

PERSONAL HISTORY

# TABULA RASA

By John McPhee

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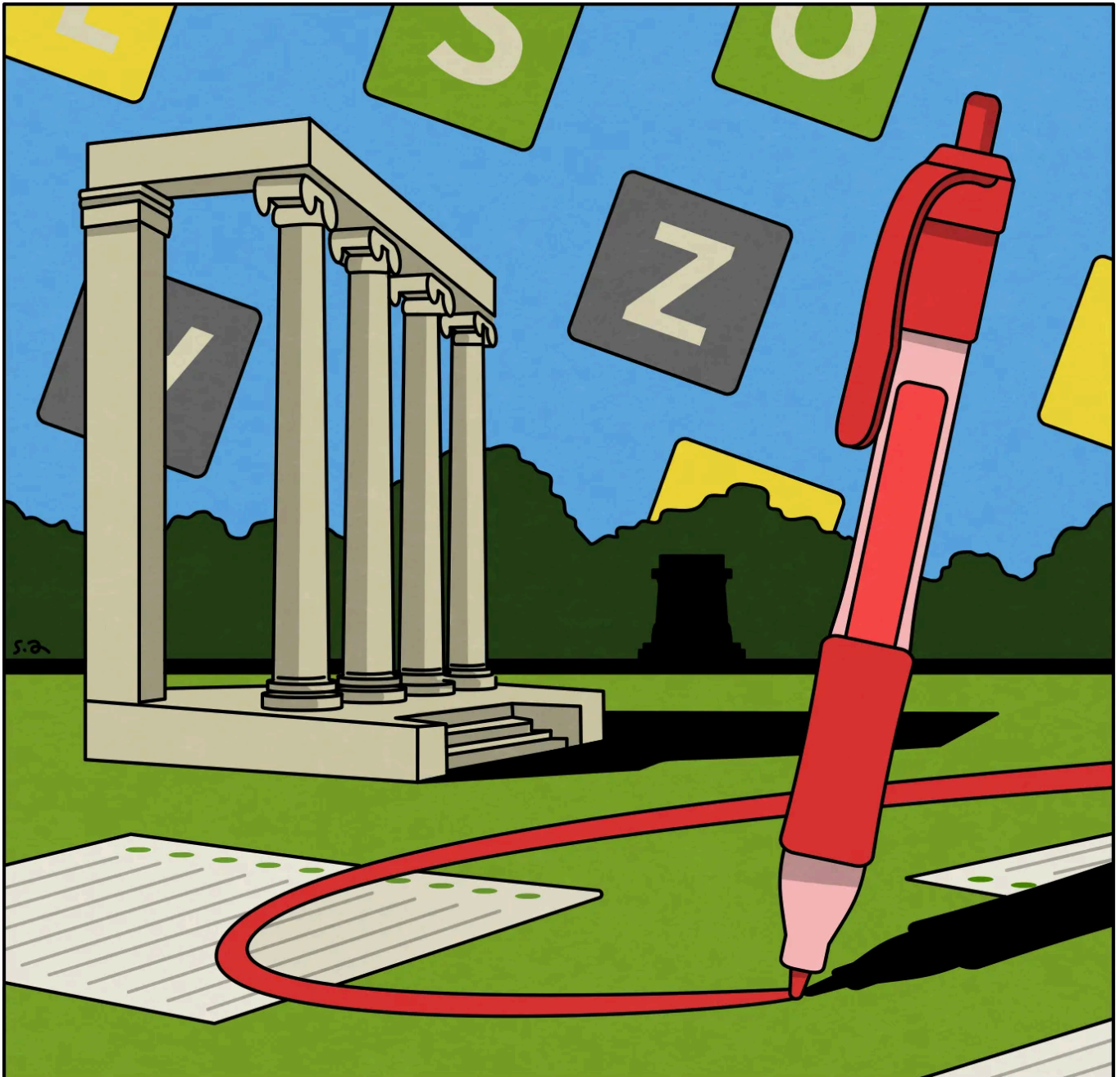


