

THE GOSSIP MILL

Alloy, the teen-entertainment factory.

BY REBECCA MEAD

When Senator Edward M. Kennedy died, at summer's end, it was inevitable that his extraordinary life would be regarded through the lens of literature. In obituaries, the history of his family was compared to Greek tragedy, and commentators described his accomplishments and his failings as novelistic. Memorializing his departed colleague on the Senate floor, Senator Robert Byrd turned to the poetry of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow ("Lives of great men all remind us / We can make our lives sublime / And, departing, leave behind us / Footprints on the sands of time"). Meanwhile, at the Manhattan offices of Alloy Entertainment, which produces books and creates other properties for the preteen and teen-age markets, an editorial group was holding a development meeting in a windowless office, pondering the relevance of the Teddy Kennedy story for younger readers. The question under consideration: Could you do Chappaquiddick for kids?

Leslie Morgenstein, the president of Alloy, who is forty-two, was at the head of a conference table. Morgenstein, who bears a passing resemblance to Adam Sandler but is leaner and has darker shadows under his eyes, sat before a counter displaying several of the company's products: "The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants," "The A-List," "Hollywood Is Like High School with Money," "Gossip Girl." A whiteboard on the wall was scrawled with fragmentary chapter outlines for a historical novel in development, about a boy who acquires superhuman powers after being tortured as a prisoner during the Civil War. At the other end of the table was Josh Bank, the company's executive vice-president, who is forty-one. Between them sat half a dozen female editors and assistants, between the ages of twenty-four and thirty.

One of them, Lanie Davis, was pitching the Kennedy-inspired story. "Three friends grow up in a coastal New En-

gland town where a famous political family summers," she said. "Every July Fourth since they were eleven, the friends have gone on a camping trip in the same spot. What they don't realize is that when they were thirteen they were just yards away from a Mary Jo Kopechne-type incident involving the eldest 'Kennedy' brother." The putative story line would be written from the alternating points of view of the three girls, each of whom would see separate clues to the crime which, taken together, would be incriminating. The girls do not discuss what they've seen, and the eldest brother is never charged. A few years later, Davis continued, a local newspaper mentions the girls' annual tradition. "The 'Kennedys' put two and two together and realize the girls were there the night of the crime, and could have seen something," Davis said. "Unbeknownst to our P.O.V. characters, the family sets out to find out if the girls know—and silence them if they do." In addition to this mystery plot, each girl in the novel would have a "front story" involving the political family. The one who'd never had a boyfriend would find herself in a romance with the dashing youngest brother of the clan; the uncool one would forge an unlikely friendship with the family's glamorous daughter. "Part friendship story, part soap, part mystery, we watch as the girls are all seduced by the political family's wealth and power, not realizing the danger they're in," Davis concluded.

Morgenstein, who has an understated, deliberate demeanor, was the first to respond. "I am a little bit off the train with the bunch of coincidences that occur," he said. "They saw something, the family reads about them in a newspaper—that all feels coincidental, and not totally credible." Nonetheless, he said, perhaps the plot could be married with an idea that Josh Bank had mentioned in passing, after having looked up his parents' address on Google Earth

and seen a digitized figure, who he thought was himself, walking outside their house. "That's like the contemporary version of 'Blow-Up,' and feels like the way into a modern, cool, psychological thriller, like 'Disturbia,'" Morgenstein said. "And this"—the Kennedyesque environs of Davis's pitch—"seems like the world to set that in."

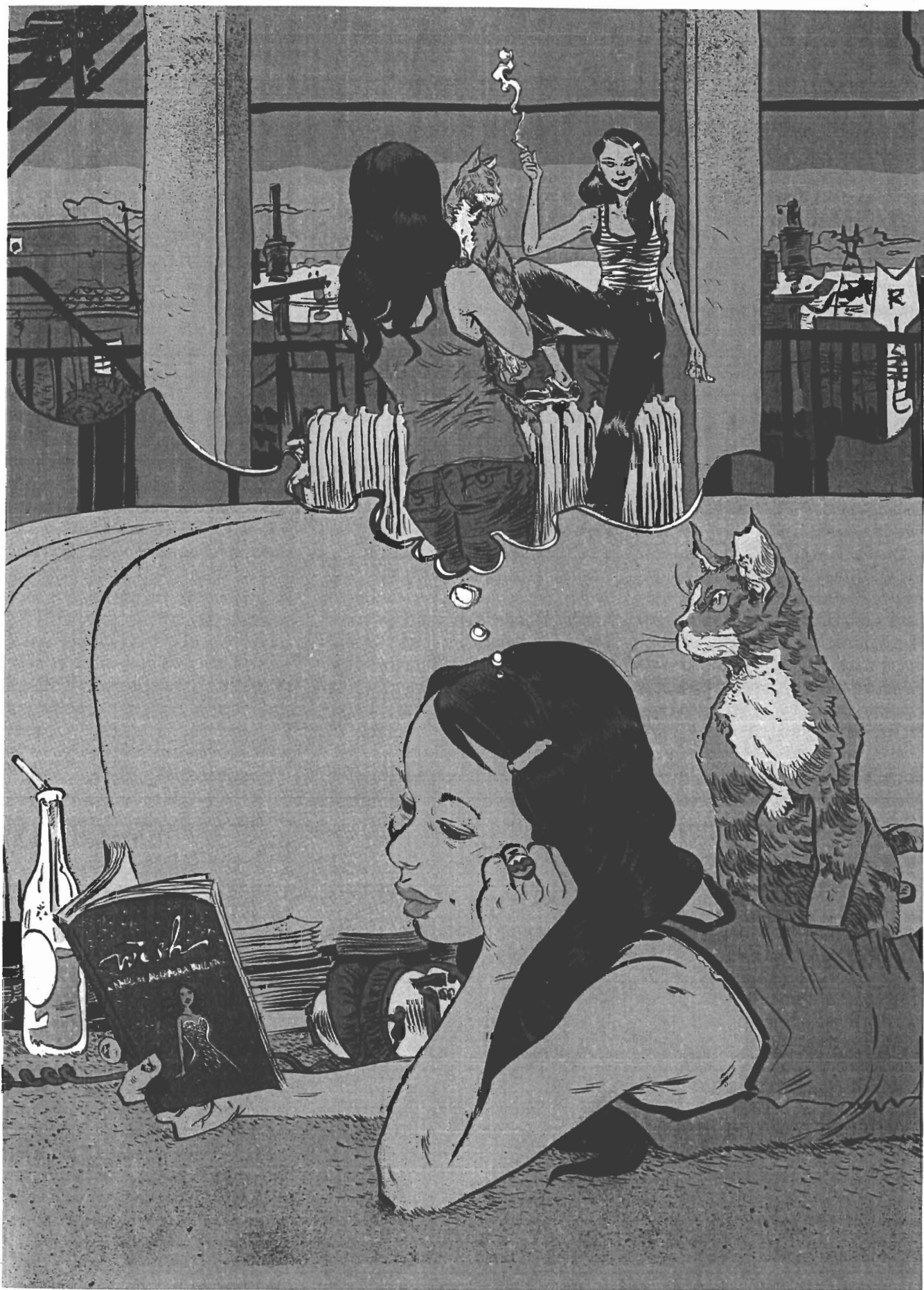
"Let's say this family looks at Google Earth and sees on their land a girls-plus-murder kind of thing?" Davis said, uncertainly.

