

# THE GADFLY

The Need to Read • 02

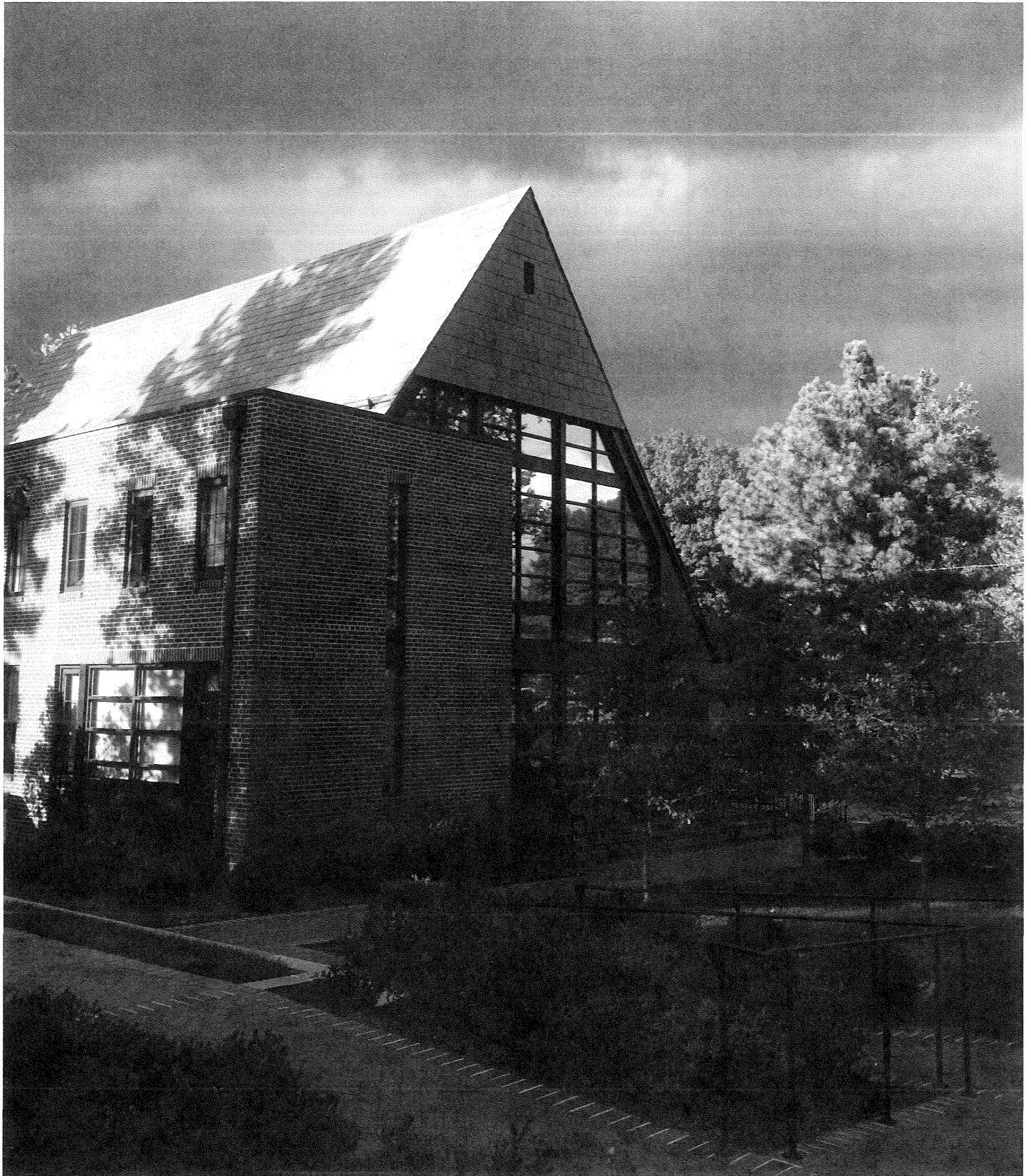
Sexism on the Program • 03

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The *Gadfly* meets every other Sunday at 7 PM in the BBC. We always need editors, layout designers, illustrators, and organizers. Contact us at sjca.gadfly@gmail.com for more information.

Articles should be submitted by to sjca.gadfly@gmail.com.

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## From the Editors:

The badness has passed. For now. You may now look forward to more of the same excellent, top-notch, in-depth reporting for which the *Gadfly* is known—and for which it was recognized last year with the Socrates Award of Sophistic Journalism: the highest honor a biweekly St. John's publication can receive. And you made it possible, Polity. Give yourselves a round of applause. Go ahead. Go for it. Even if you're in the library, they won't mind. Just tell them the *Gadfly* told you to. Little-known fact: we actually own the library. It's in the fine print of a contract we tricked them into signing back in '88. So clap. Clap! CLAP!