Illustration by Seb Agresti



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*This is the fourth article in the “Tabula Rasa” series. Read Volumes One, Two, and Three.*

## The Wordle Philosophy

In a cogent sense, I have spent, at this writing, about eighty-eight years preparing for Wordle. I work with words, I am paid by the word, I majored in English, and today I major in Wordle. On the remote chance that someone in the English-speaking world who is unfamiliar with Wordle ever happens upon this essay, I should explain that Wordle is a simple, straightforward online game. Each day, a five-letter word is hiding in the cloud, and you have six guesses to name it. On a grid five squares wide and six rows high, you enter your first guess. If your first guess is correct, it was something like a fifteen-thousand-to-one shot and feels like winning a lottery. Wordle responds to your first guess by filling in the background of each of your letters with one of three colors. The background turns charcoal gray if the letter is not part of the day’s secret word, yellow if the letter is in the word but not in that position, and green if the letter is right for the position it is in.

You may choose OCEAN as your first guess, for example, and when you touch the Enter key the backgrounds of four of those letters fill in gray. The other is E and its background is now yellow. E is in the word you seek but not in the middle, as it is in OCEAN. You study this graphic information, and carefully devise a second guess. You have known since pre-K that in English there are five and a half vowels and 20.5 consonants. Vowels grease the skids, so a useful second guess will include other vowels. Try SUITE. Enter. A gray background fills in behind the s and the u.

The  $\tau$  turns yellow. The  $\epsilon$  in its new position remains yellow, but the  $\iota$  is green. You go off into a confidence-rattling realm of digraphs and rogue “y”s. You think “realm” might be the target word someday. You sober up. If succeeding in two is just a luckshot feat (I did it nine times last year), the third guess is in the insight zone. With a nervous pen, I list letters that remain available, and I get out my digraph chart, featuring thirty-some items like “bl,” “th,” “tr,” “sh,” “gn,” “sl,” and “cr.” I stare at SUITE. With that  $\iota$  green in the middle, the  $\tau$  and  $\epsilon$  yellow, I try TRIED. Enter. The  $\iota$  and the  $\epsilon$  are now green and so is the  $\tau$ ! At this point—the fourth guess—Wordle often seems to be playing itself. Statistically, about half of my Wordlequests end in four. After TRIED, I try THIEF, and the five squares in the fourth row turn green and wiggle.

### The Guess Levels of Wordle

1. Lottery
2. Luckshot
3. Insight
4. Autodidact
5. Buffoon
6. D.U.I.

I know a research physicist at the Institut Polytechnique in Paris whom Wordle put out of business with “wryly.” He could be done in again, slyly. After a streak of a hundred straight successes, I was busted on the hundred-and-first, by two vowels and two “r”s: “riper.” Two months later, I am not over it and don’t hope to be. Ocean, juice, tiger, cider, river, riser—*busted*.

You can start with any five-letter word you choose, as long as it isn’t proper. I have used vague, suave, juice, poise, abode, quoit, laity, voice, ideal, cameo, abide, cause, maize, orate, image, moxie, outer, arise, vireo, viola, emoji, patio, radio, louse, vogue, biota, sauce, laude, route, gauze, aerie, ounce, adieu, ouija, aside, mouse, audio, ratio, media, abuse, avoid, outre, omega, imbue, beaut, audit, ukase, movie, raise, irate, pause, atone, curie, rouse, and yodel, but my all-time preference is ocean.

Ocean, chair, batch, yacht—a mid-March progression, just one more example from the autodidact zone, but it caused me to wonder about the “ch” in “yacht.” What would an expert call it? A silent digraph? I wrote to Mary Norris. Once known as the Pencil Lady, Mary is the author of books on language (“Between You & Me: Confessions of a Comma Queen,” “Greek to Me”) and for several decades was a copy editor, grammarian, query proofreader, and page O.K.’er at *The New Yorker*. She would not be intimidated by the “ch” in “yacht.”

It’s a “velar fricative,” Mary wrote back. “That is the actual name of the ch in yacht. I’d call it a vestigial guttural consonant cluster and avoid having it for breakfast. From the Dutch (jaght), who always sound like they’re choking. It took me all day yesterday!”

