking at it in a museum setting seems to evoke *collusion* in an undefined societal crime.

In 2018, the movie *Never Look Away*, directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck and said to be based on the life of Gerhard Richter, was released. Prior to viewing it, I read a piece in [The New Yorker](#) about how the filmmaker approached Richter to loosely base the young protagonist's life on the German's early travails. Richter at first eagerly cooperated only to suddenly lose interest and become very angry about the project. That said, the movie is a great one, an extraordinary personal journey of a young painter painstakingly discovering his identity, vision, technique, and philosophy, which turns out to be a purposeful avoidance of philosophy. *Never Look Away* is emotionally wrenching and an up-close trip through Cold War Germany as the nation both accepts and hides from its responsibility for Nazi atrocities.

In the movie, the artist-to-be, Kurt Barnert (portrayed as a young man by Kurt Schilling), is of a very young age during the years of Nazi rule. In the opening sequence, his eccentric aunt, the young and beautiful Elisabeth, brings him to a museum where a curator leads visitors through an exhibition featuring one of the surveys of what the National Socialists pronounced "degenerate art." To the surprise of the little boy, his aunt confides in a gay, laughing secret that she admires the paintings, going against the official party line.

Elisabeth proves to be clinically manic and loses herself to madness. The film shifts to the institution where she is held at the mercy of cold-hearted physicians who are triaging patients to be transported to camps for extermination, selecting those they believe to fail mental and physical Nazi standards for German citizenship. Elisabeth makes a last tearful plea for clemency to a doctor in his private office, who is visibly both moved and horrified by her burst of raw honesty. After she is taken from his office, we see this cruel man hastily sign the medical papers that will lead to her death.

The subsequent story is partially but not entirely true to Richter's life and that of one of his wives. After the war, the physician conceals his past behavior and escapes punishment for complicity with

the Reich. By the 1950s, he is living as a reputable and respected doctor. Ironically, the Richter-character, Barnert, falls in love and marries the doctor's daughter without a clue that his father-in-law doomed his aunt to death in the camps. The doctor proves to be as brutal and calculatingly cruel with his own daughter and Barnert as when he was a Nazi collaborator.

Early in their careers, both Richter and Kiefer painted as subjects or put photos on display of Nazis in casual poses, shocking the German establishment of the 1950s and 1960s with their honest portrayal of local, familial pride in the Reich. In *Never Look Away*, Richter's character eventually reaches the eureka moment of discovery of the photorealistic style and we watch his first solo exhibition that ends up launching his long career as a successful artist. In addition, when his father-in-law drops by his studio to see the photographically-based paintings, he is shocked to see portraits of the long dead Aunt Elisabeth, recalling how he'd signed off to have her murdered as she desperately asked him to think of her as a daughter and as a growing young woman like those of his own family. Neither painter nor doctor know any details of the other's ties to this woman. In addition, Barnert based these large paintings on personal photographs from the 1930s of the medical institution where his aunt was held and his father-in-law worked. His father-in-law can't fathom how these people came to be the subject of his son-in-law's art. Finally, this beast of a man appears to understand the horrific things he has done and continues to do to his own family and we watch with satisfaction as this previously unflappable doctor stumbles unhinged and physically unbalanced from the studio.