-The *Gadfly*

# The Need to Read

Jerry Januszewski Counselor

For book lovers, being stuck in a place without something good to read can be a painful affair. I found myself in that position recently in the remote, small town of Buncrana, Ireland.

I finished the books I had on hand and had no success finding anything interesting in the disorganized book bins of the "Charity Shops" on Main Street. A kind soul told me there was a funky used bookstore in Letterkenny, a larger nearby town. Fortune smiled on me because just then a bus going to Letterkenny rumbled down the street. I flagged it down and off I went. A car would cut the travel time in half—but, lacking a vehicle, I resigned myself to enduring forty-five vacant minutes on the bus without anything to read.

Once on-board though, my attention was piqued by the other passengers. There was a young couple in lively conversation. The woman's speech was clear enough, but the man's rapid and thick Irish brogue was as indecipherable to me as Swahili. It was fun trying to speculate on what he said by what she said.

We passed a bus going in the opposite direction. Our taciturn driver and theirs exchanged a polite wave. How do I know it was a polite wave and not the wave of old friends, or of rivals, or of brothers? I don't. I wondered what the two men's stories were.

An elderly man sat a little ahead of me across the aisle, silent and motionless. Suddenly he lifted his head in time to see a small stone church with a graveyard pass by. Communing with a grace known only to himself, he gently crossed himself.

This led me to direct my attention to my own inner world. Why was I even on this bus? Oh yes, book hunting, but why? It's fun, but what was I really after? The joy of reading and learning? The avoidance of boredom? Maybe, but there was something else. As I thought about my need to read, a fifty-year-old memory startled me.

When my older sister first went off to kindergarten, I was bereft. To console me my mother took me on walks through the neighborhood, saying, "Let's see if we can find something important!" This was great fun. My little world came alive with the thrill of the hunt as I focused my attention on items I usually ignored. I picked up a bottle cap. "Mom, is this important?" It was important to my sister, who used bottle caps for her artwork. Into my pocket it went. There's a stick, twisted in a weird way. How about a soda can? No, not a keeper. Finding a penny was like gold.

Pondering this memory while on a bus rolling through the Irish countryside I entered into an extraordinary feeling of connection with my mom and with my curious younger self. Surely in my present book hunt I was reenacting something, likewise hoping to "find something important." I felt full and rich as I sat with these feelings linking past and present; a small but pleasing insight into my current behavior. Whatever mental state this was—excitement, contentment, love—I was in a good place. This bus ride was anything but vacant. The thrill of paying attention coincided with the joy of discovery; the delight of finding meaning and value where I previously thought there was none.

The gentle sweetness of this recollection reminded me to regard my attention as a precious thing, and to be more selective about where I placed it and not to squander it. This can be quite a challenge in a world that presents so many options for what to look at, listen to and think about. It is far easier to passively respond to whatever presents itself the loudest or most urgent. This passivity can foster a sort of "learned helplessness" leading to a dependency on the loud and urgent for motivation.

A common example: a man is unable to complete an assignment until the deadline looms, thus creating an artificial urgency without which he can't command his energies and focus his attention to complete the task. The man insists he "needs" the tyrannizing last minute pressure, because without it he believes nothing is happening within himself to draw from.

There are times in my day I am tempted to think nothing is happening, like when riding a bus or being in between this or that activity. This practice of directing my attention to the present moment, what is going on around me and within me right now, has proved to me that in the spaciousness of the human body and soul there is never nothing happening.

Practicing this attentiveness, sometimes called mindfulness, requires effort, but what a thrill when our powers of attention grow strong and nimble and can be employed freely. Perhaps the common usage of the term "will power" is better understood as attention power. This is a high order of freedom when achieved through natural effort. Yet the process can seem puzzling: I am doing something intentional, but I'm not fully in charge of the outcome. It is not the same as fantasizing or daydreaming as there is more discovery than creation going on, more surrender than orchestration.

This cultivated inner space has become a mental and emotional sanctuary for me; partly a place of refuge and also a place to do active work, seeing what's there and trying to understand it. It is a safe place where I can "find something important" among things previously ignored as insignificant or too unpleasant. There I discover a need of mine that goes well beyond my immediate desires: the need to read the self. This kind of sanctuary is sometimes bittersweet, but even then it is a lovely and meaningful place to be. And, I believe, it is within the reach of every person. ♦

# Sexist Geniuses

## Why Copernicus couldn't prove feminism

Sebastian Barajas A'17

Like most of us, I get frustrated reading Program authors who have beautiful ideas about philosophy or politics or religion, who then dismiss women in one short paragraph, and then never talk about them ever again. It's rude and pointless, like pausing in the middle of a physics lecture to walk over and kick a stranger in the shins, and then continue the lecture as though nothing had happened.

