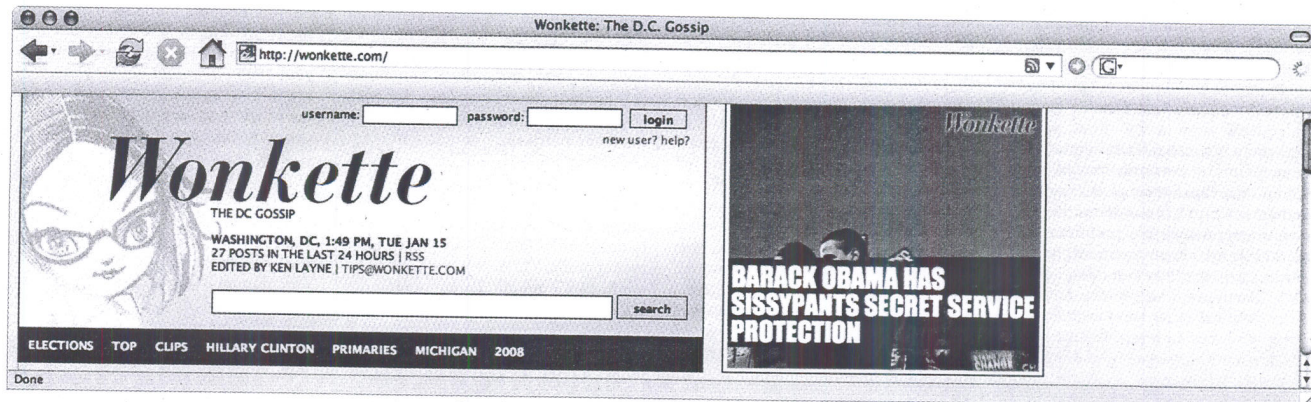


# BLOGS

Sarah Boxer



From the top of the Washington, D.C.-based blog Wonkette

Two years ago, I was given a dreadful idea for a book: create an anthology of blogs. It could not be done, I was sure. Books are tight. Blogs are reckless. Books are slow. Blogs are fast. Books ask you to stay between their covers. Blogs invite you to stray. Books fret over copyright and libel. Blogs grab whatever they want with impunity—news, gossip, pictures, videos. Making a book out of bloggy material, if it could be done at all, would kill it, wouldn't it?

A blog, for those who don't know, is a journal or log that appears on a Web site. It is written on line, read on line, and updated on line. It's there for anyone with an Internet connection to see and (in many cases) comment on. The entries, or posts, are organized in reverse chronological order, like a pile of unread mail, with the newest posts on top and the older stuff on the bottom. Some blogs resemble on-line magazines, complete with graphics, sidebars, and captioned photos. Others just have the name of the blog at the top and the dated entries under it. You can find blogs by doing a regular Google search for the blog name (if you know it) or by doing a Google Blog search using keywords.

The word "blog" is a portmanteau term for Web log or Weblog. In 1997 Jorn Barger, the keeper of Robot Wisdom, a Web site full of writings about James Joyce, artificial intelligence, and Judaism as racism (he's reputedly a racist himself), coined the word "Weblog." In 1999 Peter Merholz, the author of a Weblog called Peterme, split it in two like this—"We blog"—creating a word that could serve as either noun or verb. "Blog" was born.

Today there are, by one count, more than 100 million blogs in the world, with about 15 million of them active. (In Japan neglected or abandoned blogs are called *ishikoro*, pebbles.) There are political blogs, confessional blogs, gossip blogs, sex blogs, mommy blogs, science blogs, soldier blogs, gadget blogs, fiction blogs, video blogs, photo blogs, and cartoon blogs, to name a few. Some people blog alone and some in groups. Every self-respecting newspaper and magazine has some reporters

<sup>1</sup>In fact, I did it. See my *Ultimate Blogs: Masterworks from the Wild Web* (Vintage, 2008).

