

The Year in Culture

Stanley Crouch, Azar Nafisi, Michael Pollan, and others on the most amazing—and disappointing—events of 2006.

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As 2006 wheezed to a close, **Slate** asked a number of prominent writers, thinkers, and other luminaries to answer the following question: *What cultural event most amazed or disappointed you this year?* Here are their responses:

Christopher Benfey, art critic, *Slate*; Mellon professor of English, Mount Holyoke College

The demotion of Pluto disappointed me. The bleak little rock (with its symbol PL) was named for Percival Lowell, the great Japan hand (and big brother of poet Amy Lowell) who founded the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Ariz., where Pluto was discovered in 1930. But Lowell got some good news this year, too. For a century, astronomers have ridiculed his claim that there were canals on Mars, but guess what? Photographs of Mars, according to the [New York Times](#), "strongly suggest that water still flows at least occasionally" on the surface of the red planet. So, here's to you, Percival! (And let's hope no one argues that the occasional trickle is too small to be called a canal.)

Tyler Cowen, professor of economics, George Mason University; director, the Mercatus Center

In January and February 2006, Lincoln Center presented a festival of live music called The Passion of Osvaldo Golijov. Golijov, an Argentinian Jew, is the first breakthrough composer of the new millennium. His *Ayre* (song cycle), *Passion According to St. Mark*, and *Aindamar* (opera) make classical music passionate and popular and theatrical once again. In particular, I am amazed that a mix of tango, klezmer music, gospel, Cuban music, and the classics can bear so many repeated listenings. Golijov also reflects the growing role of Latin America in North American high and popular culture.

Stanley Crouch, author, [The Artificial White Man](#) and [Considering Genius: Writings on Jazz](#)

As we are all aware, the technology of films has never been more convincing, but the human content seems to diminish with every advance in duping techniques. That is why I was absolutely startled by *Little Children*. It focuses on humanity as the most marvelous of all narrative enhancements and has in Kate Winslet an actress of classical cinematic greatness. She is a woman who can look beautiful or plain at will and whose capacious ability to ride the pulsations of human feeling is second to none in this age. After all that we learn about the oddness, delusions, loneliness, needs, and dreams of its characters, the film comes down to something quite unusual for our narcissistic age. In the film *Paths of Glory*, one character says that compassion is the noblest of all human impulses. There is such a thorough realization of that perception in *Little Children* that it explains

both the blue, lyrical, and aching nobility of the film and the ennobling experience it provides for the audience.

Stephen J. Dubner, co-author, [Freakonomics](#)

I [heart] Aaron Sorkin's *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*. It isn't necessarily the best TV show ever. But I can't think of another show with a greater disparity between a) how good it is and b) how much it is dismissed by the smart-seeming people who tell us which TV shows are good, and why. What I most love about the show is its audio track: It is as dense, fast-paced, and jargony as the audio track for Sorkin's *West Wing*, but since I usually watch *Studio 60* on my iPod, I can actually hear what's being said, and understand most of it. It is like listening to a really good radio play. I fear that NBC may cancel *Studio 60*. If so, I hope Aaron Sorkin will at least let us all tap into his brain for a daily podcast.

Dana Gioia, poet; chairman, National Endowment for the Arts

The most startling encounter I had this past year with a new work of art was with a short choral piece by Morton Lauridsen. Only 15 minutes long, Lauridsen's *Nocturnes* consists of three interwoven settings of poems in three languages by Rilke, Neruda, and James Agee. *Nocturnes* creates a complex and strange beauty that doesn't sound like any other composer. Yet for all its musical intricacy, the work has a direct and powerful emotional impact—not the impact of a scream, but of an intimate whisper that cuts right through you. Listening to these pieces repeatedly, I find my tough, old heart filled with both wonder and gratitude.

Sid Jacobson, co-author, [The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation](#)

Finding that by far the best film of this year was a Spanish one. This with all the American ones we were asked to watch. Of course, I mean *Volver*, which in so many ways is a masterpiece with so many masterful performances.