It's an added frustration that when we bring up this casual sexism in class, tutors often shift in their chairs and resist rolling their eyes, as if to say, *Please, no more of this tiresome modern bias. We're trying to inquire here!*

While most of us realize that we can't get much out of the Program if we refuse to forgive the sexism and other foibles of its authors, I think it's also important to discuss these things head-on. Maybe not in seminar, since reputations would be tarnished and Johnnie chairs would be flung, windows broken, and wicker tangled in hair. But at some point, some day, we'll have to find a serious answer to the question: How could a genius be sexist?

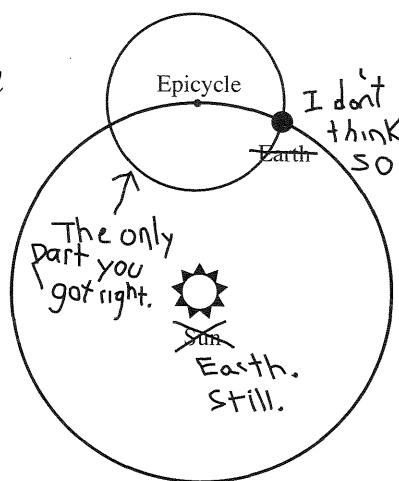
The typical answer is, "They were products of their time." But if philosophers can't see beyond the time they live in, and grasp what we might call the "real truth," who can? Is anyone capable of genuine detachment? No matter how intelligent we are, we nearly always end up believing what those around us believe, and doing as they do.

We all know how easy it is to poke fun at Ptolemy's ignorance in freshman and sophomore year, as well as the ignorance of the whole world for centuries after him. But we can hardly claim credit for the Copernican Revolution. We didn't prove Ptolemy wrong—we only happened to grow up surrounded by people who all agree that he was wrong. If we had happened to live in a time when everyone we loved, and all the experts in the world, told us constantly that the universe was Ptolemaic, then we would reject Copernicus' ideas on principle—as most astronomers did for hundreds of years after his death. Even if we replicated his steps exactly, few or none of us would actually accept his model—nor would we need to give a reason. Geocentrists did not have to justify themselves to anyone, just as Program authors did not have to justify their sexism to anyone. Sexism was "proven," just like geocentrism was "proven."

If we're honest with ourselves, we must realize that we have the same luxuries in our present beliefs. Personally, I've never been called upon to defend either the heliocentric theory or my feminist views. This shows me that I, too, am a product of my time and my community. I don't really deserve to claim credit for work I didn't do: to feel superior to a Program author simply because he was raised to believe in sexism, and I was raised to believe in feminism. Neither of us has "deserved" anything, really.

That's not to say feminism is essentially irrational; of course it isn't. Any thinking person in today's world can produce a thousand excellent arguments to support it. It's just that I never would have come up with those arguments on my own, if I hadn't been raised to believe in the proposition already. It requires a rich imagination to be able to see that one's own community is behaving immorally. Almost nobody has this kind of imagination—not even the people we refer to as geniuses. In fact, it's probably the rarest human faculty in existence.

The fact is that if each of us really didn't want to believe in feminism, our brains are powerful and clever enough to produce limitless arguments against it, especially if we had our friends to help us. The basic reason feminism continues daily to prevail with us is because we already believe it. This is called confirmation bias: interpreting all new information so that it agrees with our beliefs, and ignoring or discrediting information that does not. So it's difficult to imagine any logic or evidence that could, on its own, persuade us to abandon views like feminism. For example, even if tomorrow, neuroscience revealed some enormous difference between the brains of men and women, we could find an infinite number of ways to either discredit the science involved in that discovery, or to dismiss science itself as having no bearing on the



issues.

Not that it's wrong to treat evidence this way; sometimes evidence reveals things that are meaningless or irrelevant. But I think it's important to acknowledge that feminism is not an immutable truth that we personally discovered after having studied it objectively and established it mathematically. Rather, it is something we as individuals are used to, and something we need to believe in order to continue functioning in our native communities. Community is the only reliable way to change people's beliefs.

This is even true in situations when we say that a book "persuaded" us on some point. Books only have as much power as our communities give them. The St. John's community happens to encourage us to value books and their messages. But if everyone in our lives condemned books on principle, then no book on earth would have the power to convince us of anything.

My ultimate point is that yes, Program authors are typically sexist. And yes, it is frustrating and awful to read those terrible, demeaning passages—especially since they hardly ever add anything to the arguments being discussed. But we shouldn't ever feel superior to them on that account.

