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 turns out to have three fiancées. 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 our 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.