by SOPHIA NGUYEN

Nell Scovell ’82 went wherever they’d let her be funny. Her early writing career can be seen as a progression of bigger, freer venues where the bosses would let her crack wise: first the sports sections of The Harvard Crimson and The Boston Globe, then the glossier pages of Spy and Vanity Fair. At the latter, a colleague gently suggested, “Nell, I don’t mean this as an insult, but I think you could write for TV.” And so she found the medium where she could really act on her comedy compulsion.

But when Scovell set about drafting her memoir, All The Funny Parts, she was nagged by a different need—the sense that, as she puts it, “If I don’t say something, no one will know I was there.” There meaning the staffs of the Smothers Brothers, Bob Newhart, and David Letterman shows, or awards ceremonies and the White House Correspondents’ Dinner, or just showbiz itself. “I want my

Comedy Compulsion

TV writer Nell Scovell looks back on All the Funny Parts.
kids to know,” she adds.

She had lots of primary source material. From the start, some version of that impulse—“I want my kids to know”—made her keep everything: correspondence, silly doodles by friends, early scripts with scribbled notes (“wordy,” “too jokey,” “ALL BETTER”). “I always thought TV would go away,” Scovell says. “I just kind of thought that this is something I’m going to show someone: ‘See? For a year, I was a TV writer!’”

In 30 years and counting, she has written comedy and drama, mystery and sci-fi, and even a Lifetime movie about a college reunion that ends with blackmail (co-scripted with her sister, Claire Scovell Lazebnik ’83; Scovell also directed). She’s gotten to make a mark on beloved fictional figures: thanks to her, Homer Simpson tried fugu and Miss Piggy flashed her tail on the red carpet. (Scovell likes to say, though, that Sheryl Sandberg ’91, M.B.A. ’95, with whom she co-wrote Lean In, is her favorite character to write for “other than Murphy Brown.”) While on the staffs of long-running workhorses like Charmed and NCIS, and as the creator of the sitcom Sabrina the Teenage Witch, she mastered a specific craft: overstuffed, comfy plots that are as easy to sink into as a favorite armchair. Across an unusually broad range of genres, her writing has been driven by a goofy, antic imagination. The John Doe shrinks the heroines down to five inches. A teenager’s first spell turns everything into a pineapple. A demon shrinks the heroines down to five inches. A teenager’s first spell turns everything into a pineapple.

Scovell says that she feels a kind of survivor’s guilt about this success. “It’s not that I was the funniest female writer ever, but I managed to find a path. I was a good ‘culture fit’ in certain ways.” Her Harvard cred gave her an in, and thanks to her sports-desk days, she was unfazed by being the only woman in a room, or by shouting men in general. Whether with a bemused smile or through gritted teeth, she could deflect comments like, “Since when do we have pretty little girls working on this show?” So her book is studded with pointers.

**Slaves’ “Private Arenas”**

Combining forces, Henry Louis Gates Jr., the Fletcher University Professor, and Maria Tatar, Loeb professor of Germanic languages and literatures and of folklore and mythology, have jointly edited *The Annotated African American Folktales* (Liveright, $39.95), and contributed a foreword and an introduction, respectively. From “Recovering a Cultural Tradition,” the essay by Tatar (who was profiled in these pages in “The Horror and the Beauty,” November-December 2007):

The stories in this volume have designs on us. They take us out of our comfort zones, shaking us up in the process and sometimes even rewiring our brains. Their wizardry puts us back in touch with lived experience and reconnects us with a history that many have wanted to put behind them. Their expressive intensity enables us to explore the institution of slavery in the United States, the strategies used to survive as well as the ways of managing the complex legacy still with us today. The stories in this volume entered the bloodstream of the vernacular to become communal wisdom in an era when few had access to the instruments of writing and reading. They were meant to entertain, but also to provoke conversation and promote collective problem-solving. Their every word reminds us of the high wattage power of stories and histories.