## BOOKS MENTIONED IN THIS ARTICLE

**We've Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture**  
compiled and edited  
by John Rodzvilla, with an  
introduction by Rebecca Blood.  
Basic Books,  
242 pp., \$20.00

**Against the Machine:  
Being Human in the Age  
of the Electronic Mob**  
by Lee Siegel.  
Spiegel and Grau,  
182 pp., \$22.95

**Republic.com 2.0**  
by Cass R. Sunstein.  
Princeton University Press,  
251 pp., \$24.95

**Blogwars**  
by David D. Perlmutter.  
Oxford University Press,  
235 pp., \$24.95

**The Future of Reputation:  
Gossip, Rumor, and Privacy  
on the Internet**  
by Daniel J. Solove.  
Yale University Press,  
247 pp., \$24.00

**Blog: Understanding the  
Information Reformation  
That's Changing Your World**  
by Hugh Hewitt.  
Nelson Books,  
225 pp., \$14.99 (paper)

**We're All Journalists Now:  
The Transformation of the Press  
and Reshaping of the Law  
in the Internet Age**  
by Scott Gant.  
Free Press, 240 pp., \$26.00

**The Cult of the Amateur:  
How Today's Internet Is Killing  
Our Culture**  
by Andrew Keen.  
Doubleday/Currency,  
228 pp., \$22.95

**Naked Conversations: How  
Blogs Are Changing the Way  
Businesses Talk with Customers**  
by Robert Scoble and Shel Israel,  
foreword by Tom Peters.  
Wiley, 252 pp., \$24.95

**Blog! How the Newest Media  
Revolution Is Changing Politics,  
Business, and Culture**  
by David Kline and Dan Burstein.  
CDS Books, 402 pp., \$24.95

and critics blogging, including *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and *The New Yorker*.

Every sport, every war, every hurricane brings out a crop of bloggers, who often outdo the mainstream media in timeliness, geographic reach, insider information, and obsessive detail. You can read about the Iraq war from Iraqi bloggers, from American soldiers (often censored now), or from scholars like Juan Cole, whose blog, *Informed Comment*, summarizes, analyzes, and translates news from the front. For opera, to take another example, you have Parterre Box, which is kind of campy, or Sieglind's *Diaries and My Favorite Intermissions*, written by frequent Met-goers, or *Opera Chic*, a Milan-based blog focused on La Scala (which followed in great detail the scandal of Roberto Alagna's walk-out during *Aida* a year ago). And that doesn't begin to cover it.

With such riches to choose from, you might think it would be a snap to

put a bunch of blogs into a book and call it an anthology. And you would be wrong. The trouble? Links—those bits of highlighted text that you click on to be transported to another blog or another Web site. (Links are the Web equivalent of footnotes, except that they take you directly to the source.) It's not only that the links are hard to transcribe into print. It's that the whole culture of linking—composing on the fly, grabbing and posting whatever you like, making weird, unexplained connections and references—doesn't sit happily in a book. Yes, I'm talking about bloggy writing itself.

Is there really such a thing? A growing stack of books has pondered the effects of blogs and bloggers on culture (*We've Got Blog* and *Against the Machine*), on democracy (*Republic.com 2.0*), on politics (*Blogwars*), on privacy (*The Future of Reputation*), on media (*Blog: Understanding the Information Reformation* and *We're All Journalists Now*), on professionalism (*The Cult of the Amateur*), on business

(*Naked Conversations*), and on all of the above (*Blog!*). But what about the effect of blogs on language?

Are they a new literary genre? Do they have their own conceits, forms, and rules? Do they have an essence?

Reading blogs, it's pretty clear, is not like reading a newspaper article or a book. Blog readers jump around. They follow links. They move from blogs to news clips to videos on YouTube, and they do it more easily than you can turn a newspaper page. They are always getting carried away—somewhere. Bloggers thrive on fragmented attention and dole it out too—one-liners, samples of songs, summary news, and summary judgments. Sometimes they don't even stop to punctuate. And if they can't put quite the right inflection on a sentence, they'll often use an OMG (Oh my god!) or an emoticon, e.g., a smiley face :- ) or a wink :- ) or a frown :- ( instead of words. (Tilt your head to the left to see the emoticons here.)

Many bloggers really don't write much at all. They are more like impresarios, curators, or editors, picking and choosing things they find on line, occasionally slapping on a funny headline or adding a snarky (read: snotty and catty) comment. Some days, the only original writing you see on a blog is the equivalent of "Read this.... Take a look.... But, seriously, this is lame.... Can you believe this?"