"Since it's from the girls' P.O.V., the girls are probably, like, 'Let's look at our beach house!'" Morgenstein responded. "And then they see something on the neighboring property."

Bank, who is expansive, weighed in from the other end of the table. "Is there a teen political thriller?" he asked, dubiously. "I don't think so."

Morgenstein agreed: "Powerful family is good—the politics of it is not."

Millions of girls have consumed Alloy Entertainment's products, but the company's name does not appear on the spine of its books. Rather, it packages about thirty novels a year for publishers, and also generates television shows and a growing number of ideas for feature films. In order to do all this, Alloy has developed a process with an industrial level of efficiency. Ideas are typically suggested in weekly development meetings and, if they gain the approval of Morgenstein and Bank, are fleshed out into a short summary by an editor. A writer is asked to create a sample chapter on spec; if Alloy executives are happy with the sample, they put her (or, on occasion, him) on contract. The writer hashes out a plot with Bank, one or two other editors, and Sara Shandler, Alloy's editorial director—an alumnus of *Seventeen*, who, at the age of nineteen, put together the anthology "Ophelia Speaks," in which young women respond to the best-selling



"Publishers can get hung up on what's good for kids," an editor says. "At Alloy, they always think first about what kids want to read."

book "Reviving Ophelia." The group spends days brainstorming in the conference room, in the manner of television writers developing a series. The writer then goes off and completes the "first act"—roughly, the first ten chapters of the book. When the first act is in good shape, it is sent to potential publishers.

This week's development meeting was focussed on current events. Shandler offered a pitch inspired by the Jaycee Dugard abduction case, which had been receiving hours of coverage on CNN. In Shandler's scenario, a teen-ager who is returned to her family thirteen years after being kidnapped isn't who she claims to be. "I can take it in a thriller direction, or a horror direction," Shandler offered. Davis suggested another story line, inspired by the recent death of the investor Finn Caspersen. The idea involved the suicide of a financier and the subsequent feuding among his bereaved family: his two daughters; his new young wife, who is also the former best friend of one of the daughters; and a never acknowledged illegitimate son. Morgenstein made his own pitch, a swine-flu-meets-"Lord of the Flies" scenario, in which only a hundred young people survive a pandemic. "I'm eager to use the title 'The Hundred,' which I've been pitching now for ten years," he said.

Bank suggested spinning a story line out of the ongoing cartel violence in Mexico: a pampered rich girl has to res-

cue her kidnapped parents. "It's a reverse 'Taken'"—the 2008 movie starring Liam Neeson—"or a dark, grounded 'Nancy Drew,'" he explained.

"A young, female Jason Bourne could be interesting," Morgenstein said.

Davis then returned to political themes, reporting that an absent colleague had suggested a clever book title: "Malia Stole My Lunch Money." As Davis explained, "What if President Obama's daughter wasn't adorable and charming but a brat and a bully? And what if you were running against her for seventh-grade class president?" Everyone laughed at this idea, but the consensus was that the Obama girls were untouchable. (Bank fondly recalled one of his unused pitches from an earlier era, titled "I Did the President's Daughter": "A guy goes out to a bar one night, meets a girl, he's drunk, she's drunk—like 'Knocked Up'—and the next day he realizes, 'Holy crap, I slept with the President's daughter, and she's really into me,' and he has to get a lecture from the President.")

Not every pitch was related to the headlines. "Is there a way to do 'Marley & Me' for teen girls?" Bank asked, toward the end of the meeting. "Bittersweet ending, sad, but about dogs?"

"That feels very generic," Morgenstein replied. "I'm sure every publishing house has a couple of versions of that."

"But name one," Bank insisted. "The 'Sisterhood' version, with dog."

"I pitched one a while ago with a girl and a dog solving crimes—'Girl's Best Friend,'" Shandler said.

Bank looked dismissive. "I just don't know the thing that is similar to my idea," he said. "Girl and dog. I think we should look into it."