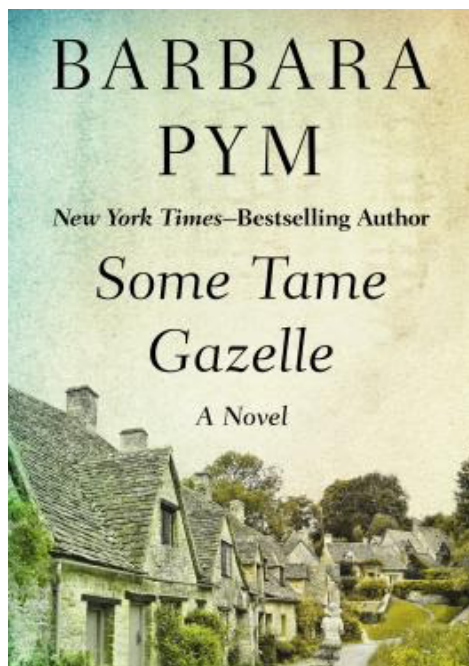
Toward the conclusion of the movie, we finally hear words from Barnert at his solo exhibit's press conference that sum up what some of us have learned to be the real Richter's attitude towards painting: The artist, by definition, is not in control of their own work and can give no meaning to their creations—there's no point or reason to debate otherwise. *Never Look Away* does not make the viewer ponder art and life in the same way Richter's paintings do. It makes a louder and broader statement, and the viewer cannot retreat from it like one can in a museum, strolling from canvas to canvas and then out the door to the sidewalk. This film and its powerful sequences remain in the mind for days after viewing, eventually lodging in the unconscious where it simmers and ponders in continual background revelation. I, for one, think that is a good thing. ■



## Quarantine Reads

EMMA GARST

Quarantine is a wonderful time to get caught up on your “to be read” stack. However, some of us have felt culturally adrift since the shutdown in New York, wanting to take the opportunity to engage with good stories but feeling dissatisfied with what’s on the shelf. Here, I go through some book recommendations for very specific quarantine moods, many with which I have had first hand experience. Each of these books is available as an e-book or audiobook from the New York Public Library through [Overdrive](#)—or you can buy them from [The Bookstore at the End of the World](#), an organization that supports booksellers who have been furloughed or laid off since the shutdown (you can learn more about the parent site Bookshop.org [here](#)). So without further ado, do you:



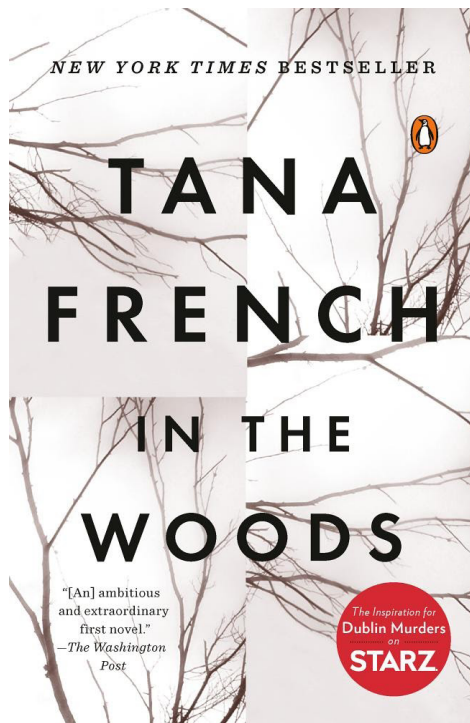
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**Want a book where not a lot happens and everyone is pretty much okay?**

Barbara Pym, sometimes called the Jane Austen of the twentieth century, relies almost entirely on small town cattiness to propel her books forward. Many of her protagonists are aging women who are somewhat comfortable in the beginning and still mostly comfortable at the end. In *Some Tame Gazelle*, the lives of two spinster sisters are turned upside down when a new reverend comes to town. It is about as eventful as it sounds, but in a good way

(I promise)!

Of course, you could always return to the master herself and give Austen’s *Emma* a read.



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**Want a grabby mystery to transport you away?**

