

# Montage

Art, books, diverse creations



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come fairy-tale heroes and villains. When, to her horror, Sophie arrives at the Evil branch to learn “uglification,” death curses, and other dark arts, while Agatha finds herself at the School for Good amid hand-

**The writer at work: Soman Chainani in his Brooklyn apartment**

some princes and fair maidens, the line between good and evil blurs, the meaning of beauty twists, and the girls reveal their true natures.

At the core of their journey is the “princess culture,” which Chainani defines as today’s “tyranny of pink in young-girl marketing. It tells them their responsibility is to be pink, sparkly, ultra-feminine, and—most of all—pretty.” With such an emphasis on looks, “girly girls are terrified of being ugly, and normal girls are afraid of being outcasts.”

Even boys are unnerved. “They have no idea how to live up to the expectations,” he says. “That’s what I am interested in capturing: what kids fear most today.”

Sophie and Agatha inhabit a world like that of classic fairy tales: a place where magic and reality coexist, and dangers lurk. Yet those dangers reflect modern issues. Several episodes tackle the fear of ag-

## Princess Not-So-Charming

*A fairy tale for today’s world*

by SUSAN HODARA

“FAIRY TALES have always tapped into the subconscious, bringing to light children’s deepest fears,” says Soman Chainani ’01. In his new fantasy-adventure novel, *The School for Good and Evil*, he has brought that tenet into the twenty-first century.

The first of a trilogy for middle-grade readers (ages nine and up), *The School for*

*Good and Evil* tracks two archetypal heroines: the lovely Sophie, with her waist-long blond hair and her dreams of becoming a princess, and her friend Agatha, an unattractive, unpopular contrarian who chooses to wear black. A giant bird snatches the pair and carries them off to the School for Good and Evil, a two-pronged magical academy that trains children to be-

O P E N B O O K

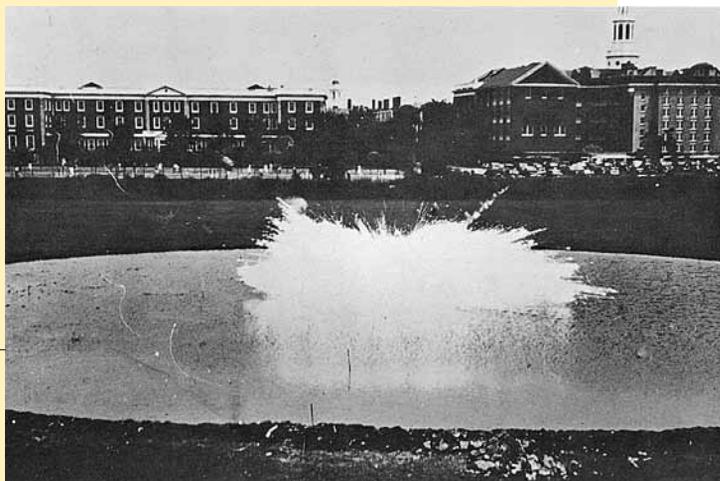
# Like Garlic or Burning Matches

nese cities. Robert M. Neer Jr. '86, an attorney and lecturer at Columbia, has written *Napalm: An American Biography* (Harvard University Press, \$29.95). "Napalm was born a hero but lives a pariah," he writes. This excerpt, from the introduction to the first section, narrates the gel's origin.

**America's** first Independence Day of World War II was idyllic at Harvard University. On campus tennis courts nestled between the college soccer field's verdant green and the golden dome of the Business School library, players in whites gathered for morning games. They volleyed as university maintenance workers armed with shovels arrived, cut into the field, and built a circular parapet a foot tall and 60 yards in diameter. Fire trucks from the City of Cambridge rumbled up, and men flooded the circle to make a wide pool four to nine inches deep. By mid morning, all was ready for the arrival of Sheldon Emery professor of organic chemistry Louis Fieser, one of the university's most brilliant scholars and head of "Anonymous Research Project No. 4," a top secret war research collaboration between the school and the government.

Fieser arrived. He was 43 years old, tall, bald, with traces of the Williams College varsity football lineman he once was still present in his bearing. An octet of assistants followed. He equipped four of the young men with boots, buckets, long sticks, and gloves, and positioned them around the pool. With assistance from the others, he gingerly lugged a live 70-pound napalm bomb, bolted nose down on a metal stand, to the center of

**Independence Day, 1942:**  
the first field test of  
napalm, behind Harvard  
Business School



**Napalm**, indelibly associated in modern memory with the horrors of civilians bombed during the Vietnam War, emerged from a Harvard laboratory as a lauded invention in an earlier conflict—and then was used to incinerate Japa-

the lagoon. A wire ran to a control box on dry ground. Firemen and groundskeepers looked on. Players 50 feet away traded forehands.

Fieser flipped a switch. High explosives blasted incendiary white phosphorus into 45 pounds of jellied gasoline. A spectacular, billowing 2,100-degree-Fahrenheit fire cloud rose over the field. Lumps of searing, flaming napalm splashed into the water. Oily smoke filled the air. Assistants plunged into the muck, splashed water on burning blobs, and used their sticks to submerge and extinguish larger gobbets. They noted the location and size of chunks, and scooped salvageable jelly into buckets for weighing. Tennis players scattered....