## Proofreading

A cover story I wrote sixty years ago for *Time* declared that Richard Burton was not petty. The piece went to press, and when the magazine came out it said that Burton was not pretty. Meaningless typos are bad enough, but typos that make sense are exponentially worse: “cook” for “look,” “fool” for “cool,” “lust” for “must,” “sissy fit” for “hissy fit.” The first law of proofreading is that no one cares as much as the author, with the possible exception of the author’s mother.

My mother, who died at the age of a hundred, read the galley proofs of every one of my books as long as she was able to. When both of us were done, we compared galleys. Always, she found typos I had not, and vice versa. We both found typos that had not been found by the editors and proofreaders of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, my publisher. My mother had an occasional question for me. Why did I lowercase “god”? Why was “God” sometimes uppercased? “There are different ways to say god damn it,” I said, and suggested that we move along.

Reading proofs one time, I came upon a sentence in which 1492, a presumed error, had been changed to 1942. Crack a joke and watch it disappear. The 1492 was just hyperbole, a way of saying “ages ago.” Forget it. In the same set of proofs, fifty million shad were migrating up the Columbia River. Fifty million was an error ten times fact. Where did it come from? *The New Yorker*? No. In the magazine, five million shad went up the river. The mistake was unaccountable, but also caught. In my book contracts with Farrar, Straus & Giroux, a clause added long ago states that if other publishing houses are licensed to publish my paperbacks they will require that their professional proofreaders meet with me and compare what we have found. The need for such contractual clauses first arose after a paperback “Encounters with the Archdruid” arrived in the mail with a color photograph of the Grand Canyon on the cover, all but obscured by two pen-and-ink sketches of the head of David Brower, the protagonist, and each head had a cartoon balloon coming out of its mouth containing a quote from Brower.

As a result of this excrescence, I asked for contractual approval of paperback covers. Roger Straus agreed. In time, the number of such clauses added to my contracts would exceed thirty-five. Meanwhile, not long after the “Archdruid” catastrophe but with the new clauses in the contracts, Farrar, Straus licensed the paperbacks of “The Deltoid Pumpkin Seed” and “The Curve of Binding Energy” to Ballantine Books. The cover art was sent to me for my approval. “The Deltoid Pumpkin Seed” was about an experimental aircraft—a hybrid of an airplane and a rigid airship—that could fly like a plane and land on a dime, and would

revolutionize air-freight transportation. The project happened to have been initiated and continued to be run by Presbyterian ministers. Ballantine's cover ignored aviation and showed a guy in a clerical collar looking holy. "The Curve of Binding Energy" was about special nuclear material in the hands of private industry and the possibility of its being stolen by subnational groups for purposes of making atomic bombs. Ballantine's cover art consisted of a large keyhole, through which the reader could peep at a subnational group making a bomb—Blacks, Chicanos, white hoodlums in leather jackets and shades.

So I rejected both Ballantine covers. Ballantine's solution was to do them over as all-type covers, no pictures or drawings. Ballantine also told Roger Straus never again to submit to them a book by me. So Roger made a paperback deal with Bantam Books for "Coming Into the Country," my book on Alaska. I went to Bantam myself for a talk with its president, in which I said that my book was essentially about people who had migrated to Alaska from the Lower Forty-eight, and that the last thing appropriate for the paperback cover was a big fat Eskimo in a wolf ruff. Bantam sent the book to an artist in Wales. Back from Wales came a big fat Eskimo in a wolf ruff. Bantam shrugged and changed the cover.