Last year, eighteen of Alloy's twenty-nine new titles hit the *Times* children's best-seller list. Elise Howard, the associate publisher for fiction in the children's division of HarperCollins, says of the Alloy executives, "They have a no-holds-barred approach to giving readers exactly what they want to find." Howard has published a hundred books with Alloy, including the best-selling mystery series "Pretty Little Liars," by Sara Shepard, which chronicles the lives of four girls after their clique's leader has mysteriously vanished. (Her body is ultimately found encased in cement, in her family's back yard.) "Editors and publishers can get hung up on what's good for kids," Howard told me. "At Alloy, they always think first about what kids want to read."

Not every Alloy proposal finds a publisher: an idea for a book called "Sparkalicious" has so far failed to sell. "Two girls spend their whole lives working to get into their dream schools, and they finally get in, but they have no idea what to do, so they get really high and go on a crazy adventure," Bank explained. "It was really 'Harold & Kumar,' or 'Superbad,' for girls, but people had a hard time with the pot use." (Alloy is now repackaging it as a movie pitch.) Occasionally, the Alloy team finds an idea that's so irresistible it generates a book proposal even when a huge audience is unlikely to materialize. "You Are So Not Invited to My Bat Mitzvah!," an account of the coming-of-age trials of Stacy Friedman and her misplaced affection for one Andy Goldfarb—a classmate who speaks in hip-hop slang, and whose belt buckle reads "G-Farb"—sold only modestly for its publisher, Hyperion.

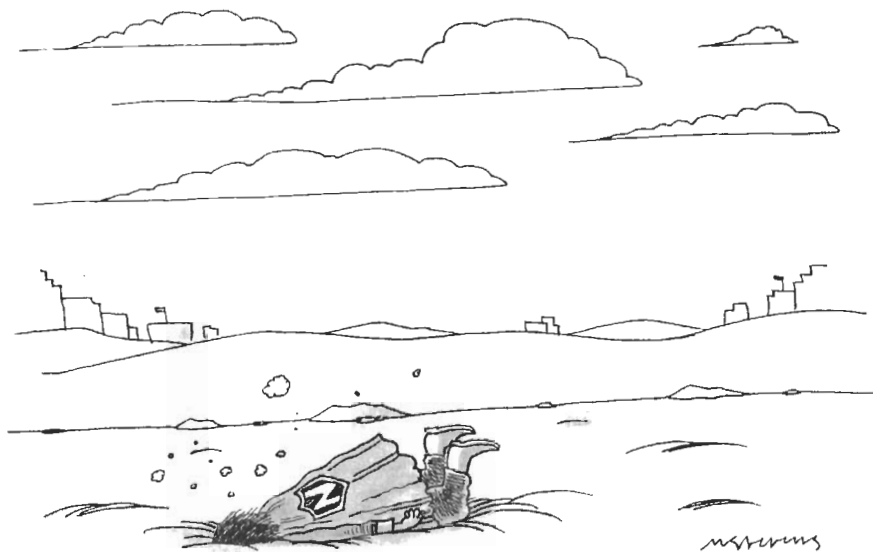
The company's main goal, however, is to produce blockbusters. It is the belief at Alloy that what kids want to read is not so different from what adults want to read, and many Alloy books have their genesis in successful grownup entertainment reworked for a younger audience. The "Pretty Little Liars" se-



"If I married him, it would only encourage him."

ries, for example, was conceived as “Desperate Housewives’ for teens.” (It has sold more than eight hundred thousand copies.) Sometimes Alloy will recalibrate a teen success for an even younger audience. A current project in development is “The Zombie Chasers,” a book series aimed at nine-to-twelve-year-olds, which Elise Howard commissioned for HarperCollins after observing her teen-age son’s fascination with stories of the undead, and realizing that there was almost no zombie literature for younger readers. “I talked to a number of editors and agents, and I said, ‘I want “Shaun of the Dead” for tweens, or zombies for tweens,’ and Alloy were the ones who came back and delivered exactly what I had been hoping for,” she says. The book, by John Kloepfer, is to be published in the summer of 2010, and is illustrated by Steve Wolfhard with cheery cartoon images of decomposing corpses.

In the middle of this decade, one of the things that kids most wanted to read was the “Gossip Girl” series. “Gossip Girl,” the name of which was suggested by an Alloy intern, had its genesis in a development meeting in early 2000, and is written in the voice of an anonymous blogger who chronicles the antics of students at elite New York private schools. The focus is on their sentimental rather than on their formal educations: sex, drugs, and alcohol are an essential part of the “Gossip Girl” curriculum. The first book was published in 2002, and was written by Cecily von Ziegesar, who at the time was an Alloy editor and an old hand at the writing-by-committee method. (Von Ziegesar recalls plotting out a now forgotten series that featured a baby with evil powers. Her contribution to the conference-room brainstorming included screaming, “Gouge the baby’s eyes out! Gouge the baby’s eyes out!”) With “Gossip Girl,” von Ziegesar created a deft caricature of teen-age self-involvement seen through the lens of excessive wealth and absent morality. The first book begins with a dinner party at the penthouse apartment of the antiheroine, Blair Waldorf, which “had been expensively redecorated that summer in deep reds and chocolate browns, and . . . was full of antiques and artworks that would have impressed anyone who knew anything about art. . . . In the kitchen,



THE ADVENTURES OF NORMALMAN

Myrtle the cook was singing Bob Marley songs to the soufflé, and the sloppy Irish maid, Esther, hadn’t poured Scotch down anyone’s dress yet, thank God.”

