

found Bellow “category-shattering ... a Lawrentian Jew, an impossible creature,” who combined intellectuality and vitality with a unique energy, bookish yet “flush with raw life.”

If Bellow was an impossible creature, perhaps it is equally impossible to capture such a soul within a book. Writing fifteen years ago, James Wood speculated that the “proper” biography of Bellow would be a biography of his imagination, charting the currents of his reading, his intellectual encounters, his influence. But a true biography must be an almost alchemical fusing of the imagination and the life, in all its category-shattering complexity. “The necessary premise is that a man is somehow more than his ‘characteristics,’ all the emotions, strivings, tastes, and constructions which it pleases him to call ‘My Life,’” Herzog tells us. “We have ground to hope that a Life is something more than such a cloud of particles, mere facticity. Go through what is comprehensible and you conclude that only the incomprehensible gives any light.” ■

### May Index Sources

1 FBI Criminal Justice Information Service (Clarksburg, W.Va.); 2 Gallup (Princeton, N.J.); 3 NYC Department of Correction; 4,5 South Carolina Department of Corrections (Columbia); 6,7 Ty Treadwell (Miami); 8 Aner Tal, Cornell Food and Brand Lab (Ithaca, N.Y.)/*Harper's* research; 9,10 Pew Research Center (Washington); 11 Oxitec (Abingdon, England); 12 Good Governance Africa (Johannesburg); 13 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (Coventry, England); 14 Council on Foreign Relations (N.Y.C.); 15 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (Geneva); 16,17 Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (Seattle); 18 A.M. Best Company (Oldwick, N.J.); 19 Robert Hutchins, UCSF School of Medicine (San Francisco); 20 Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (Seattle); 21 National Endowment for Financial Education (Denver); 22,23 National Bureau of Economic Research (Cambridge, Mass.); 24,25 Public Religion Research Institute (Washington); 26 Indian Community Welfare Organisation (Chennai); 27 MarketWatch (San Francisco); 28 Alamogordo Police Department (New Mexico); 29 Natural Resources Defense Council (Santa Monica, Calif.); 30,31 John Woinarski, Charles Darwin University (Melbourne, Australia); 32 U.S. Department of Agriculture/Center for Biological Diversity (Portland, Ore.); 33 Swedish Ornithological Society (Halmstad); 34 Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior (Vienna); 35,36 Embassy of Greece (Washington); 37 Sentix (Frankfurt, Germany); 38 Office of the Mayor (Megyer, Hungary); 39,40 Mars One (Amersfoort, Netherlands).

# THE DEEP, DARK, UGLY THING

## Can shame shape society?

By *Laura Kipnis*

---

Discussed in this essay:

*So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, by Jon Ronson. Riverhead. 304 pages. \$27.95. riverheadbooks.com.

*Is Shame Necessary?*, by Jennifer Jacquet. Pantheon. 224 pages. \$22.95. pantheonbooks.com.

Say you tweet something you mean to be funny and edgy to your Twitter followers—all 170 of them—before boarding a plane to South Africa to visit relatives, something about hoping you don't get AIDS in Africa, which of course you won't, because you're white. You can afford to be funny because you're not racist—your relatives are ANC supporters, after all—you're merely commenting on racially disproportionate AIDS statistics in Africa. Who would take you literally? Except that you wake up after an eleven-hour flight to find almost a hundred thousand tweets calling you every vicious name imaginable. You're one of the top worldwide trends on Twitter, the most hated racist on the planet.

Twitter users doubtless already recognize the incautious tweeter as Justine Sacco, a thirty-year-old P.R. executive with an online persona that Jon Ronson, the author of *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, describes as “a social media Sally Bowles, decadent and flighty and unaware that serious politics were looming.” Many thought that Sacco—the entirety of whose tweet reads, “Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!”—got what she deserved. The world waited in real time for her plane to land and for Justine to see the response; there was even a photographer at the airport when she disembarked.

*Laura Kipnis is the author of Men: Notes from an Ongoing Investigation (Metropolitan). Her most recent review for Harper's Magazine, “Me, Myself, and Id,” appeared in the August 2014 issue.*

And the public shaming didn't last merely a few hours, or a day: over the next ten days her name was googled more than a million times. She was fired (true, public relations didn't seem to be her calling), lambasted on TV news programs, and followed to the gym by a reporter. Every tweet she'd ever posted was exhumed and microscopically examined for evidence of further character flaws. There were many to be found, because what had seemed breezy when Justine was tweeting to her friends looked very different now that she'd been established as a moral monster. Welcome to modern shaming, where an ill-considered joke can ruin your life.