Professor Fieser's firestorm was over in seconds. Hunks of gel hissed, flickered, and died. A pungent aroma of phosphorus, like garlic or burning matches, mixed with the oily smell of gasoline, hung in the air over the flooded field and empty tennis courts. Napalm bombs had arrived in the world.

ing; one chapter riffs on the current obsession with physical self-improvement. In a scene where Sophie is asked to contribute to the school, she becomes a campus celebrity by offering "Malevolent Makeovers" and a presentation titled "Just Say No to Drab." When Agatha challenges her, Sophie replies, "Isn't this compassion? Isn't this kindness and wisdom? I'm helping those who can't help themselves!"

"So much is based on image," Chainani explains. "It's such a pervasive, destructive thing."

The fairy tales have roots in Chainani's childhood in Key Biscayne, where he grew up in one of the island's only Indian families. "I was Agatha," he says. "I might have thought I was Sophie, but Agatha was who

**"Maybe my secret goal is to scare the pink princess out of a lot of little girls."**

I really was." He was devoted to Disney animations as well as to Roald Dahl's stories ("I had a bit of a dark edge as a kid," he says). As an adolescent, he listened to Madonna incessantly. By the time he arrived at Harvard, Chainani's fascination with fairy tales—and with female villains in particular—was entrenched. "A female villain is infinitely more clever than a man," he says. "Her evil relies not on brute violence, but on the ability to manipulate, seduce, or recruit—in sum, a deeper, more thrilling corruption."

A freshman seminar on the portrayal of witches in children's literature, taught by Loeb professor of Germanic languages and literatures Maria Tatar, chair of Harvard's folklore and mythology program, enlivened Chainani's first year. (Tatar became a mentor; commenting on *The School for Good and Evil*, she wrote, "It is not often that someone comes along who can reinvent fairy tales and reclaim their magic.") Three years later, he wrote a senior English thesis about the reinvention of wicked women as fairy-tale villains. His academic efforts earned him a Hoopes Prize, the Le Baron Rus-

sell Briggs Commencement Prize, and a *summa cum laude* degree.

He went on to earn an M.F.A. from Columbia University's film school and worked for a few years as a screenwriter for hire. Yet his concept for his own contemporary fairy tale never stopped tugging at him; he wrote it first as a film treatment. "It was going to be a movie," he says. "I never thought it would be books." Producer Jane Startz, however, saw it as a literary series—so he and Startz (whose feature films include *Tuck Everlasting* and



*Ella Enchanted*) adapted the treatment into a proposal for a book trilogy. Within 72 hours, Startz had sold the books and optioned the movie rights herself. Chainani is currently writing the screenplay for *The School for Good and Evil*, along with the second and third installments of the novel (due out in 2014 and 2015, respectively).

The author considers his new book a modern-day fairy tale and a survival guide for children—boys as well as girls. "I think there is a bit of an urban legend that boys won't read books that have

female protagonists," he says. "As they did with the original Grimm fairy tales, boys don't respond to gender in a story—but simply to the circumstances that befall protagonists."

Chainani draws parallels not only to the Grimm brothers' works, but also to J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, which he greatly admires. "Her attention to magical details was unprecedented," he says. "I preferred to spend more time on the kids."

But he doesn't wish to coddle his readers. "I don't want my readers to feel safe," he says. "I want to give them insight into different forms of good and evil." Then he pauses. "Maybe my secret goal," he says, "is to scare the pink princess out of a lot of little girls."

## Soul Beyond the Skin

Indelible Lalita's saga of pigmentation and personhood

by LAURA LEVIS

FOR THREE YEARS, documentary filmmaker Julie Mallozzi '92 had learned of every fateful turn in Lalita Bharvani's life—her affliction with vitiligo, an autoimmune condition that blotched her dark skin with white; her battle with ovarian cancer; and, out of nowhere, heart failure. But now, for the first time, Mallozzi wanted to turn off the camera.

Bharvani lay motionless a few feet away from her on a hospital table, surgeons readying to cut into her chest for open-heart surgery. "She's lying there with only 40 percent of her blood in her body and

the other 60 percent is in this machine, so you see this large quantity of blood," Mallozzi recalls. "It was just the reddest red I have ever seen in my life." But Mallozzi did not turn off her camera, recalling something her subject had once told her: "When I asked her why she would let herself be filmed in all these intimate moments, she said that she was very unselfconscious—she has come to a place where she has realized her body is not really who she is." Says Mallozzi, "I think she's a beautiful woman, but she no longer stakes her identity in her body."

*Indelible Lalita* tells the story of Bharvani, an Indian woman who began to lose her skin pigment as an adolescent and then migrated from India to Paris and eventually Montreal. Now 60, with completely white skin, she copes with her own identity transformation as she battles a



Filmmaker Julie Mallozzi intercut scenes of Lalita Bharvani at home, tending to her garden (top) or doing yoga, with startling images of x-rays and medical tests, including an echocardiogram (above). One poignant scene shows Bharvani visiting her elderly mother in India.