Consider these two quite unrelated early-morning posts on December 5 from Instapundit, a well-known political blog operated by Glenn Reynolds, a law professor at the University of Tennessee:

**HUCKABEEING AND NOTHING-  
NESS:** Great title.  
posted at 07:28 AM  
by Glenn Reynolds

**ALCEE HASTINGS resigns from  
Intel committee.** That seems like a good thing, though Hastings disagrees:

In an interview with *Congressional Quarterly* in April, Hastings expressed some anger at "Democrats in high places" who made an issue—during his bid for the chairmanship—of the fact that he was impeached and removed from

office as a federal judge in 1989 on corruption and perjury charges.

Yeah, can you believe they'd be so uptight?

posted at 07:21 AM

by Glenn Reynolds

The items are short and elliptical—teasers. To see what they are about you click on the links. Here, clicking on the highlighted words “AND NOTHINGNESS” whisks you to a blog post by John Podhoretz on the Web site of *Commentary* magazine with the title “Huckabee-ing and Nothingness”; clicking on “resigns from Intel committee” brings you to an article about Hastings quitting the House Intelligence Committee that was posted on *CQ Today*, the daily news Web site of *Congressional Quarterly*. Following links is like putting on 3-D glasses. Too bad there is no equivalent in print.

Political blogs are among the trickiest to capture in a book because they tend to rely heavily on links and ephemeral information. But even blogs that have few or no links still show the imprint of the Web, its associative ethos, and its obsession with connection—the stink of the link. Blogs are porous to the world of texts and facts and opinions on line. (And this is probably as close as I can come to defining an essence of blog writing.)

Bloggers assume that if you're reading them, you're one of their friends, or at least in on the gossip, the joke, or the names they drop. They often begin their posts mid-thought or mid-rant—in medias craze. They don't care if they leave you in the dust. They're not

responsible for your education. Bloggers, as Mark Liberman, one of the founders of the blog called *Language Log*, once noted, are like Plato. :- ) The unspoken message is: Hey, I'm here talking with my buddies. Keep up with me or don't. It's up to you. Here is the beginning of Plato's *Republic*:

I went down yesterday to the Peiraeus with Glaucon, the son of Ariston, to pay my devotions to the Goddess, and also because I wished to see how they would conduct the festival since this was its inauguration.

Wait a second! Who is Ariston? What Goddess? What festival?

And here, for comparison's sake, is a passage from Julia [Here Be Hippogriffs], a blog about motherhood and infertility:

Having left Steve to his own devices for the past three days I am being heavily pressured to abandon the internet (you! he wants me to abandon you!) and come downstairs to watch SG-1 with him....

So this will have to be quick. Vite! Aprisa aprisa!

I went to Blogger. It was rather fun and rather ridiculous and I am quite glad I went although I do not know if I would ever go again. One thing of note for my infertile blogging friends: DO NOT EVEN THINK ABOUT IT. Do not go. Do not ever ever go to Blogger.

Huh? Who's Steve? What's Blogger? A blog? (No.) A mothers' club? (No.) A blogging conference? (Yes.)

You get the point. Bloggers breeze through places, people, texts, and blogs that you might or might not know without providing any helpful identification. They figure that even if they don't provide you with links you can get all the background you need by Googling unfamiliar terms, clicking through Wikipedia (the collaborative on-line encyclopedia) or searching their blog's archives.

The very tone of most blogs—reactive, punchy, conversational, knowing, and free-associative—is predicated on linkiness and infused with it. And that's no accident. Once upon a time blogs were nothing but links with bits of commentary.

Although blogging has precedents going back to the early 1980s—on-line newsgroups, on-line diaries, and the “What's New” sections of personal homepages—blogging as we know it (according to Rebecca Blood's essay in *We've Got Blog*) began gathering steam around 1998. That was when a number of people began using their Web sites to record and to link to the new sites they had discovered. These early bloggers didn't always offer much commentary. What they did do was offer place names and coordinates on the Web—like a ship's log. They provided, Blood notes, “a valuable filtering function for their readers.” They “pre-surfed” the Web.