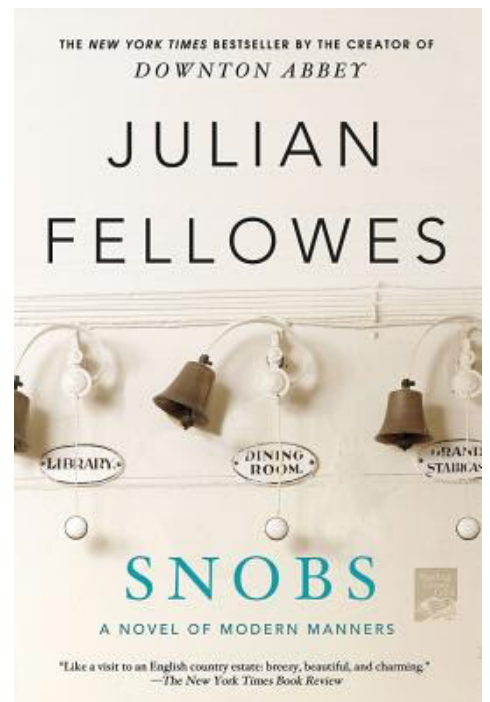
Very early in quarantine I stayed up until 3 a.m. to finish *In the Woods* by Tana French. The first in the Dublin Murder Squad series, this book centers around Rob Ryan and Cassie Maddox as they investigate the gruesome murder of a twelve-year-old girl. The novel walks that fine line between mystery and thriller, with plenty of creepy vibes and intrigue. It felt good, at that point, to have my adrenaline pumping over an entirely fictional situation. Come for the escape, stay for the dead-on portrait of fragile masculinity.

**Want to escape into rich people problems?**

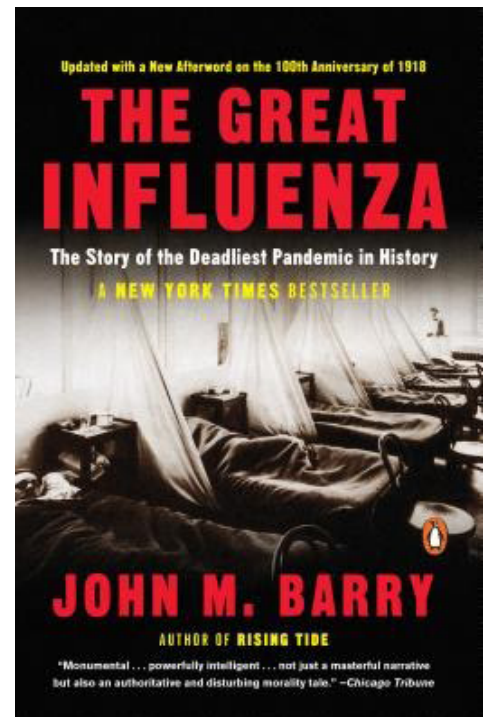
In *Snobs*, written by The Right Honourable Lord Julian Fellowes of West Stafford (writer and creator of *Downton Abbey*, if that tells you anything), thoroughly middle-class Edith Lavery meets and is engaged to Charles, Earl Broughton. Is it love, or is it social climbing? Fellowes uses his insider knowledge to create a novel of old money, new money, and their grip on social power to this day.

**Want to stare, stone-faced, into the eye of the storm?**

Of course, the first place to look



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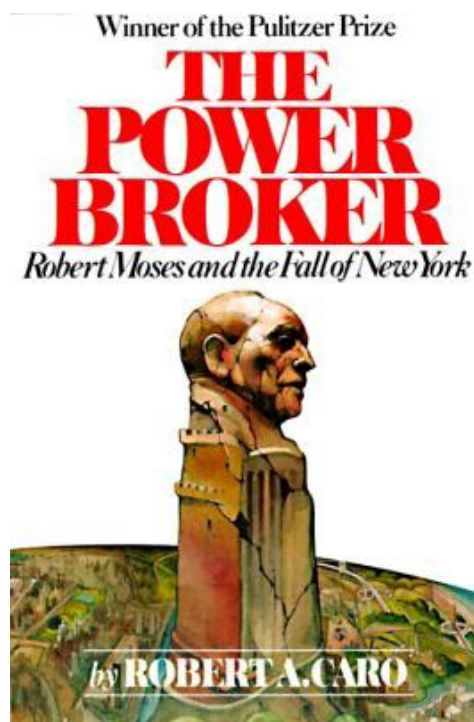


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is Jennifer Einstein’s “Quarantine Don’t Reads”—go forth and engage, masochist. My personal pick for an absolutely too close to home read would be *The Great Influenza* by John M. Barry. This sizable book goes through the 1918 flu in excruciating detail, from the basic biological factors that made it possible to how society’s reaction changed its progression. It makes me shiver just thinking about it.