Ronson's book, along with Jennifer Jacquet's *Is Shame Necessary?*, gave me hope, before I read them, that I'd emerge at the end miraculously cured of my own chronic shame. No such luck. Neither author sets out to alleviate the pain of the afflicted; in fact, neither is especially interested in the psychology of shame per se. Their territory is the ethics of shaming. Ronson is pretty much against the whole business, while Jacquet, in a surprise twist, is rather a fan. Her appreciation for shaming stems from political optimism: she believes in human improvability and thinks that shame could be what it takes to get people to shape up, especially those acting against the public good. Ronson focuses more on who we are than who we should be, and is far less sanguine about humanity's moral prospects, though he does at least manage to wrest a certain mirth from his pessimism.

Ronson is a Welsh journalist, filmmaker, and radio host who's written books about conspiracy theorists and military psychics (the film *The Men Who Stare at Goats* was based on his book of the same name). His entrée into the story of modern shame came after he found his own reputation besmirched by a trio of digital pranksters who created a Twitter spambot with his name and photo, which sent out twenty embarrassing tweets a day. ("I'm dreaming something about #time and #cock.") Soon the spambot accrued followers, many of them Ronson's actual friends. Eventually he tracked down the identity thieves, who turned out to be a band of pompous academic postmodernists. (They argued that the spambot was "repurposing social media data into an infomorphic esthetic.") He got his revenge by posting an interview on YouTube in which his antagonists mock him for believing in tired conventions like authenticity. In the process they come off as recondite twits. YouTube commenters, sniffing pretension, quickly rose up to humiliate Ronson's tormentors and to threaten physical violence, leaving him feeling warmly vindicated. Through the pleasant fog of victory it occurred to him that a renaissance of public shaming is under way: it's the democratization of justice. He decided to dive into the story.

Though his reporting methods can be haphazard, Ronson is a fantastic interviewer. He knows exactly when to play the naïf and when to move in for the kill, which he typically does so deftly that his subjects are unaware they've been knifed. He's also frequently hilarious, folding his neurotic internal monologues and memo-to-self asides into his reportage. He interviews those on the receiving end of shame and those who've doled it out, opening with the case of Jonah Lehrer, the best-selling wunderkind science writer who torpedoed his career at the tender age of thirty-one by inventing a Bob Dylan

quote. (Many other fabrications were subsequently found.) Ronson courts revelations from a reluctant Lehrer and from Michael Moynihan, the ethically agonized journalist who brought Lehrer down, re-creating the affair as a tense morality play. Lehrer is a big name, but most of the victims we meet in subsequent chapters are former nobodies who made dumb missteps or crossed ill-defined lines about what is or isn't funny before getting ripped to shreds on social media. Now, Ronson writes, they're "spectral figures wandering the earth like the living dead in the business wear of their former lives."

Trying to grasp the mind-set of a shamer leads Ronson to Adria Richards, who got a tech nerd Ronson calls Hank