There have been twelve “Gossip Girl” books so far, although several of the later ones were only “created” by von Ziegesar, who oversaw the work of a ghostwriter while also “creating” another ghostwritten series, “The It Girl,” a best-selling “Gossip Girl” spinoff set in an upstate boarding school. (A thirteenth “Gossip Girl” volume, also not von Ziegesar’s composition, will be published in November.) So far, more than five and a half million “Gossip Girl” books have been sold, and a TV show, on the CW network, is in its third season. Morgenstein, who has two sons, aged thirteen and ten, says that when the “Gossip Girl” show began airing, parents at his sons’ Upper East Side private school—especially parents with daughters—were horrified. Success seems to have dispelled the opprobrium, however, and these days he is more likely to be asked to donate, for a school silent auction, a visit to the set of the series.

Morgenstein hasn’t even read all the “Gossip Girl” books—he stopped after editing the first couple—but for several years Alloy mined the “Gossip Girl” vein. “The A-List,” about a group of students at a Beverly Hills high school, is

“Gossip Girl” in Los Angeles. “Private,” about a group of girls in an exclusive dormitory, is “Gossip Girl” at boarding school. “The Insiders,” about a gang of male high schoolers who live in downtown Manhattan, is “Gossip Girl” with boys. Not every derivative has worked—“Hotlanta,” which was “Gossip Girl” with African-Americans, failed to find an audience—but others have paid off richly. “The Clique,” a series about a group of nasty middle schoolers in a wealthy Westchester County suburb, is “Gossip Girl” for tweens, and has sold more than eight million copies. When, in 2006, the company brought to market a series called “The Luxe”—“Gossip Girl” set in the Gilded Age—the competition among publishers was such that one sent its offer in the hands of a footman, dressed in period costume and carrying a rose. The four-book series went to HarperCollins, for a mid-six-figure sum per book. (In total, the first three books have sold more than four hundred thousand copies.)

A proposal package from Alloy contains not only the first act of a book; it also includes a proposed cover image and a document known as the “what comes next”—a detailed summary of the subsequent two acts. (The books almost invariably have a three-part structure.) For “The Luxe,” editors so liked

A HISTORY OF ORIGAMI

the cover mockup—a photograph, torn from a bridal magazine, that showed a girl with cascading locks wearing a billowing pink satin gown with a strapless bodice—that the Alloy team reproduced the image, more or less exactly, for the book-cover photo shoot. The result is a look that no woman in the Gilded Age would have been immodest enough to wear beyond the boudoir or the brothel, though the Alloy team felt that the sartorial anachronism was entirely forgivable (much like the heroine's request for "ciggies"—slang that would take another sixty years to emerge). "Girls today would not relate to the more severe necklines and covered arms and horrible hair styles that girls were wearing at the time," Sara Shandler says. "We tried to do the imaginary-princess version." Or, as one of the publishers competing for the book described the gown, "the ultimate fuck-you prom dress."

Even before the financial crash of last fall, the sales of "Gossip Girl" books had levelled off, and since then they have declined—in part because "fans are getting their 'Gossip Girl' in other places," as Morgenstein puts it, but also because the books' milieu is less beguiling, and less relevant, than it once seemed to be. At Alloy, too, a certain weariness with brat lit has set in. "We are really a little sick of mean-girl stuff," Shandler says.

The Alloy team knows at least one thing that today's girls want to read: anything by Stephenie Meyer. The author, who has never worked with Alloy, is known for the "Twilight" series, about Bella Swan, a gloomy misfit girl, and her problematic romance with a sensitive vampire named Edward Cullen. Last year alone, twenty-seven and a half million Meyer books were sold in the U.S.—seven per cent of all young-adult sales. Meyer's success largely explains why sales of children's books are likely to be up five per cent this year, whereas adult trade publishing is experiencing diminishing revenues. (Albert Greco, a marketing professor at Fordham University who studies the book industry, projects a decline of four per cent this year, even after the stimulus provided by Dan Brown.)

"Forbidden love is a lot of what's behind 'Twilight,'" Morgenstein says. "It's about longing and lust, but it's not about

two women in three days
cried on the green bench in the park
where i found a dollar
folded into a boat.

i thought it was the crying bench and cried
on the crying bench
when it became available.

i cried
by thinking of all the people
who've never broken a shop window, not the baker's
window, the bead-seller's,
who sells beads for purposes
i find hard to list: necklaces,
the hanging of strings of beads
in doorways, the owning of beads
just in case.

breaking a shop window with a piece of shale
the size of my heart, a piece of shale
on which i've drawn my heart, not my actual heart
but my feelings of my heart,
since i've never seen my heart,
would set something free.

i don't know what that something is
but it would be free.

and my heart would have survived its travels
through glass, its jagged voyage
through my reflection.

you see now why i cried: none of this is real.

sex, and that's very powerful to younger teen girls." It is for this reason that Morgenstein has for years resisted one of Josh Bank's pitches, "Mini Vampires," aimed at younger kids. "Vampires are sexy and dangerous and romantic, and, if they're mini, they're none of those things," Morgenstein says. ("I still think it could work," Bank insists, imagining the merchandising opportunities: "It sounds like a breakfast cereal! 'Mom, can I have some more Mini Vampires?'")

Shandler says, "More serious, angsty literature is where girls are right now. Morbid, dead-girl lit." Alloy's next offering in this genre is a book called "Wish," which is to be published by Scholastic in January. The heroine of "Wish," Olivia Larsen, is a withdrawn

seventeen-year-old in San Francisco whose outgoing twin sister, Violet, has recently died. Through the ministrations of Posey, an irascible, supernatural seamstress who provides her with a magical dress, Olivia is able to bring Violet back to life, at least temporarily. The dead twin, who is visible only to her sister, has a dry wit. When Violet first reappears, she is on a fire escape, smoking. "One of the perks," she says. "Cigarettes can't kill you if you're already dead."