How do you make something from nothing? Or from something that appears to be nothing? African American slaves may not have owned property, but no one could prevent them from storing, remembering, recounting, and, over time, creating and re-creating their own cultural property in the form of songs, stories, and belief systems. They used narratives and other forms of expressive culture not just to strategize and survive, but also to create symbolic and imaginative spaces to which they could escape, almost like an alternate universe, where they could live and breathe. “The entire sacred world of the black slaves,” American historian Lawrence Levine writes, “created the necessary space between the slaves and their owners and were the means of preventing legal slavery from becoming spiritual slavery.” These were anything but the much-heralded public spaces of freedom that are the signature of democratic societies. Instead, they were private arenas, imaginary playgrounds, secular as well as sacred, in the fields, by the fire, and in cabins. Song and story emerged, often in the form of narratives encoded with symbolic meaning—things made up for the purpose of diverting and entertaining, and also for focusing and concentrating propulsive energies that could not be contained.
Take any job that comes your way. Don't mistake sexual power for real power. Sometimes sincere trumps snarky. (In an interview, she offers a few more, on the spot. “Comedy is always easier when we’re with familiar characters”—so, in a first episode, “Every line not only has to move the plot forward, it also has to illuminate the character.”) There’s also something to be learned from the one-liners embedded throughout her narrative like razor apples. If a new colleague asked if she had kids, she’d blithely reply, “I’ve got two sons, but I’m blanking on their names right now.” Recalling a misogynistic former boss, she writes that they never met again, then tosses off, “It’s unlikely we will since I don’t get to Branson, Missouri, much.” It’s these moments that really show how Scovell made it in entertainment: thick skin, secret steel, and the ability to parry.

Yet hers is not a straightforward growth narrative. Instead, it zigzags from triumph to disappointment. A “Job Timeline” lists every single project she ever worked on, including the unshot and unaired, each rewrite and every rejection. Then there are the lists of jokes that didn’t make it, a chapter all about shows that she narrowly missed working on—it’s like a movie made of outtakes, as if she stitched a narrative from what she’s swept up from the cutting-room floor. “I have cried in every parking structure in Hollywood,” Scovell confides. In the book, she quips that the flipside to that William Goldman chestnut, “Nobody knows anything,” is the helplessly hoping, “You never know…” Even to her, Hollywood remains baffling, a system operating on variable rewards. Hopefuls are lured in by intermittent reinforcement, like gamblers playing the slots, or caged rats. “Pressing the lever may lead to insanity,” she writes, “but how else are you gonna get a pellet?”

Scovell admits that she sometimes chafes against the suggestion that she must give herself over to mentoring young women. After all, she still has aspirations of her own. She’s working on a pilot about a divorced one-percenter who moves in with her school-teacher sister and her school-nurse brother-in-law. She might like to run a show again. She would love to direct another movie. “I’m not done. And I don’t want to admit that it’s over just yet. I want one more shot!”

Time in Space
Renée Green’s new art, embedded in the Carpenter Center
by Lily Scherlis

Many who work in and around the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts have a weird relationship with the French modernist architect who designed it. Le Corbusier is a mythic figure for Harvard’s art students: his notoriety, when combined with the loudness of his architecture, means that making art able to hold its own in the building feels like shouting over a lawnmower.

Artist, filmmaker, and MIT professor Renée Green has been making work at the Carpenter Center during a two-year residency—enough time to get to know the space intimately. She has set up colorful modular viewing stations for displaying videos, installed grids of images of California infrastructure, and presented essay films, ephemera, sound works, and print publications. Throughout, “I’ve used spaces that I wouldn’t ordinarily imagine would be used,” she says, “more interstitial spaces”—under the stairs in the basement, in the vertical vitrines, in a corner of what is now the bookstore at the top of the building’s ramp. She’s excited about her final exhibition, “Within Living Memory” (on view through April): she gets the whole place to herself. The culmination of her residency, it contains works made in the past decade and spanning many media. Gravitating around...