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Need a fat book that will take you to the end of this madness (and possibly beyond)?

I will not pretend to have read *The Power Broker* by Robert Caro, but if there was ever a time to tackle this 1,300-page biography of the man who shaped modern New York, it would be now.

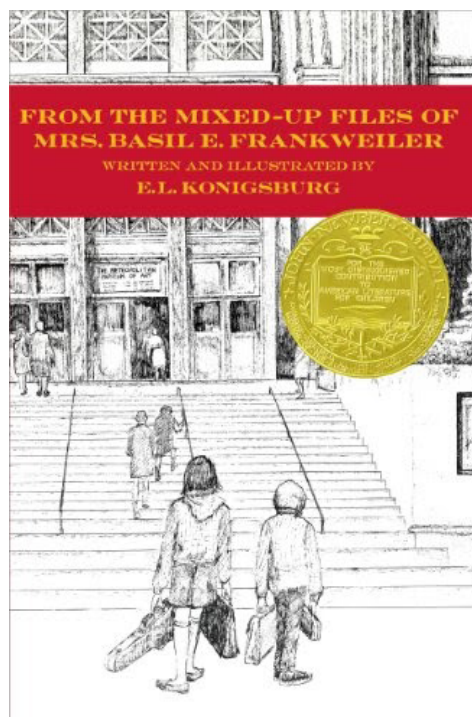


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Have trouble concentrating these days?

Two words—go short. The essay collection *I Miss You When I Blink* by Mary Laura Philpott will give you a lot of bang

for your buck, fitting very big questions about aging and identity into very snackable essays. Philpott deftly puts into words the elusive feeling of not quite fitting into your own life, which is more relatable now than ever.



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Miss New York?

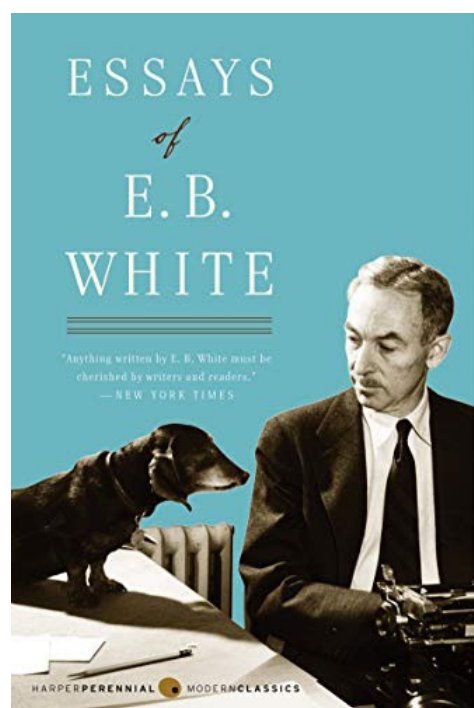
The longer I sit inside, the more I find myself returning to Newbery Medal winning *From the Mixed up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* by E.L. Konigsburg. Yes, it is a children's book. But who, at this point, doesn't want to run away from home to live in the Metropolitan Museum of Art? You say adolescent, I say wish fulfillment at its finest.

Miss nature?

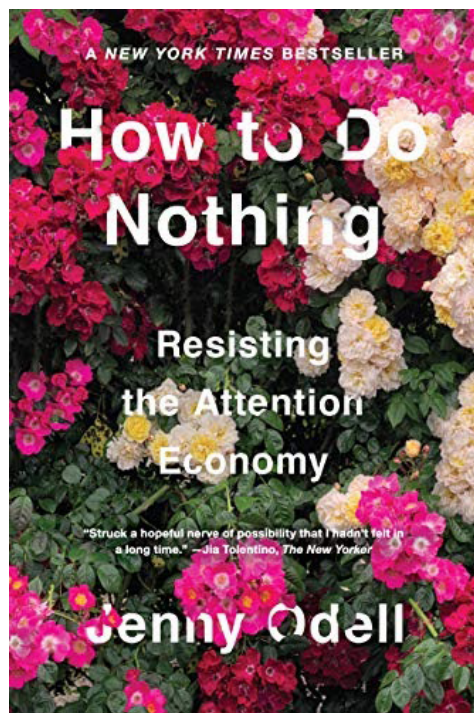
E.B. White is one of those essayists who has always made the pretty routine into the quite beautiful. I think now more than ever people will appreciate his depiction of the small dramas of small-farm life. Highly observant and quite funny, his essays might make you look at your neighborhood wildlife with changed eyes.