Ben Karlin, co-creator, *The Colbert Report*

The Russian government is poisoning enemies of the state again. Awesome, just awesome. And why is it cultural? Generations of people grew up fearing the U.S.S.R. They found great comfort in a monolithic enemy. It made a neat dichotomy and *Red Dawn*. Russia may not be back, but that warm feeling of nostalgia and mutually assured nuclear destruction sure is nice.

Laura Kipnis, author, [The Female Thing](#)

I was gripped by the minor scandal involving hard-punching literary critic Lee Siegel, who was suspended from the *New Republic* after it turned out he'd been anonymously writing glowing tributes to himself on the magazine's Web site. Before being exposed, he'd celebrated himself as brave, brilliant, and witty—all this under the alias "sprezzatura," which is Italian for "studied carelessness." In the *New York Times Magazine*, Siegel defended himself by declaring that he is constitutionally childlike. What's so interesting about the genre of the minor scandal is that new rules for proper social behavior get invented in the very act of

someone's transgressing them: Thanks to Siegel, we all now know not to blog flattering things about ourselves under a pseudonym while in someone else's employ. In case there was any doubt.

Jim Lewis, author, [*The King Is Dead*](#)

The most extraordinary artifact I encountered this year was J.M. Coetzee's [*Elizabeth Costello*](#) (which was published in 2003). It's one of the strangest books I've ever read, an object lesson in the possibility of impossible intentions: Every time I thought I'd figured out what Coetzee was up to, he made some move that I couldn't comprehend. As I was reading, I kept saying to myself, "He can't possibly mean to do this" (attack Paul West—of all people—while hiding behind a frail protagonist; purvey ludicrously ill-considered positions about animal rights; skip blithely and erratically from fiction to polemic to parable and back again), and yet apparently he did mean to do it. It's a vexing book, an irresponsible book, at times an appalling book. I read it with great pleasure and admire it enormously.

Michael Lewis, author, [*The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game*](#)

I still find myself intrigued by the incredibly vanishing New Orleans. A major American city has been largely wiped off the map. Natural forces obviously played their role, but the tragedy was very much man-made. At its bottom was the negligence of the federal government in the construction of flood walls. Sixteen months later, there is little sign of human intervention in the destroyed areas of the city. Anderson Cooper has come and gone, along with most of the rest of the national media. The *New York Times* is the great exception, and even its efforts feel increasingly worthy and dutiful. I get the sense that most people would just like to move on. The destruction of a culture was interesting for about as long as it made for good television.

Megan Marshall, author, [*The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism*](#)

I was lucky to be present at Authors Ridge in Concord's Sleepy Hollow Cemetery last June for the reunion of Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne—after a 142-year separation. The couple, whose happy marriage had been so powerful an example of romantic love that even marriage-skeptic Margaret Fuller envied the pair, had been buried with an ocean between them. Nathaniel died first in 1864 at age 59, borne to a grave just yards away from Henry Thoreau's by pallbearers including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Franklin Pierce, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. His grieving widow left transcendental Concord for Europe, dying in London seven years later, to be buried in Kensal Green Cemetery, where her defunct neighbors included Trollope and Thackeray. By the 21st century, that real estate was no longer good enough for her, or for the order of Dominican nuns founded by the Hawthornes' youngest daughter, Rose (now up for canonization for her good works), which had assumed responsibility for tending Sophia's grave. When an enormous hawthorn tree, planted at the time of Sophia's burial, withered in recent years, and then collapsed on the London

gravesite, the Dominican sisters took it as a sign that it was time to bring Sophia home. Her entry on Kensal Green's registry of literary luminaries now reads: "Sophia Peabody Hawthorne (1809-1871) ... remains translated to Concord, Massachusetts, USA, 2006." And while we're on past lives—reading Robert Richardson's new biography *William James in the Maelstrom of American Modernism* reminded me of everything I love about the genre. In his preface, Richardson writes that "biography begins in the mysteries of temperament, lives in narrative, but aims beyond it ... to resurrection." Sophia Hawthorne literally sprung from her grave, William James resurrected literarily—it was a good year!