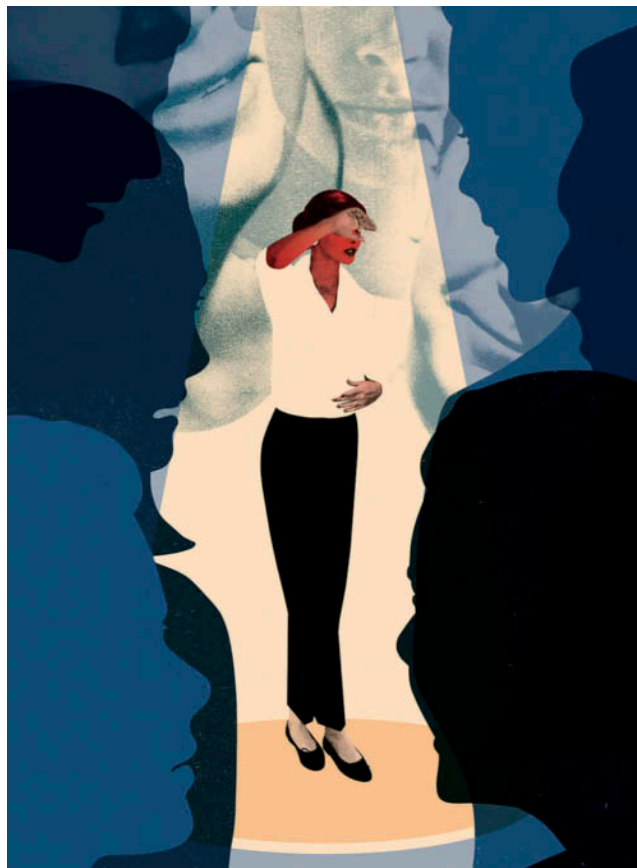
audience by conference organizers; the next day he was out of a job. A socially awkward father of three, Hank was mortified about having offended anyone. He posted an online apology. Then the blowback started: men's-rights groups and online trolls mounted a campaign against Richards and her employer, including taking down the company's website; the next day Richards, too, was fired.

By way of explaining to Ronson why she'd felt endangered by the jokes, Richards said, "Have you ever heard that thing, 'Men are afraid that women will laugh at them and women are afraid that men will kill them?'" She insisted on meeting Ronson in public out of fear for her safety. During his interview Ronson elicited Richards's reasons for seeing the

world as such a threatening place: she came from a background of family violence and horrible neglect. After the backlash over Hank's firing, she was barraged with rape and death threats and had to go underground for six months, which no doubt confirmed, in her mind, just how accurate her fears had been all along.

Richards perfectly personifies the current situation: the Internet empowers the powerless, but it also allows people with personal demons to enact frontier justice that has real-world consequences. Another of Ronson's great interviews introduces us to an activist-troll named Mercedes who defends online shaming as a form of social leveling. "There's a fair understanding on the Internet of what it means to be the little guy," she maintains. In her eyes, Justine Sacco was a stand-in for every "rich white person who's ever gotten away with making a racist joke because they could." Why is there so much

misogyny in these attacks, Ronson asks? Mercedes proceeds to defend gendered forms of shame: Internet trolls aim to degrade their targets, she argues, and when a woman is in the crosshairs this naturally means impugning her femininity. "One of the highest degradations of women in our culture is rape," she says.



fired after she overheard him and a friend whispering dumb insider jokes about "big dongles" and "forking repo" to each other at a conference. The jokes so offended Richards, who was sitting in the next row, that she tweeted a photo of the two men to her 12,000 followers. Ten minutes later Hank was pulled out of the

Precision that tells  
the weather story.  
Quality that enhances it.



For a FREE catalog of our  
weather instruments and weather  
stations, contact Maximum or  
visit our website.

508.995.2200  
www.maximum-inc.com

**MAXIMUM**<sup>®</sup>  
WEATHER INSTRUMENTS

## SUBSCRIBER ALERT

Dear *Harper's Magazine* Readers,

It has come to our attention that several of our subscribers have received renewal notifications from an independent magazine clearinghouse doing business under the names Magazine Billing Services, Publishers Processing Services Inc., and American Consumer Publish Assoc. These companies have not been authorized to sell subscriptions on behalf of *Harper's Magazine*.

If you receive a renewal notice and are unsure of its authenticity, please call our subscriber services department and order your renewal through them. You may contact subscriber services by calling our toll-free number, (800) 444-4653, or via the Web at [www.harpers.org](http://www.harpers.org).

Every shamer Ronson encounters comes from a place of shame; they're passing their own shame around. There's also the economics of shame to consider, and Ronson makes some interesting calculations. He estimates that Google took in as much as \$456,000 from the Justine Sacco shaming alone, based on the number of people searching her name. Ronson resolves to give up public condemnations, even though he admits that he used to get antsy on days when there was no Twitter scandal raging. And he asks himself, uneasily, why is he—a former fat teenager, who was daily shamed and bullied by other teens—so attracted to shame?