It isn't sexism we need to overcome, but hubris in any form. History should have taught us by now that many of the things we say in our lifetimes—the things we count as implicitly true, just because our communities taught them to us—will certainly bother readers of the future, just as we are bothered now by the past. I'm not saying they will be bothered by our feminist views, necessarily (since through the lens of our time, I personally think feminism is wonderful and will never go away). But it could be anything at all that we accept and don't think much about. Our prejudices enter us the same way sexism entered our favorite Program authors, and the same way feminism enters us now: we believe what our little worlds tell us. And just like our Program authors, 99.9% of us are totally incapable of seeing quiet bigotry in ourselves, no matter how smart we are, unless our communities alert us to its presence.

Though I'm limited just like everyone else, years of concentrated introspection have revealed in myself tiny slivers of this great hubris and its resulting hypocrisy. I've noted how often we so-called compassionate liberals say things like, "Too bad," or "I don't care," or "They can rot in prison forever," when we talk about the enemies of our political ideals. But our attitude is neither compassionate nor liberal—and, in fact, cannot be put to any productive use whatsoever. Though it does show a remarkable indifference to the wellbeing of others.

Wherever the future of human rights takes us, it is unlikely that it will vindicate demeaning, disempowering, and dismissing other human beings: something even feminists and other so-called progressives do far more than anyone realizes. This glimpse of our own blindness gives us a tiny insight into our own place in history, and the place of all mankind before us. Dimly, we can sense how posterity will wonder about us, just as we do about the ancients: "How," they will ask, "could people who are so smart say things that are so foul and wrong?" ♦



## Poem by a Poet

◆ Erik Neave A'16

A poem read by a poet,  
Flat and bland,  
Schooled and full of purpose,  
Did not move me.

A hunched woman,  
Sweatered with knit cap,  
Speaking from experience,  
Forced tears.

## Notes from the Other Side: 5

Judith Seeger TUTOR

### *The Rainy Season Begins*

At first the earth drinks in the rain.

After all, it hasn't rained for months.  
The water simply disappears  
as if it had never been.  
And then we're back to dust again.

There will be time enough for puddles;  
Time enough for shining sandy beaches  
to be submerged beneath the flood;  
Time enough for fish to flee and game to gather,  
trapped on islands nonexistent now;  
Time enough for the river to rise,  
and time enough for mud.

# A Fire in Bucharest Leads to a Country-Wide Protest

Allison Tretina A'17

A little over a week ago, on October 30, a fire set off during a concert at a nightclub in Bucharest killed 32 people and injured around 180, 35 of whom are in critical condition. The tragedy brought the country to a standstill, leaving many in a fury of anger and grief.

Although the cause of the fire is still unknown, many attribute it to the country's corrupt system. According to the media, the Collectiv nightclub had not adhered to its proper safety regulations, putting it in danger long before the fire occurred. Yet, as many know, obtaining necessary permits and meeting all of the fire requirements requires slugging through Romania's bureaucracy system, and thus offering bribes.

Only a day after the fire, tens of thousands of people flooded the streets in Bucharest and several cities across Romania to protest the government's corruption and demand the resignation of senior officials. People chanted, "Shame on you," and "Assassins." Signs read, "Corruption kills," and, "The day we give in is the day we die."

Surprisingly, Prime Minister Victor Ponta, who had already been on trial for corruption, resigned in response to the first day of protests. In a television address, he told the public that he hoped his resignation would "satisfy the people who came out on the streets." For months now, the president and his National Liberal Party have been urging Ponta to resign to no avail. And, corruption trials without enough parliamentary votes failed to dismiss the politician. His resignation was the first time in 26 years that such a major political change has been determined in Romania by peaceful protests. The last time marked the fall of Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu.

Since Ponta's resignation, the protests have continued. This time, however, the people are targeting President Iohannis, demanding he fundamentally change the political class in Romania, as he promised at the beginning of his presidency. Yet removing corrupt political figures is easier than replacing them with ones that do not exist. Even if there are figures untainted by the corrupt system, 26 years of

corruption and nepotism will still require great measures from more people than Iohannis.

After all, the fire in Bucharest was only the latest in a series of catastrophes, caused simultaneously by politician and citizen-led corruption and ineptitude. In January of last year, an agonizingly slow hunt for the survivors in a plane crash in eastern Europe cost four people their lives, not including the two who had died immediately from the crash. Then, less than a month ago, a policeman was fatally injured while accompanying the Interior Minister's motorcade, which many believe was already an abuse of power. These incidents do not include the hundreds of people who passed away in recent years because of the ineptitude of the country's healthcare system, or the roads that remain poor despite the billions of dollars poured into their repair.

Surely, the change in political class currently being demanded by people on the streets will not be the end all. A widespread culture change is also needed. This is nothing new, but the crowd of thousands flooding the streets most certainly is. ◆