Meanwhile, the text had to be proofread. Bantam hired a professional and required that she go through her finished read with me. We met at Bantam's offices, in Manhattan, and she was not just cold; she was furious. She said she did not miss typos and did not make mistakes, and being summoned to go over proofs with me was a personal and professional insult. I said I was sorry she felt that way, but that I had many times experienced the need to compare proofs, and had it in my contracts. Could we just sit down and make the best of it? In some sort of cubicle there, we sat down and made the best of it. On the second or third galley was a typo corrected by her that I had completely missed. Next came a typo that she had not found. It surprised her. We found others that I had missed, then two more that she had missed. She said she was embarrassed, and quietly began to apologize. I told her not to, told her she was obviously better at it than I was, and

her discoveries were rescuing my book. Tension was turning into compatibility, and I think I can say that both of us enjoyed the rest of that morning together. Typographical errors are more elusive than cougars. One of my sons-in-law, the poet Mark Svenvold, wrote a nonfiction book called “Big Weather,” about tornadoes and people who chase them, from meteorologists to simple gawkers. Mark went to Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Texas, and rode around with both categories. When “Big Weather” appeared in hardcover, a sentence in the opening paragraph mentioned “the Gulf of New Mexico.” Where did that mutinous “New” come from, a typo right up there with “pretty” for “petty”? Mark said it was unaccountable. For a starter, I suggested that he look in his computer, if the original manuscript was still there. It was, and in that first paragraph was the Gulf of New Mexico. Remarkable, yes, but think where that paragraph had been. It had been read by a literary agent, an acquisitions editor, an editorial assistant, a copy editor, a professional proofreader, at least one publicity editor—and not one of these people had noticed the goddam Gulf of New Mexico.

## Litwill

Long ago, it occurred to me that after my death I might regret not having written a literary will. In my relationships with publishers other than *The New Yorker* and Roger Straus—and, truth be told, in scattered moments with them—I had reached for enough band-aids to make the impetus acute. So I wrote a literary will. It was appended to my contract for “The Ransom of Russian Art,” which was published in 1994, and has been in the contract for each of the eight books that have followed. It applies to earlier books as well, and is meant to provide instructions, down to the last comma, for future handling of my work. Almost any prose paragraph can be dated to the era in which it was written. In any swatch of prose, neologisms will stand out. I worried that some editors, while meaning to be helpful and useful, might modernize the text and paralyze the writing. Basically, my wish is that things be left as they are. The will:

It is my wish that future editors respect my thoughts about various matters like inches versus centimetres and miles versus kilometres and the choice in which altitude is expressed and personal habits of punctuation and so forth. In the case of the units of measure, I have used both (but mainly the English system) because we are living in a time of transition, and, in the United States at the moment, both apply. Sometimes, to express that fact indirectly—and for rhythm, and for other considerations—I have used metric measurements in one part of a sentence and English measurements in another. But never do I say something like “seventeen miles (27.359 kilometres)” because that is oafish, and I hope and pray that no sentence of mine is ever “improved” in such manner by a well-meaning editor who doctors my texts so that the two forms of measurement are presented in linear translation. Equally, I would spin in my grave if such an editor were to change an English measurement to a metric measurement, ruining whatever flow and rhythm the sentence in its original form managed to achieve. If something is in inches, feet, miles, leave it just as is, even after the entire country has embraced the metric system and miles have gone the way of leagues and rods. In general, please follow to the letter—and to the last absent or present punctuation mark—the Farrar, Straus & Giroux editions of my books. If you do, you will not dismantle various idiosyncrasies of style and punctuation that I chose to employ or create. If a comma is not there, please do not insert it. If commas are not there in adjectival strings, it was my intention that commas not be there. If you come upon an exxecutive, preserve him. He worked for Exxon. If, in “In Suspect Terrain,” you come upon the words “new and far between,” the words I intended were “new and far between.” If William Penn’s daughter wants a “rod and real,” stet “real.” If someone is “called to an office and chewed,” do not add “out.” In that instance, I preferred to leave it out. If a rule is probed, as in “the exception that probes the rule,” stet “probes.” If something is described as “avalanchine,” I did not intend to say “avalanching.” If the text says “porpentine,” please do not change it to “porcupine.” Where “The Founding Fish” refers to Reds Grange, Reds plural is what I meant. In “La Place de la Concorde Suisse,” foreign words are not italicized—and are not to be italicized. The same applies to “Tabula Rasa.” In the