That small, cozy world exploded in 1999, the year that a handful of build-your-own-web-log tools for setting up blogs popped up on the Internet—LiveJournal, Diaryland, and, most importantly, Blogger, a free blogging

tool courtesy of Pyra Labs. After that anyone with a computer and Internet access could start a blog. You'd simply go to a service like Blogger (now owned by Google) or, in later years, to a social networking site like MySpace. Then you'd follow the instructions: choose a name for your blog, consider how much to reveal on the “About Me” page, decide whether to allow comments from readers, and pick a template—including the layout, font, and background screen.

At the beginning of 1999 there were a few dozen blogs, Blood reports. By the end of the year there were thousands, and it was impossible for anyone to keep up. At the end of 2003 there were two million blogs and the number was doubling every five months. In early 2006 Technorati, a search engine that tracks blogs, counted 27 million. In late 2007, the count passed 100 million. (The largest number of blog posts, some 37 percent, are now in Japanese, according to a recent *Washington Post* article by Blaine Harden, and most of these are polite and self-effacing—“karaoke for shy people.” Thirty-six percent of posts are in English, and most of them are the opposite of polite and self-effacing.)

When the blog boom came, the tone of the blogosphere began to shift. A lot of the new blogs—though certainly not all of them—weren't so much filters for the Web as vents for opinion and self-revelation. Instead of figuring out ways to serve up good fresh finds, many of the new bloggers were fixated on getting found. So the very significance of linking began to change. The

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remembering the sixties  
robert stone

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—WALL STREET JOURNAL

P.S.  
INSIGHTS,  
INTERVIEWS  
& MORE.

"Erudite but blunt, both tender and hard-boiled, [Stone] knows how to stick a sentence." —*New York Times Book Review*

"Opening the trunk on the American Sixties might seem at first to be a fearsome...undertaking. However, the incomparable novelist Robert Stone is...destiny's choice for the role of narrator-guide. [H]e writes with unnostalgic compassion and intelligence for that tumultuous time." —Richard Ford

"Robert Stone's riveting memoir, recalls his days as one of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters in the Decade That Changed Everything." —*GQ*

"A remarkably lucid, passionate history and defense of that decade's countercultural tendencies.... His overall conclusion? 'We saw...this country as [being] blessed in its most generous hopes.' Right on, brother." —*Entertainment Weekly*

"Brilliant chronicler of the geopolitics of irony and doom... the very idea of a memoir from that period is a welcome one.... It's Stone's missive from his piece of psychedelic history—his postcards from the edge." —*Boston Globe*

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links that had once mattered were the ones you offered on your blog, the so-called outbound links pointing to other sites. Now the links that mattered most—and still do—are those on other blogs pointing toward your blog, the so-called inbound links. Those are the ones that blog-trackers like Technorati count. They are the measure of fame.

Now that fame and links are one and the same, there are bloggers out there who will do practically anything—start rumors, tell lies, pick fights, create fake personas, and post embarrassing videos—to get noticed and linked to. They are, in the parlance of the blogosphere, “link whores.” And those who succeed are blog celebrities, or “blogebrities.”

One of the surest ways to hoist your blog to the top of the charts is to bring down a big-time politician or journalist. (Bloggers who constantly dog the mainstream media, or MSM, have been dubbed the Pajamahadeen.) In 2004 the blogs Little Green Footballs and Power Line helped set Rathergate in motion when they spread the allegation that the memos Dan Rather presented on *60 Minutes II* about President George W. Bush's Air National Guard duty were fakes. (Since then, a CBS panel investigating the matter has failed to prove that Rather's account of Bush's military career was substantially wrong,<sup>2</sup> and Rather has pressed a suit against CBS for “wrongful dismissal.”) In 2006 Little Green Footballs scored another hit by pointing out that a Reuters photograph of an Israeli air strike had been doctored to make the smoke plumes over Lebanon larger and darker. In 2004 many right-wing blogs helped the Swift Boat Veterans sink John Kerry's bid for the presidency. In 2002 it was bloggers like Joshua Micah Marshall of Talking Points Memo and Atrios (a pseudonym) of Eschaton who first publicized Trent Lott's racist remarks at Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday party, leading to Lott's resignation as Senate majority leader.