The book had an unusually long gestation. Initially, Shandler says, the editorial team had decided that Olivia's drive was to seek popularity in school, but ultimately they agreed that such a preoccupation was implausible, under the circumstances. "We realized that Olivia is

until i can answer yes to the cop who asks, is this your heart
among the ruins of your reflection?
i won't be a man, despite what my anatomy
insists.

it insists
that i overcome a sense of resistance when i move,
that i move
as long as i am able to move, and when i am unable
to move, that i stop.

it would be free and look like a bird, an actual bird
or a dollar folded into a bird, a dollar bird
in a dollar boat.

which is to say
i believe origami arrives
when we need it most.

i can't prove this but i can't prove
you're a good person though i suspect
you're a good person.

you who opened the door.

you who tipped your hat.

you who ran into the fire and carried
the fire safely out.

—*Bob Hicok*

not looking to be popular—she is looking to be a whole person,” Shandler says. “You don’t care about being popular if you’ve lost your twin sister.” This more emotionally textured plot, however, was harder to hammer out within the established Alloy framework. “I want to be O.K.—it’s not great motivation, it’s not a great drive,” Shandler says. “It’s hard to put that into cover copy.” The final form of “Wish” might be characterized as “The Lovely Bones” for kids, and Shandler says that, compared with other Alloy offerings, the new series “has more of a literary bent, and some hopefulness and wish fulfillment in an emotional way, not in an ‘I want that Gucci bag’ way.” The book is certainly a tearjerker, though there are also many, many descriptions

of the characters’ dresses, boots, and skinny jeans.

The author of “Wish” is Alexandra Bullen, a twenty-seven-year-old graduate of New York University’s drama-writing program. It is her first novel, and in August she spent a few days at the Alloy offices with Shandler, Bank, and another editor, Joelle Hobeika, figuring out the story line of “Wish 2,” which Scholastic plans to publish in 2011. Three weeks before the plotting meetings, Shandler had e-mailed Bullen a short characterization of the direction in which the team had been thinking of taking the book: “What might happen to a girl who says, I wish I had a different life. And then she wakes up, and she actually has one.” Bullen had replied, “I

love it! Such a great place to start! Can’t wait to come and hash it out with you guys!”

Bullen arrived in the conference room with a laptop and the kernel of an idea: What if the girl’s wish was really about having different parents? The team batted around several ways of approaching this theme, with the author taking notes. What if the girl comes from a messed-up but wealthy family and wants a simpler life? Or what if she has a single mom, whom she is hard on, because the mom is hard on her? What if her parents forced the family to move all the time? What if her mom was a famous something or other—always on a book tour or the talk-show circuit—and the girl feels that she’s expected to be a manager rather than a daughter? Could the mom be a conservative Dr. Laura figure who tries out her theories on her reluctant daughter? Or maybe the mom had made some mistakes in her own life, from which she is trying to protect her daughter?

After a couple of hours, Bullen said, “I have a crazy idea. What if she went back in time and met her mom as a younger woman, so we understand why she’s the way she is?” The team jumped at this idea, and by early afternoon had nailed down the rough outlines of the book’s three-act structure. Act I: A girl, Hazel, who has grown up being bounced around among foster families, decides, as soon as she is eighteen, to track down her birth mother. She finds a name, Googles it, and discovers that her birth mother is hosting a benefit in San Francisco. Unable to reach her any other way, she flies to the city—where she gets a dress from Posey, the magical dressmaker—and shows up at the benefit, only to discover that the woman she seeks was killed in a car accident a week earlier. Devastated by the news, Hazel says that she wishes she’d had the chance to get to know her mother. When she wakes up the next morning, she discovers that it is 1993, the year of her birth, and she’s in Martha’s Vineyard. Act II: She gets a job on the farm of the woman she believes to be her mother, who is pregnant, apparently with her; she also becomes friends with Katie, a girl her own age, who is also working on the farm. Midway into Act II—a pivotal point in Alloy books—the pregnant farm owner has a miscarriage, meaning



"I'd run it by legal myself, but they have a restraining order against me."

that she cannot be Hazel's mom after all. Meanwhile, a teary Katie admits to Hazel that she is pregnant, and Hazel realizes that her co-worker is actually her mom-to-be.

The content of the book—unplanned pregnancy, miscarriage, death—seemed likely to arouse controversy, and certain issues would have to be handled with extreme care. Morgenstein and the team discussed the idea of Katie visiting Planned Parenthood. "I think at Planned Parenthood you're going to have to deal with the 'Is she going to have an abortion?' stuff pretty quickly," Shandler said.

"She's too far along," Hobeika said, definitively.

"She's, like, 'I know I'm going to have the baby, but I don't know if I'm going to keep it or give it up for adoption,'" Shandler agreed.

"And then maybe the rest of Act II could be Hazel thinking she's trying to convince Katie to keep the baby," Bullen suggested.

"How can she convince her?" Shandler asked.

"She would be doing things like going and looking at baby bonnets with her," Hobeika offered.

"A great second act," Bank said, sardonically. "Readers will be, like, 'My God, that scene in the baby store!'"

"Maybe the second half of the second act is really less about trying to convince Katie to keep the baby, and more about her realizing that Katie, this person she's just getting to know as her best friend, is really her mom," Sandler suggested. "And about really getting to know her mom, now that she has the opportunity."

"I like that," Bank said. "I keep thinking about 'Dirty Dancing'—I don't know why. It's the idea of a family that isn't a family. Our girl Hazel has never really had a family, and this farm family becomes her family, and Katie becomes a mom-ish best friend, in a way."

"They are raising each other," Shandler said.

"I like that a lot," the author said.

Bank suggested that Katie could be "somewhat of a nemesis up until the midpoint of the book."