For Jennifer Jacquet, an assistant professor of environmental studies at NYU, shame is far more attractive. Her argument is that shame can be a tool for social change—indeed, that it is “a form of nonviolent resistance anyone can use.” Where Ronson is the inquisitive amateur, Jacquet is systematic and reasoned. And though there's an urgency to her book, she's a clear and incisive writer, especially for someone in a discipline that ends with the word “studies” (cultural studies, performance studies), which often lean toward political sanctimony and convoluted prose. Shame is her weapon against the corporate bad apples who are destroying the environment, as well as anyone acting contrary to our collective interests, and she cites many studies about how effective it can be. Experiments have already established how much even a couple of freeloaders can lessen the willingness of the rest of a group to do its share. But Jacquet conducted experiments in which “the threat of shame made people more cooperative.” People can also be shamed for their own good: a third of smokers and overweight people who were shamed by doctors changed their behaviors. (I tensed a little reading that.)

But Jacquet wants to reserve shame for serious causes. She describes, for example, the case of Susan G. Komen for the Cure, a breast cancer foundation. After the organization pulled funding for cancer screenings from Planned Parenthood (presumably because Planned Parenthood is an abortion provider), Twitter users posted more than 150,000 critical messages. The foundation caved. When Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Haiti's president,

was ousted in 1991 and Bill Clinton refused to send troops, opponents of the decision used hunger strikes and ads in the *New York Times* to persuade Clinton to change his mind. (Some would call this political pressure rather than shaming—the book is unclear about the distinction.) Another example is the giant inflatable rat used to shame companies in union disputes. But individuals can be the objects of shaming campaigns, too: in rural Bangladesh, members of community-led sanitation programs conduct “walks of shame,” counting piles of excrement in public areas and, where possible, identifying offenders.

Jacquet is generally more interested in shaming organizations than individuals, but she also considers cases in which freeloaders fail to do their share—avoiding paying state income taxes, for instance. By threatening to publish the names of the state's top tax delinquents on a website, California has collected more than \$400 million in back taxes.

A high point in Jacquet's narrative comes courtesy of the Yes Men, the culture-jamming group whose mission is to impersonate “big-time criminals in order to publicly humiliate them.” In one of the group's most successful stunts, a member posing as a Dow Chemical spokesperson appeared on the BBC World News in 2004, on the twentieth anniversary of the chemical disaster in Bhopal, India. (In 1984, a gas leak at a pesticide plant killed some 4,000 people and exposed almost 600,000; Dow purchased the plant in 2001.) The fake spokesperson formally accepted full responsibility for the catastrophe on behalf of Dow and announced a \$12 billion fund to compensate victims and clean up the site. Dow quickly issued a retraction, though not before the segment had aired twice. The retraction was part of the Yes Men's strategy, since it called even more attention to Dow's mealy-mouthed equivocations. (According to documents made public by WikiLeaks, Dow later hired Stratfor, a “global intelligence” agency, to monitor the activities of the Yes Men.)

The coercive cooperation encouraged by shaming makes some people squeamish, among them James Q. Whitman, a professor at Yale Law School who's concerned that shaming transfers the power to punish from the state to the public, where it risks becoming “fickle

and uncontrolled.” Jacquet disagrees: If shaming can benefit the community, why not use it in ways the community finds acceptable? “Shaming should be directed where possible benefits are greatest,” she suggests. It should be nuanced and prudent, not a blunt instrument used for frivolous ends—we have only so much attention to devote to public spectacles, after all.

But whom do we entrust with the power to allocate shame? I’d feel better about Jacquet’s recommendations were I convinced that such tactics would be aimed exclusively upward—at, say, the ninety corporations that are responsible for almost two thirds of fossil-fuel emissions, according to a 2013 study. Who is considered “upward” turns out to be quite flexible, however: to Justine Sacco’s gleeful shamers, she was a “media elite” who needed to be brought down. On the website Rate My Professor, students get to topple their professors—especially the women, who are routinely criticized for their wardrobes and personalities. In the faux populism of the Internet, any form of hierarchy is fair game, and any means are justified.

Jacquet does make an interesting case for the efficacy of shame over guilt. The usual distinction is that guilt is directed at a particular act, and shame at the entire person. But for Jacquet, guilt is something instigated by oneself, whereas shame requires an audience. Guilt holds individuals to their own standards; shame holds individuals to group standards. Guilt may be more the norm in individualistic Western cultures and mobile, privacy-oriented societies like ours. But, she argues, when it comes to the planet, we’re in an emergency situation, with no time to wait for guilty consciences to prevail. Consumers may be willing to pay through the nose for high-priced organics and sustainable fish at Whole Foods, but the “green guilt” that fuels such spending leaves the food industry largely unchanged. It simply creates new profit sectors geared to upper-crust shoppers. Shame, however, has more immediate effects, and so is preferable politically.