Sex, of course, can also give your blog a lift. In 2004 a “Staff Ass” (staff assistant) on Capitol Hill named Jessica Cutler used her blog Washingtonienne to broadcast firsthand tales of sex (sometimes for money) with a lot of men on the Hill, including one married Bush official. When Ana Marie Cox, who was then blogging as Wonkette, got wind of it and let the world know, Washingtonienne became famous and Wonkette became more famous than she had been. Both bloggers went on to publish novels. In 2005 Diablo Cody, a former stripper from Minnesota who keeps a blog called The Pussy Ranch, wrote a book (*Candy Girl: A Year in the Life of an Unlikely Stripper*); and this year the movie she wrote (*Juno*) became a hit. Here's a bit of her blog:

I'm at my parents' house. I came in from Seattle last night and slept for 14 hours straight. My mother peeked into my room at noon today and reports that I was so unresponsive she checked my breathing. 29 years ago she probably did the same on a nightly basis, except I was ostensibly a lot cuter

then and didn't mutter *cock ring* in my sleep.

For many bloggers infamy is better than no kind of fame at all. In his book *The Future of Reputation*, Daniel Solove quotes Jessica Cutler of the Washingtonienne blog: “Some people with blogs are never going to get famous, and they've been doing it for, like, over a year. I feel bad for them.... Everyone should have a blog. It's the most democratic thing ever.” To go unnoticed in this democracy is to not exist. This kind of existential pressure, naturally, ups the ante on language.

Investive—hilarious, acidulous invective, often served up with false apologies—is everywhere. The law of the blogosphere is Hobbesian: survival of the snarkest. In 2004 a British blogger known as Eurotrash went after a *New York Times* food writer who had written a gushy restaurant review. Here is a sample of her attack:

You make my teeth want to vomit. The last time you took the subway was in 1983. You once read a Kurt Vonnegut novel and pretended you understood it. You laugh like a hyena, but you crave approval. Your clothes are nice, though. I don't know. I don't know you from Adam. I'm sorry.

The blogger's attack was so merciless that people took notice. And before long someone found out that the chef under review had blurbed the reviewer's book. The reviewer was caught and soon lost her gig. The blogger's reaction: “Storm in a teacup to me.... Life in New York. Hey ho.”

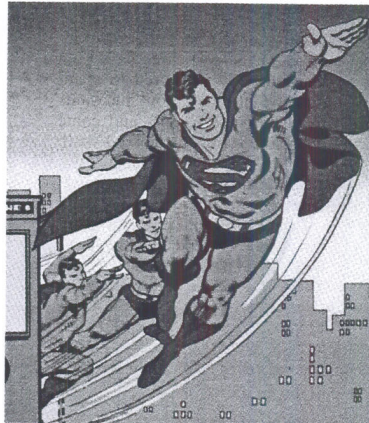
In 2006 a feminist in Texas who writes the blog I Blame the Patriarchy made great fun of the fuss she had stirred up among other feminists by opining that fellatio is “gross.” She softened her attack with an apology, false of course:

I am chastened. I'd forgotten that when it comes to sex, it is the duty of the radical feminist to shut the fuck up.... I must have been insane to question the degrading sexual theatrics that are every woman's birthright, when the mastery of these theatrics is her invitation to life's rich feast. It is a well-known fact that most women spring from their beds every morning singing, “O I hope I can blow some dude today!”

Of course I can't prove it, but I'm pretty sure that bloggers have fouler mouths, tougher hides, and cooler thesauruses than most of the people I've read in print. Here's a sampling of words gleaned from some of my favorite blogs:

anyhoo, bitchitude, fan-fucking-tabulous, hole-esque, nastified, alternapop, coffin-snatching, YouTube-ization, touzing, Daddio, manky, nutters, therapised, Boo-Ya Nation, dildopreneur, dudely, flava, haz-mat, nut sac, sexbot, underwearian, fugly, vomit-y, consciousness-jumped, tear-assed, fetbryo, grapatistically, mommy-blogdaciousness, Nero-crazy, English, pidginized, votenfreude, angsty, malgovernment, bejesus, JumboTron, man-dresses, babe-aliciousness, droit de senny.