"That's really interesting," Shandler said.

Hobeika said, "That increases her drive to get to know her mother in the second half of the second act—"

"They have been competing over a boy! Her dad!" Bank said, before quickly adding that he was kidding.

"God, no. It's an off-island boyfriend," Bullen said, emphatically.

"That's one thing we have to steer this away from—the creepy Michael J. Fox

'Back to the Future' thing of flirting with your mom," Bank said. "We're not in that business."

The business of packaging books for kids was invented a little more than a century ago by Edward Stratemeyer, an author and entrepreneur, who got his start writing boys' stories for the magazine *Golden Days*, in the eighteen-eighties, before launching his own adventure series, "The Rover Boys," in 1899. Stratemeyer's innovation was to produce books that were intended to entertain rather than to instruct, as was more typical of children's literature at the time. The series, which was published under the pseudonym Arthur M. Winfield, begins when three Rover brothers, Tom, Dick, and Sam, are sent off to a military academy for misbehaving at home. "We have been going it pretty strong lately, with playing tricks on Sarah the cook, Jack the hired man, and Uncle Randolph's pet dog Alexander," Sam, the youngest Rover, says on the book's first page.

By 1910, Stratemeyer had formed a corporation called the Stratemeyer Syndicate, which was a kids'-books production line: he would make an outline, hire a ghostwriter to write the book to order, then polish the work to conform to his preferred style, before handing it off to a publisher. The books—which went on to include the "Hardy Boys" series, launched in 1927, and the "Nancy Drew" mysteries, launched in 1930—were all published under pseudonyms, with Stratemeyer maintaining ownership of the copyright. After his death, in 1930, Stratemeyer's daughter, Harriet, continued to produce books according to the same fundamental model until her own death, in 1982. (In 1984, Simon & Schuster acquired the syndicate, and a few years ago Nancy Drew was reimagined as a girl detective who texts friends and is *au fait* with fashion magazines.)

In the early eighties, other publishers began to see new commercial possibilities in book series for kids and teens. Dan Weiss, an editor who had worked at Golden Books and at Scholastic, felt that teen girls had an appetite for romance books that was not being satisfied. He started his own packaging company with a series called "Sweet Dreams"—essentially, Harlequin romances for kids.

"I knew what I wanted, and I wanted to craft what I wanted," Weiss says. "I wanted Ivory Soap to be Ivory Soap every time." Weiss teamed up with Bantam, the mass-market paperback imprint, and soon had an enormous success with "Sweet Valley High," a series about the twin Wakefield sisters—one naughty, one nice. (There were ultimately more than five hundred titles in the franchise.) The scenario was conceived by Francine Pascal, and her name went on all the books, but the actual writing was farmed out to a succession of workers for hire. "Sweet Valley High" alumnae include Cecily von Ziegesar, who once knocked off one of the books in a weekend.

Leslie Morgenstein went to work for Dan Weiss immediately after graduating from Sarah Lawrence, in 1989. Weiss encouraged him to take night courses at N.Y.U.'s Stern School of Business, and Morgenstein did, receiving an M.B.A. in 1997. Three years later, he bought the company from Weiss, in partnership with Ann Brashares, the editorial director at the time. Shortly thereafter, the company was acquired by Alloy Media and Marketing, which promoted youth events, orchestrated online marketing aimed at teens, and sold clothing and other products to teens. These days, Alloy Media and Marketing is the owner of Teen.com, a popular Web site that heavily promotes Alloy Entertainment products; it also owns Channel 1, the in-school television news network created by Chris Whittle, which means that it can broadcast commercials for Alloy properties to a captive teen audience numbering in the millions.

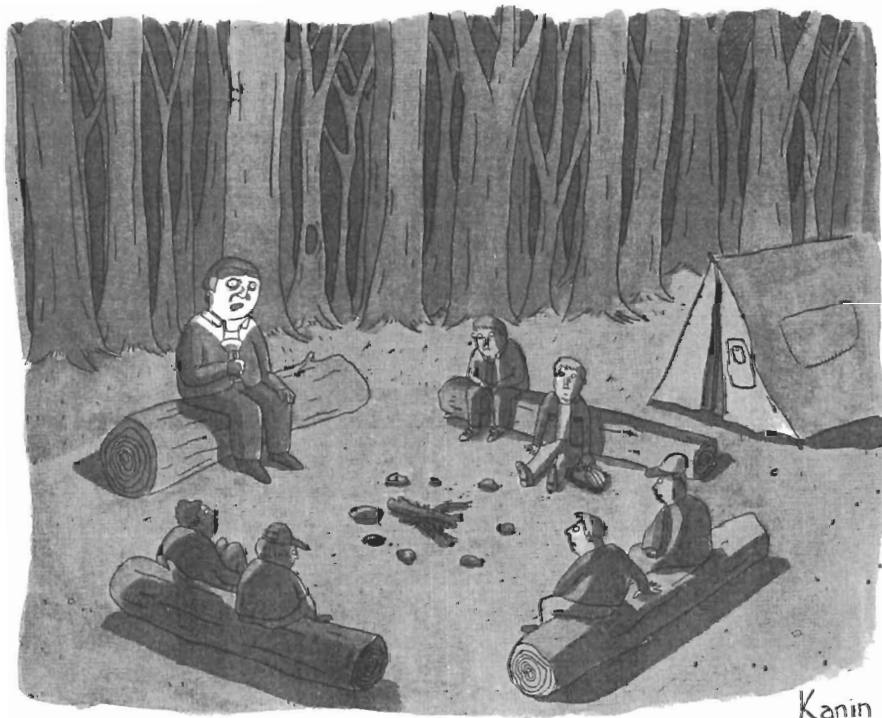
By the time Morgenstein took over the company, the "Sweet Valley High" phenomenon had run its course, and young-adult publishing was in a slump relative to other media. "The press was spending a lot of time talking about Generation Y, and there was *Teen People*, the WB network, the boy bands," he recalls. "But the teen book market wasn't performing at all. The product needed to catch up to other forms of entertainment." The once-a-month "Sweet Valley High" model seemed outdated. "We thought consumers were more sophisticated," Morgenstein says. "They wanted their book to feel like Mom's book—to be printed on decent paper, with a cover that looked like it didn't have to come

from the kids' section, didn't have a number on it, and wasn't embarrassing to be seen with."