Lorrie Moore, author, [Birds of America](#)

Theater! Especially the moving and ghostly last acts of *Faith Healer* and *Grey Gardens*: Ralph Fiennes' transcendent rendition of Brian Friel's soliloquy of death and Christine Ebersole singing "Another Winter in a Summer Town," *Grey Gardens'* one good song (which like the Friel is about the doom involved with losing one's powers, especially if those powers were capricious to begin with).

Azar Nafisi, author, [Reading Lolita in Tehran](#)

I can name a few amazing, as well as a number of disappointing, cultural events for 2006, but none can match my sense of outrage at the so-called Holocaust conference convened by the Iranian government. I felt outraged as a human being, because, like all the great human catastrophes, the Holocaust transcends its own time and place, concerning not just the Jews and those who tried to eliminate them but the rest of mankind, and when we deny it or remain silent about it, when we manipulate it for political purposes, we become complicit in the assault not only against the actual victims but against all that goes by the name *humane*.

As an Iranian, it was with a sense of tragic irony that I witnessed a regime that has denied Iranian citizens the right to freedom of expression and freedom of religion, and has systematically repressed, jailed, and tortured thousands of its own citizens for demanding their most basic rights, claim to provide freedom of expression for neo-Nazis and members of the Ku Klux Klan.

I had to remind myself that, while the ruling elite in Iran convenes such an event in the name of the country's culture and religion, many Iranians boast of the fact that more than 2,500 years ago, a Persian king, Cyrus, after the conquest of Babylon, allowed the Jewish people to return to their land and permitted the practice of all cults and beliefs of the countries he had conquered. The ancient city of Hamadan is the site of the pre-Islamic temple of the water goddess Anahita, the Mausoleum of the vagabond poet Baba Taher, and the shrine of the Esther—believed to have been the wife of the Persian king, Xerxes—and her cousin Mordecai, who together rescued the Jewish people from extermination. These sites represent the best of the Iranian culture and tradition, its diversity, its passion for poetry, its hospitality and generosity toward others. And yet, today when we talk about Iranian culture, none of this comes to mind.

Josh Patner, writer on fashion, *Slate* and the *New York Times*

Until the night of Oct. 5, the knockout moment of the year in fashion happened at Alexander McQueen's March show in Paris. Following a spectacular parade of clothes based on the designer's wild imaginings of the Scottish Highlands, a tiny blue light—a hologram—appeared on the stage, bouncing through the air until it bloomed into swirling, translucent lavender petals, and then bloomed again, this time into Kate Moss. Kate floated through the air and disappeared, and the audience cheered and rose to its feet. This was pure fashion: the outrageous reach for beauty, the here-and-then-gone illusion, the extravagant expense for a limited audience.

Then I saw the Oct. 5 episode of the ABC comedy *Ugly Betty*. Betty, the unattractive assistant of a hotshot fashion-magazine editor, has lost "The Book," or mock-up of the upcoming magazine. Fashion has never seemed so integrated into the popular culture as it did when Betty's fashion-obsessed young nephew gasped, "*You lost The Book?!*," in a way Bobby Brady never could have.

The fashion world reached unprecedented levels of exposure this year, with *Project Runway*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, and *Betty* suggesting that the inner workings of fashion, long a mystery, are better understood by fans. Yet for all the exposure, the world of true fashion insiders has never seemed more insular. Betty has 13 million viewers, but there were only a few hundred seats at McQueen's show.

Michael Pollan, author, [*The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*](#)

I have to salute Stephen Colbert for the concept of "truthiness," which is a 2006 contribution to American culture that should last, or at least deserves to. Colbert's work all year long amazed me—as much sparkling satire as anyone got written in 2006.

Robert Pinsky, former poet laureate; author, [*Jersey Rain*](#)

Political comedy—funny, passionate, informed, smart—not long ago seemed not an American form. European cabarets or Latin American writers could slash, while American comedy made cautiously topical, evenhanded wisecracks. Garry Trudeau looked lonely. *Saturday Night Live*, even in its best days, was limited. The running gag, "In breaking news, Spanish dictator Francisco Franco is *still* dead," was kind of brilliant—and kind of self-diagnostic: easy target, minimal statement.