But for shame to be effective, the community has to care about the transgression, which raises a crucial question: Are we a community? Or are we merely a bunch of factions and constituencies with different values and goals? Jacquet

doesn’t mention People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, a group whose tactics have long included shaming fur-wearers by splashing their pricey coats with red paint. Apparently in recent years the group has switched to flour-bombings, including of Kim Kardashian, though that name is a reminder that not everyone cares about being shamed, especially these days. Did the bankers who accepted huge bonuses that were paid for with federal bailout dollars care that a great deal of the country thought it was shameful? As Jacquet herself acknowledges, shamelessness might be an obstacle to the sort of political program she has in mind.

For Ronson, whose shame victims generally haven’t done anything that terrible, the fact that not everyone is shameable offers the promise of a magic potion for the rest of us. In an effort to discover why some people seem immune, he interviews people who are sexually aroused by being shamed, or who use sex to cure their shame: a porn impresario named Princess Donna Delore imagines what she’d find mortifying, then enacts it. He attends a shame-eradication workshop in a Chicago hotel, which is led by a shady psychotherapist (a practitioner of “radical honesty”) for \$500 a head. Ronson’s champion shame-ignorant is Max Mosley, son of the British Fascist leader Sir Oswald Mosley; his mother, Diana, was one of the Mitford sisters and a great pal of Hitler’s. (Both parents—who were married at Joseph Goebbels’s house, their wedding attended by Hitler—spent most of the war interned in a prison in North London.) Mosley, the president of Formula 1 in Britain, was exposed by British tabloids a few years ago as a devotee of sadomasochistic Nazi-inflected sex orgies. He sued a tabloid for libel and won, arguing that while the sex scenarios may have involved uniforms, they were not Nazi uniforms. Mosley is Ronson’s unlikely role model for how to survive a public shaming: he simply refused to be ashamed. As soon as the victim rejects his assigned role in the ritual, Mosley says, “the whole thing crumbles.” Unfortunately, most of us are not built that way. In fact, we may be engineered for group madness, a concept described by a nineteenth-century doctor named

## Publish Your Book in 2015

for as little as \$100 for 25 copies or \$1 each for 1000



- Full service or à la carte printing!
- 7 Binding Styles (including hardback & paperback)
- Easy File Setup: all file types!
- Bookstore Quality Books
- Fast Turnaround & Live Customer Service
- No set-up or hidden fees!
- Complete Control of Your Work
- Custom Design Services
- Illustration Services

1-800-259-2592

### Affordable Guided Vacations

Grand Canyon	8 days	\$1395
Nova Scotia	10 days	\$1395
Costa Rica	9 days	\$1095



Free 28-Page Brochure: Caravan.com 1-800-Caravan

**Caravan**

### ACADEMY OF REMOTE VIEWING

HOME TRAINING PACKAGES  
 AS SEEN ON TV: NIGHTLINE AND REAL X-FILES. REVOLUTIONARY MIND-EMPOWERING TECHNOLOGY USED BY INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES. INCREASES INTUITION 1000%. FORECAST PERSONAL/WORLD/FINANCIAL FUTURE EVENTS. PERCEIVE ANY TARGET IN SPACE/TIME. COOPERATIVE REMOTE INFLUENCING. TAUGHT BY FORMER OPERATIVE. THOUSANDS SATISFIED TRAINEES WORLDWIDE. (888) 748-8386 VISIT: WWW.PROBALEFUTURE.COM

**Writing Coach:** Thoughtful, constructive, smart; published fiction writer, award-winning journalist, PhD English lit. Interested in long and short fiction. [www.readmylit.com](http://www.readmylit.com)

LifeLifeLifeLifeLifeLifeLifeLifeLifeLifeWithoutEnd.com

**RESURGENT GRAINS**  
 Einkorn – Emmer – Black Nile Barley  
[www.lentzspelt.com](http://www.lentzspelt.com) (509) 717-0015