title piece of “Giving Good Weight,” the rationale with respect to italics was more complex. Please carefully follow the original text in FSG editions. In “Annals of the Former World” and its component books, if updating is done in the light of advances in scientific research please cover such matters in footnotes. Please also handle in footnotes and not in textual alterations anything to do with money, including but not limited to pounds, guineas, shillings, halfpennies, farthings, francs, pesetas, lire, dollars, Deutschmarks, yen, and euros. Titles are never to be altered. And please never title a collection of my work “The Best of . . .” Such titles are false in nature and demean work that is not included. In my various books, photographs, drawings, charts, maps, and the like have been used sparingly or not at all. That was intentional. I wanted the pictures to be done in words. I don’t mean to lay down a rigid guideline here, but please consider respectfully the editions of my lifetime and use them generally as models. They are fairly but not wholly consistent. For example, more than two dozen maps were made specifically for “Annals of the Former World” by Raven Maps & Images, of Medford, Oregon. In “The Ransom of Russian Art,” the reproductions of dissidents’ paintings are integral components of the book and their locations within it are not random. Notes underlying this literary will and other items that may have occurred to me after this date are in my computer in a Kedit file called Litwill.FSG. My books have been proofread with exceptional care by proofreaders at FSG, by proofreaders at *The New Yorker* magazine, by myself, and by others. In more than a million words, there are probably fewer than ten typographical errors. Please do not fix one unless textual evidence allows you to be absolutely positive that you have found one of those ten. I warmly thank you for your attention to these words.

## Final Exam

**I**n the Journalism and Creative Writing programs at Princeton University, the course I taught consisted of twelve seminars and a picnic, not to mention scheduled private conferences in which I pretended to be the student’s editor and

we went through my marginalia on the student's latest essay one semicolon at a time. Not a few former students have kept my marginalia and throw them back at me from time to time, even in public settings. There were no exams. The picnic, in May, was under a monument on the Princeton Battlefield or in a park pavilion beside the Delaware and Raritan Canal, or back in the classroom if it rained. B.Y.O. sandwiches. I brought the chips and the pretzels. I also brought paper, pencils, some photocopied syntactical entertainment, and two tests.

The syntactical entertainment included actual statements by car drivers on insurance forms:

As I reached an intersection, a hedge sprang up obscuring my vision and I did not see the other car.

In my attempt to kill a fly, I drove into a telephone pole.

The guy was all over the road. I had to swerve a number of times before I hit him.

The other car collided with mine without giving warning of its intentions.

The indirect cause of the accident was a little guy in a small car with a big mouth.

Obtained from university presses were swatches of professorial prose in the original manuscripts of scholarly books:

This serial procedure is of course slower than the parallel one, but it takes much longer.

The meeting had been preceded by some prior ones.

These three men all received their degrees from the University of Chicago where they first became friends, and later each was to be a preceptor at Princeton and still later to become three of the leaders of the American mathematical community.

The three men evidently became nine.

The dissertation was written in a single draft with no revisions in order to retain an interpretive stance. As a result, there is some repetition and some ponderous expressions, and the total is rather long.

The late Charles Patrick Crow was an editor of nonfiction pieces at *The New Yorker*. He did not acquire manuscripts. They were assigned to him after they were bought. With the exceptions of fly-fishing and family, Crow had a distanced, not to say cynical, view of most aspects of this world. He kept in his wallet a little blue card that bore selected sentences from manuscripts bought by the magazine:

Very likely, if we knew the answer to this question we wouldn't have to ask it.

Until the orchestra didn't exist, composers didn't write music for it, and instrumentalists didn't form such groups because there was no music for them to perform.

Grey-haired, yet crewcut, he was clean, precise and appeared somewhat cold, just as one would expect a surgeon.

These two atolls being studied prior to returning the people that had been removed from those atolls prior to the nuclear testing.