Want to be productive... but REALLY want to figure out how your self worth got completely tied up in your productivity and the value added to our messed up late capitalist society?

One third art criticism, one third nature writing, one third manifesto, *How to do Nothing* by Jenny Odell is so much more



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than a self-help book. Although the tone is frequently academic, *How to do Nothing* made me think differently about how I value my own time, and how I am complicit in my own commodification. I think we all need a reminder sometimes that capitalism and big tech are not necessarily on our side.

Also, a quick sidebar? There is no moral imperative for you to read in quarantine. A compelling book and a good TV show are equals in my mind. I've even started reading cookbooks in bed. It's very relaxing, and it totally counts! ■



## Quarantine Don't Reads

JENNIFER EINSTEIN

My brother, apparently, has become a baker. The girl who sat two rows behind me in second grade just planted her first veggie garden. The first alto in my high school Concert Choir now makes soap. And Shakespeare wrote King Lear while in quarantine. What, exactly, is wrong with just curling up with a good book? Nothing! But I polled my friends about this and, just for now, you might want to avoid any of **these** good books:

If, perchance, you DO decide to read these (or others), consider buying them from an independent bookstore; they can use the business. See <https://cornerbookstorenyc.com/> or <https://bookshop.org/shop/nycbooksellers> (ebooks). ■

- *Year of the Flood*, by Margaret Atwood
- *World War Z*, by Max Brooks
- *The Brief History of the Dead*, by Kevin Brockmeier
- *Walk to End of World*, by Suzy McKee Charnas
- *Pandemic*, by Robin Cook
- *Andromeda Strain*, by Michael Crichton
- *The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of all Time*, by John Kelly
- *The Stand*, by Stephen King
- *Severance*, by Ling Ma
- *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy
- *The Last Man*, by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley
- *Station Eleven*, by Emily St. J. Mandel
- *The Doomsday Book*, by Connie Willis

You don't have to avoid all post-apocalyptic novels. I found Pat Frank's *Alas Babylon* to be rather hopeful.

## Natural Expressions

### Digital

This month, Nick Didkovsky, Bioinformatics Group Supervisor in the Laboratory of Molecular Biology at The Rockefeller University, announced the release of CHORD's third album *CHORD III*. Didkovsky plays guitar, composes, and produces music in this electric guitar duo. Described as "heavy, deep listening," this album is an experience that "draws the listener further into the expansive chasms of sound that were excavated by [CHORD's] first two releases." Check out *CHORD III* online. Didkovsky's band Doctor Nerve is also celebrating the release of their album *LOUD*, mixed by Nik Chinboukas (producer/engineer for Testament and Metal Allegiance) and mastered by Thomas Dimuzio. *LOUD* features eleven bonus tracks and is available online for \$7.

Gretchen M. Michelfeld of The Rockefeller University's Office of General

Counsel is excited to announce the availability of her film *As Good As You* for streaming on Amazon Prime and EPIX. Michelfeld was the screenwriter and executive producer for *As Good As You*, a serious comedy that follows writer Jo (Laura Heisler) in the aftermath of her wife's untimely death. Jo is on a quest to have a child by in vitro fertilization using her deceased wife's brother, Jamie (Bryan Dechart) as a sperm donor, and things get complicated. Checkout the [trailer](#) or watch *As Good As You* for free with Amazon Prime.