Economic aspects of the "Sweet Valley High" model have been superseded, too. Rather than providing services for a fixed fee, as "Sweet Valley High" writers did, Alloy authors generally own a fifty-percent stake in their work; the terms can be more favorable in the case of a writer who is a proven best-seller, or less favorable when the writer is a novice. Crucially, though, Alloy retains the intellectual-property rights to all the work, with a view to generating a movie or a TV show from the same title. (Authors share in revenue generated from the rights, but Alloy gets the producer's credit, which, over time, can be worth a great deal more.) Alloy's writers are usually in their twenties, and often have little or no experience writing a full-length novel. In 2006, one Alloy author, a nineteen-year-old Harvard student named Kaavya Viswanathan, was accused of plagiarizing many passages in her book, "How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life," from the works of another young-adult author. The books were pulped, and Viswanathan's contract for a second book was cancelled. At the time, Mor-

genstein admits, he thought it was "tremendously clever" to work with a teenage author, but Alloy's policy now is not to do business with minors.

Initially, Morgenstein maintained the option of using company-owned pseudonyms, with some success. "Private," officially by Kate Brian, is by a writer named Kieran Viola, who also publishes under her own name. Zoey Dean, the supposed author of the "A-List" books—who, according to her publisher-issued biography, "divides her time between Beverly Hills and several small islands in the Caribbean"—is actually a front for six ghostwriters, including a husband-and-wife team. But Morgenstein has begun to consider author anonymity a liability. It is difficult to get a nonexistent author to blog or tweet, let alone make author appearances. By comparison, Lisi Harrison, the author of the "Clique" series, gets upward of a thousand responses to her weekly blog entries. Readers gush about her brilliance in Clique-speak ("I love your books lisi! Your an ah-mazing writer!"), plan hypothetical fan get-togethers ("I think it would be toh-tally awesome if Lisi held like a idk . . . like a party kinda thing or w/e . . . so we could all finally meet each other!"; "i think it



Kanin

"And because of this one, human indiscretion, the man and his wife never trusted each other fully again."

should either be in cali or texas because these are some of the biggest states. but think bout it—would ur parents really let you fly half way across the coun-try?"), and post their own fan fiction featuring Massie Block, the vile anti-heroine of the series, Claire Lyons, her dorky nemesis, and other characters. ("Okay whatevs," Massie said. "Look Kuh-lair, what you said back there was pretty biotchy but Alicia and i forgive you.")

Some writers have their own qualms about putting their names on Alloy books. As Shandler says, "A lot of people who hope to write the Great American Novel under their own name aren't sure they want to start their career writing books for twelve-year-olds." But the potential benefits of becoming recognized as a best-selling author are substantial, even if much of the profit goes to Alloy. Cecily von Ziegesar, who is discussing with Morgenstein and Bank the possibility of doing a "Gossip Girl" sequel, which would revisit the

characters a decade later, is also completing her first novel written, and sold, independently of Alloy. Von Ziegesar has mixed feelings about her reputation as an author of books that even girls who don't like to read like to read. "I want girls who *love* to read to read them," she says. But sharing the ownership of the "Gossip Girl" books does not upset her: "It was very much a collaborative thing, and I don't begrudge them that at all."

Other authors have a more qualified view of the arrangement. Ann Brashares, whose four "Traveling Pants" novels have sold more than nine million copies in the U.S., says that, while the idea for that book was hashed out in committee, she was left to develop the plot and the characters in relative solitude, as she preferred to do. "They took a huge share of the money," she told me. "And if I wanted to do all the work, that was O.K.—they gave me that." Brashares, who left the company in 2001, is obliged to write two more books with Alloy. "I'm

trying to separate from them amicably," she said. "I'm writing my way out of it."

The brainstorming sessions at Alloy's offices, Brashares says, stimulated creativity. "We did things in a very collaborative way, and there was a lot of freedom, and ideas would flow, and one of the nice things was that you said what you thought and you didn't worry about guarding it," she recalls. "But, when faced with the actual sentence-by-sentence unfolding of a novel or a story, I can't see how you can do that in a way that involves a lot of voices at the same time." The limitations of the Alloy method are visible even to its most accomplished practitioners. "We don't have literary aims, by and large," Josh Bank says. "It would be nice to have a couple of literary aims. I would like to do more experimental stuff. You can't group-plot 'Harry Potter.' Well, you could, but it wouldn't be 'Harry Potter.'"

Morgenstein still believes in the transformative power of books: his own career as a reader began when he was about to go to college and his sister gave him a copy of Jay McInerney's "Bright Lights, Big City." He says, "I read that book, and I didn't stop reading for four years." He once hoped to be a writer himself, and studied for an M.F.A. at CUNY; for his thesis, he completed a collection of short stories, which remains unpublished.

Morgenstein has much less confidence in the economic power of books. "I do fundamentally believe that publishing is not an expanding business," he says. "It is contracting—even our corner of it, which has been very vibrant in the past few years. I don't think long term there's going to be sustainable growth there." As a result, the Alloy executives spend as much time thinking about ideas for television and movies as they do for books, and consider their book ideas in terms of their viability as television and film franchises.