I also offered the young writers a parable from particle physics, quite possibly the oddest metaphor ever applied to the writing process. The weapons designer Theodore B. Taylor, whose atomic bombs were very small and very large, spent a lot of time worrying about the slow production of plutonium. He thought of a solution to the problem. In my book "The Curve of Binding Energy," I tried to describe it:

The A.E.C.'s plants at Hanford and Savannah River were literally dripping it out, and Ted thought he saw a way to make a truly enormous amount of plutonium in a short time. He wanted to wrap up an H-bomb in a thick coat of uranium and place it deep in arctic ice. When it was detonated, the explosion would make plutonium-239 by capturing neutrons in uranium-238—exactly what happened in a reactor. The explosion would also turn a considerable amount of ice into a reservoir of water, which could easily be pumped out to a chemical plant on the surface, where the plutonium would be separated out. Why not?

There were those who had an answer to that question, and Ted Taylor's MICE—megaton ice-contained explosions—would serve only as a message to young writers: No matter what kind of writing you are doing, you want desperately to get it done. You yearn for one great, perfect, and explosive outburst. Impossible. Like a driver reactor, you have to drip it out.

That was the serious finale of my course, but I always had more to impose. Passing out pencils and sheets of paper, I informed the picnicking class that the time had come for their final exam (an event of which they had not previously been aware). O.K., I would say, hoping and failing to shake them up, this is your final exam. Everything rides on it, including the honor system. Write these twenty words and spell them correctly. Moccasin.

I gave them plenty of time to wonder if there were two “c”s and two “s”s or one “c” and two “s”s or two “c”s and one “s.” Next?

Asinine.

Braggadocio.

Rarefy, liquefy, pavilion, vermilion, impostor, accommodate. By now, they were flunking out. Years before I even started to teach, I had clipped the test from *Esquire*, where T. K. Brown III, compiler of the twenty words, wrote that “impostor” is the most misspelled word in the English language and “accommodate” is the word misspelled in the greatest variety of ways.

Mayonnaise.

Impresario.

Supersede, desiccate, titillate, resuscitate, inoculate, rococo, consensus, sacrilegious, obbligato.

Raise your hand if you spelled all twenty correctly.

No hands.

Nineteen?

In 1975, Nina Gilbert raised her hand.

Eighteen, seventeen, sixteen . . . Across the years, zero to very few hands would go up until the countdown got into the twelve-to-six range. After six, for humanitarian reasons, I stopped asking for hands. At Nina Gilbert's level, in five decades, no one else would raise a hand.

Nina Gilbert was a music major. She became an arranger and composer of choral music, ran education programs for the Boston Lyric Opera, and taught sequentially at Hamilton, Lafayette, U.C. Irvine, and the Webb Schools, in Claremont, California.

There was a last and deceptive segment of the final exam. The deceptive aspect was that it seemed simple and wasn't. There are eleven words in the English language that end in "umble." What are they?

Pencils flew as the students attacked this easy question. Bumble, crumble, fumble, grumble, humble, jumble, mumble, rumble, stumble, tumble . . . Ten quick words. The luck stopped there. Erasers were bitten into. Like lamps turning off, success turned into failure. Logoparalysis set in.

One year, after the picnic, I happened to get a call from my daughter Sarah, in Atlanta, and I told her about the eleven words in the English language that end in “umble.” Could she name them?

Sarah said, “Well, let’s see. There’s ‘scumble,’ and . . .”

The elusive eleventh was Sarah’s first umble. She is an architectural historian, at this writing chair of art history at Emory University. Scumble is a delicate, final layer that painters have used to give their subjects the appearance of being seen through mist. Webster’s Second International defines it as a verb, “to render less brilliant by covering with a thin coat of opaque or semiopaque color applied with a nearly dry brush,” and as a noun, “a softened effect produced by scumbling.” The technique was employed by Titian in the sixteenth century, Rubens and Rembrandt in the seventeenth, J. M. W. Turner in the nineteenth, Claude Monet on into the twentieth—Monet’s scumbled water lilies, the scumbled ambience of his Rouen Cathedral.

As it happens, scumble is what I see all day long, or something much like it. Ninety-two at this writing, I have a stent in each eyeball as a result of advanced glaucoma. My world is brushed with mist. I mentioned scumble to my eye surgeon, Sarah Kuchar. She said she is always looking for ways to describe what her patients see, and she was gratefully adding “scumble” to her vocabulary.