Chris Marhula of the MacKinnon laboratory completed the Brooklyn Half Marathon Virtual Race. With outdoor events cancelled for public safety, the [New York Road Runners](#) transitioned to virtual events. Runners can participate remotely, while observing social distancing guidelines, and submit their miles using the Strava fitness app. On Saturday, May 2nd,

Marhula completed the 13.1 miles necessary to finish the Brooklyn Half Marathon.

Bernie Langs of The Rockefeller University Development Office announces the release of his new song "Grow Old Along With Me and Other Songs of Hope" on SoundCloud. Drawing on themes of hope and inspiration, Langs acts as musician, vocalist, and composer for this medley of songs featuring the work of John Lennon, The Beatles, and World Party. You can listen to Langs' composition [here](#).

Email Megan E. Kelley at [mkelley@rockefeller.edu](mailto:mkelley@rockefeller.edu) to submit your art/music/performance/sporting/other event for next month's "Natural Expressions" and follow [@NatSelections](#) on Twitter for more events. Digital and online events/releases are welcome!



**Life on a Roll**  
*Inside Iran: Holy City of Yazd*  
NAN PANG



JĀMEH MOSQUE OF YAZD



WIND-CATCHERS OF YAZD

After spending a night in [the Varzaneh Desert](#) in Iran with Hamidreza and his father, I was ready to head east. Because Varzaneh is a small desert town and does not have a bus stop, I decided to hitchhike from the nearest highway. It must have been a peculiar sight for the Iranians as they saw me with my 40L backpack standing at the highway to stop a car, as there is no hitchhiking culture in Iran. Luckily, a father and son picked me up and dropped me off at the nearest city called Na'in. There, two nice police officers at the highway checkpoint tried to stop a bus for me so that I could hop on to Yazd. They were curious about my background and the

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YAZD ART HOUSE ROOFTOP CAFE



CONTINUED FROM P. 10

sneakers I was wearing. We chatted about sneaker brands and their police car while waiting for the bus—cars and sneakers are surely the lingua franca across the globe.

I arrived at Yazd in the afternoon. This place probably has the essences of the middle eastern cities you imagine—it has well-preserved mud bricks, a bright blue mosque, and iconic wind-catchers. I barely saw anyone on the street on my way to the Amir Chakhmaq Complex, most likely due to the extreme heat and the fact that the tea houses seemed to be closed due to Ramadan as well. Though Yazd is not considered to be a religious city like Mashhad or Qom, it is definitely conservative and traditional. I noticed more women wearing traditional chadors as I walked down the street, adding a unique atmosphere to the city. After all, the word *Yazd* does mean “holy.” At twilight, the city came back to life once again. Rooftop cafes were popular spots among locals and tourists. People gathered around to share stories while sipping on drinks. *Sekanjabin* is a good summer drink to try if you don’t know what to get. It is one of the oldest Iranian drinks, made of honey, vinegar, and cucumber. ■



AMIR CHAKHMAQ COMPLEX



YAZD ART HOUSE

## ON AND OFF

I remember the nights  
when the lights went out  
And my mum was rushing to find the only torch in the house  
that would always flicker on and off  
reminding us it was in the last blackout  
when we realized it needed new batteries.  
Soon she was lighting candles and the dark was becoming  
home again.  
Dad was telling stories of an old man who was helping people,  
doing all sorts of good things,  
embellished with all sorts of good jokes  
that made us all laugh.

There were moments where darkness  
was shedding light to secrets we would  
never share with the lights on.

And although we had school the next day  
We would stay up until 1 or 2  
Until the lights came back  
Just to turn them off ourselves and go to sleep

I remember my feeling when the blackout was over.  
There was excitement;  
but the lights were suddenly breaking the gathering,  
and the jokes and the stories.

And we were speaking  
only on and off.

*Ky* Konstantina



Poetry: Dr. Konstantina Theofanopoulou (instagram: @newyork\_rhymes)  
One line art: Mikaela Theofanopoulou (instagram: @m\_theta\_art)