Bloggers give new, Web-inflected meanings to old words. A “troll” on the Web is someone who posts provocative things just to cause an outcry. “Astroturfing” is creating a fake grassroots movement. Bloggers also sprinkle their blogs with expressions like WTF (translation: “What the fuck?”), lol (laugh out loud), and meh (a verbal shrug). They willfully misspell—like “teh” for “the.” They call the Internet “the internets,” cutely following George W. Bush's slip. If people wrote like this for publication, they'd be fired. And, indeed, there is a term for getting canned because of your blog: “dooced,” named for the blogger Dooce, now a stay-at-home-mother (SAHM) or, as she puts it, a “Shit Ass Ho Mother-fucker,” who got fired for blogging about her employer.



Writing like this might seem easy, but just try it. Geoffrey Nunberg, a linguist at Stanford who writes for newspapers and radio and sometimes contributes to the blog Language Log, admitted on NPR back in 2004, “I don't quite have the hang of the form.” And, he added, many journalists who get called upon by their editors to keep blogs are similarly stumped: “They fashion engaging ledes, they develop their arguments methodically, they give context and background, and tack helpful IDs onto the names they introduce.” Guess what? They read like journalists, not bloggers.

Bloggers are golden when they're at the bottom of the heap, kicking up. Give them a salary, a book contract, or a press credential, though, and it just isn't the same. (And this includes, for the most part, the blogs set up by magazines, companies, and newspapers.) Why? When you write for pay, you worry about lawsuits, sentence structure, and word choice. You worry about your boss, your publisher, your mother, and your superego looking over your shoulder. And that's no way to blog.

Blogging at its freest is like going to a masked ball. You can say all the spiteful, infantile things you wouldn't dream of saying if you were in print or face to face with another human being. You can flirt with anyone, or try to. You can tell the President exactly what you think of him. You can have political opinions your friends would despise you for. You can even libel people you don't like and hide behind an alias. (It's very hard to get back at anonymous bloggers who defame you because, by an act of Congress, Web site administrators aren't liable for

what's written on their sites.<sup>3</sup> And erasing anything on the Web is almost impossible.) You can assume a new identity and see how it flies—no strings attached.

A blogger called El Guapo, who liberally uses Spanglish and signs every post with “Mucho Amor,” is adamant about keeping his true identity a secret. (I tried and failed to figure out who he was for my anthology.) He writes as a twenty-nine-year-old Guatemalan-American living in Washington, D.C., about such things as helping an oversexed friend shop for bulk condoms at Costco and fending off a gang of muggers with the phrase “Yo Quiero Taco Bell.” I desperately wanted it to be memoir. But who cares? In a book, you can get in trouble for writing under false pretenses or writing a false memoir (right, James Frey?). In a blog you can't.

Well, not much trouble anyway. In 2006 Lee Siegel, a culture critic and *New Republic* editor (who by the way coined the term “blogo-fascism” to describe bloggers' attempts to control their critics) was caught on *The New Republic's* blog using a “sock puppet,” an alias named Sprezzatura, to rein in his own critics. He praised himself as “brave” and “brilliant” and labeled his detractors “abusive sheep.” As he himself put it, he “got down in the mud” with them. When someone tried outing him, Sprezzatura responded: “I'm not Lee Siegel, you imbecile. If you knew who I was you and your n+1 buddies would crap in your pants.” *The New Republic* suspended Siegel. Now he's back and has just published a book about blog culture, *Against the Machine*.

While putting together my anthology of blogs, I marveled many times at the large numbers of bloggers obsessed with masked superheroes. (Off the bat I can think of posts about Superman, Spiderman, and the Green Lantern.) Here, for instance, is a post about the movie *Superman Returns* that I found on a blog called Johnny i hardly knew you:

so i saw superman returns last night, btw [by the way].... i am sitting there hungrily devouring every signpost of clark kent mythology before i knew i was doing it: the corn fields, the farm, the old truck, the labrador retriever farm dog, the breaking sun over the plains....

but there was something else. something that knocked me on my ass. and it was brandon routh [the actor who played Superman]. and it was the flying.... seriously. it was as if this film had taken the exact blueprint of my movements, and speed and mapped them out of my dreams. the gentleness and impossible speed, the suspension of gravity. the strength i took from the sun's rays, how they entered my chest. the towering cloud formations, and gathering storms, lightning in the stratosphere and over horizons. everything....

i thought, what if we did have a hero like that? in this world. not a saviour, but a hero who could do

<sup>3</sup>See James Goodale, “Yale Law Students May Be Out of Luck,” *New York Law Journal*, December 7, 2007.