Now, in the mysterious life cycles of art, we have *The Onion*, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and *South Park*'s Matt Stone and Trey Parker: all bringing it, American-style. The separate show for Colbert this year confirms the transformation. Bless cable ... or thank Cheney for his February quail shoot?

Ron Rosenbaum, author, [Explaining Hitler](#) and [The Shakespeare Wars](#); columnist, the *New York Observer*

I'd argue that the development that will have the most *lasting* significance—because it will force us to reconsider, re-argue, re-envision the supreme icon of English literature—is the publication of the three-text Arden edition of *Hamlet*. The edition, produced by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, makes a persuasive case that the three earliest texts of *Hamlet*, which differ in ways great and small, should be presented separately, rather than "conflated" into the single *Hamlet* various editors have woven together from them.

Readers will now be made aware that some of the most famous phrases in Shakespeare—"the mote it is to trouble the mind's eye"; "the vicious mole of nature"; "the engineer hoist with his own petard"; "Denmark's a prison"; "nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so"—and Hamlet's final, agonized 35-line soliloquy ("How all occasions do inform against me ...")—appear in one early version of *Hamlet* but not in another.

And the question of whether the changes in the three versions are Shakespeare's own evolving "revisions" of *Hamlet*, his successive drafts, will reopen the argument about what kind of writer—one-draft wonder, or serious reviser?—Shakespeare was. And what kind of evolution—self-revision—Hamlet himself went through.

The signature drama of the divided soul has now been subdivided.

David Simon, executive producer, *The Wire*; former metro desk reporter, *The Baltimore Sun*

In the year past, we've been given the clearest indications yet as to the future of the daily newspaper in America. And that future is brutal, reductive, and ever-less relevant.

The *Los Angeles Times*, which thought itself to be in the highest tier of daily journalism and therefore immune to the economic logic, is told to eviscerate itself, and when chief editors refuse, they are summarily dismissed. The *Baltimore Sun* is hollowed out by a string of buyouts that began more than a decade ago. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* is confronted with new ownership that demands a news organization with no pretensions beyond covering its circulation area. In their desperation to float their stock prices, the big newspaper chains are slowly strangling the only thing that still makes their daily editions matter: content.

For years, the Kool-Aid drinkers from the home office have journeyed to newsrooms far and wide to explain to the ink-stained rabble that these were new times, that by attriting the numbers in the newsroom, by offering buyouts to veteran reporters, by reducing the news hole, the American newspaper could not only remain viable economically, but could—given effective management—do more with less.

Here's a secret: You cannot do more with less. You do less with less. To gather more news, to investigate more wrongs, to analyze more of the complexity of modern life, you need more experienced reporters.

What now passes for journalism outside the vale of New York or Washington, D.C., is largely an embarrassment. Good people still remain in every American newsroom, and some of them are doing their damndest to make their product essential. But every month, there are less of them, and every month, some soul-sucking whore from atop the pyramid types yet another memo explaining why this newspaper or that no longer needs a Washington correspondent, or a labor reporter, or foreign coverage. Until the industry begins to believe that content—and only content—matters, then there isn't a power under heaven that can prevent newspapers from meaning less to our world.

Tim Wu, professor, Columbia Law School; co-author, [Who Controls the Internet?](#) Amazing: Overshadowed by YouTube, iTunes TV may be the bigger cultural story. This year (along with Netflix) it began to quietly and fundamentally change how Americans watch TV. Although it's been seen as a way to watch TV on your iPod, iTunes TV is actually the prototype for the first real Internet television sets. Let's see if Apple can do the same for cell phones this year. Disappointing: Terribly acted, *The Banquet*—an overblown Hamlet-goes-to-China film—confirms that Chinese blockbusters can be every bit as trite and tacky as their American counterparts. Which may not be a surprise to anyone who's been to China lately.

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