Some television shows have already been spun off from books: "Gossip Girl" was followed by a short-lived series called "Privileged," and NBC has just bought a show based on "Midnighters," a series of books about crime-fighting kids. Morgenstein and his team are increasingly looking to Hollywood, where the company has a small but growing office, led



by Bob Levy. Alloy has an exclusive development deal with Warner Bros. Television, and its products have already generated a handful of movies, including two based on "The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants," which have grossed more than eighty million dollars. More recently, there was "Sex Drive," a movie based on "All the Way," a book for teen boys; it bombed at the box office, to the great disappointment of Morgenstein and Levy, who were lead producers on the film. "I think a lot of it had to do with the title," Bank says. "It's one thing for a twenty-five-year-old guy to say, 'Honey, do you want to go and see "Superbad"?' And his girlfriend will say, 'That sounds great.' 'Honey, do you want to go and see "Sex Drive"?' Not so great."

Morgenstein says that the company has expanded its focus to include developing more family-oriented fare for film. One idea under discussion is a comedy about a Texas steer that somehow finds itself transported to Bollywood. "My add was that the cow was like George Bush," Bank told me. "He's not the world's brightest cow—he's very pro-American. He is this well-taken-care-of steer and lives this fabulous cowboy life in Texas, and then he realizes one day he is being fattened for slaughter. He gets to India—we haven't figured out how—where he is revered as a god. Then there's a second act that's all about cultural misunderstanding."

Alloy Entertainment is also developing digital programming to be shown directly on Teen.com. This summer, the site launched a Web series, "Private": twenty episodes of four to six minutes each, all sponsored by Johnson & Johnson products, in a manner similar to the way that Procter & Gamble used to underwrite soap operas. (There has been unsubtle product placement. The heroine—a scholarship student at a boarding school—sleeps with a box of O.B. tampons on her bedside table.) The digital experiment was a success—the show received more than thirteen million unique views, exceeding commitments to the sponsor—and Alloy is looking to apply the model to other books on its backlist. "The scale is much smaller than a TV series, but we're financing it, so if it works it will be something that is really, really valuable,"

Morgenstein explains. It is increasingly unimportant to Alloy whether an idea ever appears in book form: although it can be useful to demonstrate to a network or a studio that a title already has traction in the marketplace, developing a book is time-consuming, whereas an idea for television can be pitched and sold within weeks. "We are both ready to and need to step away from what our traditional model was," he says.

In September, the CW network began airing "The Vampire Diaries," Alloy's latest venture into non-literary entertainment, and the result of one of the first pitches that Morgenstein ever made, for a book series to be called "Teen Dracula." ("Vampires have enduring popularity in movies and fiction," the original pitch document, from 1989, says. "For the first time, 'Teen Dracula' takes this phenomena to juvenile series fiction.") That pitch contributed to the creation, in 1991, of a trilogy called "The Vampire Diaries," by L. J. Smith, which centered on a popular blond high-school student who inspires romantic competition between two vampire brothers. The series did so well that a fourth book was added a year later. "It was Anne Rice for kids," Dan Weiss says.

The books sold well for several years, then lost popularity as the "Gossip Girl" wave flooded the kids' market with shopping-and-hooking-up novels. But, with the phenomenal success of "Twilight," the "Vampire Diaries" franchise has been dusted off. The first four books have been rereleased, and last winter saw the publication of a fifth installment, which bears the Meyer-esque title "The Return: Nightfall." Editors at Alloy recently received an eight-hundred-page manuscript from Smith, which will have been whittled down into a publishable sixth book by next year. "For us, 'Vampire Diaries' has been a pretty big book success," Morgenstein says. "But if the show is successful that will be many, many times more profitable for us than the books."

On the evening of the show's premiere, the Alloy editorial team gathered at a bar called Jock Tamson's Bairns, on Second Avenue, in the Eighties. Josh

Bank was there with his wife, Lissy, fielding text messages from Cecily von Ziegesar, who was tied up at a "Gossip Girl" event downtown and couldn't make it. Morgenstein's family were at home. "My kids don't think it's exciting," he said, glumly. "They told me, 'We saw the pilot already, in the car.' They don't realize it's exciting for Dad."

When the show began, the bar fell silent, and everyone watched as the network's interpretation of the story unfolded—the heroine now had dark hair, a drug-addled brother, and an African-American best friend. (One of the show's executive producers, Kevin Williamson, created "Dawson's Creek.") Even though the bar's sound system faltered in the final segment—when the hero's canines began to elongate at his sighting of the heroine's neck—there was loud applause at its conclusion. (The ratings were excellent.)

After the episode was over, Morgenstein and Bank talked about some ideas for tweens that had come up in a meeting earlier in the day. The group had been discussing whether there was a new way to do "Jaws." "In an age of Lyme disease, and scary stuff about the environment, what is the middle-grade version of that?" Bank said. "How do we find a story that is very alive and active in the minds of eight-to-twelve-year-olds?" Someone in the meeting had mentioned an audio clip, which had been circulating widely on the Internet, of a woman frantically calling 911 as a pet chimp mauled her friend. Morgenstein's idea had been to cross this event with Stephen King's novel about a rabid Saint Bernard. "It's 'Cujo' with a chimpanzee," as Morgenstein put it.

Bank had shot down the idea. "I said, 'What is the P.O.V.? Is it P.O.V. chimp?'" Bank recalled. "He said 'Yes.' I said, 'I'm off the train here.'"

"I also pitched rabid deer," Morgenstein said, mildly. "But we came up with a compromise: 'Jaws,' with a grizzly bear, at summer camp." ♦