## Alfred A. Knopf

**T**he *New Yorker* I joined in 1965 did not publish profiles of dead people. When I turned in a piece about an old person, William Shawn, the magazine’s one-man constitution, considerately published it soon after I submitted it. I once thought of doing a profile of Alfred A. Knopf, who was born in 1892, but I never did so, in part because of the age factor, and in part, truth be told, because the piece might have been redolent with spite. In college, I had

written, as a “creative thesis,” a stillborn novel that was little more than an academic exercise. Whatever life it might have had expired as it was written. But of course, at the time, I did not assess it as such, and I sent it to several New York publishers, who rejected it seriatim—Random House, Charles Scribner’s Sons, Alfred A. Knopf. Dudley Johnson, one of my professors in the English department, competing with me in naïveté, suggested that I write to Alfred Knopf himself, asking for the readers’ reports. From them, said Johnson, I might glean thoughts that would serve me well in future efforts.

Alfred himself wrote back to me, saying that his company never released its readers’ reports, adding, gratuitously, this:

The readers’ reports in the case of your manuscript would not be very helpful, and I think might discourage you completely.

This was the letter that caused my mother to say, “Someone should go in there and k-nock his block off.”

Two decades later, when some of my longer pieces were running in *The New Yorker*—“Encounters with the Archdruid,” “The Deltoid Pumpkin Seed,” “The Curve of Binding Energy”—I had to commute from my home in New Jersey to the magazine’s offices, at 25 West Forty-third Street, because the technology that would eventually make it possible to close a piece remotely was far off in the future. So I was in the city for weeks at a time, and I often had lunch with Anthony M. Schulte, an employee at the publishing house Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., where he was a rising star.

Bob Gottlieb, who worked there with Tony and some years later became the editor of *The New Yorker*, told the *New York Times* in 2012, “Tony was a rare fossil—a gentleman publisher.” Tony had drowned in one of the Rangeley Lakes, in Maine. He dove into the lake on his first day there in that 2012 season, and did not come up.

I had known Tony since he was nine years old and I was eight. He would be educated at Yale and the Harvard Business School. His career in publishing began at Simon & Schuster and moved on to Knopf and eventually to Random House, which owned Knopf. We had met at the summer camp Keewaydin, near Middlebury, Vermont, and had proceeded together, through its several age levels, on hiking trips in the Green Mountains and long canoe trips in the Adirondacks, both Maine and Canada being out of range because of gas rationing and other limitations during the Second World War. We made the Honor Trip, in Saranac country, including streams, ponds, and portages west of Upper Saranac Lake. Tony was a boxer. On Saturday evenings at Keewaydin, under overhead lights, he slowly and methodically stalked his opponents, always with a gentle smile, and when the bout ended after three rounds the ref always lifted Tony's arm. Always. Summer after summer, he was Best Boxer. There was also an award for Best Camper, and, annually, Tony Schulte won that, too.

In this narrative, I have now come to the day I have been aiming at, on which I showed up at the Knopf offices to collect Tony and go to lunch. I was standing beside Tony's desk while Tony shuffled some last-minute memos and stood up to go. His office door was open to a corridor and, just then, Alfred Knopf walked by. The year was in the seventies, Knopf in his eighties. Tony called to him, "Alfred, come in a minute. There's someone here I want you to meet."

Knopf joined us, and Tony said, "Alfred, this is John McPhee." In that exact instant, seemingly cued by my name, Alfred Knopf's eyes narrowed to a stare, and his arms stiffened at his sides. Very slowly, his arms began to rise, came up like wings, while his falcon eyes stayed on me and blazed. The arms went on up until they were high above his head.

By now, of course, Tony and I had realized that Alfred Knopf was having a seizure. Tony wondered if I knew what to do. I did not. Tony called out to Knopf's assistant, and she summoned an in-house first responder. This was not Alfred's first working seizure. Tony and I went off to lunch. ♦



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*John McPhee, a staff writer since 1965, has published thirty-two books, including "Tabula Rasa, Volume 1."*

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