**DR. ALKAITIS HOLISTIC ORGANIC SKIN FOOD**  
[www.alkaitis.com](http://www.alkaitis.com) (916) 617-2345

**Unorthodox Erotica.** Catalog \$2.  
 SBS, POB 8, Flemington, NJ 08822  
[SynergyBookService.com](http://SynergyBookService.com) (908) 782-7101

**DATE ACCOMPLISHED PEOPLE.** Join the introduction network exclusively for graduates, students, and faculty of the Ivies, Seven Sisters, Stanford, U of Chicago, and others. All ages. **The Right Stuff (800) 988-5288** [www.rightstuffdating.com](http://www.rightstuffdating.com)

**Disclaimer:** Harper’s Magazine assumes no liability for the content of or reply to any personal advertisement. The advertiser assumes complete liability for the content of and all replies to any advertisement and for any claims made against Harper’s Magazine as a result thereof. The advertiser agrees to indemnify and hold Harper’s Magazine and its employees harmless from all costs, expenses (including reasonable attorney fees), liabilities, and damages resulting from or caused by the publication placed by the advertiser or any reply to any such advertisement.

## BIOLOGIST'S PHEROMONES INCREASE AFFECTION



Created by  
**Winnifred Cutler,**  
Ph.D. in biology from  
U. of Penn, post-doc  
Stanford.

Co-discovered human  
pheromones in 1986  
(*Time* 12/1/86; and  
*Newsweek* 1/12/87)

Effective for 74% in  
two 8-week studies

**PROVEN EFFECTIVE IN 3 DOUBLE BLIND STUDIES IN PEER REVIEW JOURNALS**



Vial of 1/6 oz. added to 2-4 oz. of your fragrance, worn daily lasts 4-6 months, or use it straight.

Athena 10X™ For Men \$99.50  
10:13™ For Women \$98.50  
Cosmetics **Free U.S. Shipping**

♥ **Sybil (NY)** "Following my divorce this year, I began dating again at age 50. I began using your 10:13 six months ago and am currently juggling three attractive men. I haven't had this kind of attention in decades!"

♥ **Victor (TX)** "Women notice me more. Come up to me and feel very relaxed around me. I have noticed a 30% to 40% increase in confidence. Casanova & Don Juan are 2nd & 3rd to me!"

Not in stores  610-827-2200

[www.Athenainstitute.com](http://www.Athenainstitute.com)

Athena Institute, 1211 Braefield Rd., Chester Springs, PA 19425 HP

For classified rates and information,  
please contact **Jennifer Adams,**  
Classified Sales Manager, at  
(212) 420-5757 or email  
[jennifer@harpers.org](mailto:jennifer@harpers.org)

TEXT ADS: Minimum ten words. RATES per word: 1X \$4.50; 3X \$4.40; 6X \$4.30; 9X \$4.10; 12X \$4.00. Telephone numbers, box numbers, URLs, and email addresses count as two words. ZIP codes count as one word. CLASSIFIED DISPLAY ADS: One-inch, \$270; Two-inch, \$530; 1/12, \$650; 1/9, \$765. Frequency discounts available. 15% agency discounts for display ads only. Closing dates: 1st of the 2nd preceding month. For example: August 1st for the October issue. Prepayment for all text ads and first-time display advertisers is required. Make checks payable to *Harper's Magazine*, 666 Broadway, New York, NY 10012, or charge your ad to MasterCard, Visa, or American Express. Include telephone number on all correspondence. For size requirements and inquiries, call Jennifer Adams, Classified Sales Manager, at (212) 420-5757 or email [jennifer@harpers.org](mailto:jennifer@harpers.org). PERSONAL ADS: Minimum ten words. RATE per word: \$4.50. Check, MasterCard, Visa, or American Express only. TO RESPOND TO AN AD: *Harper's Magazine* Personals, Box # (4-digit #), 666 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

Gustave Le Bon, who speculated that humans lose their free will in crowds.

Jacquet, for her part, tends to underestimate the damage that shame can do; on the Internet, she writes, "No one is tied to a pillory, clapped into the stocks, burned at the stake, or publicly hanged." No, but the effect can still be enormous: ask the relatives of people who have committed suicide after being publicly shamed. Ronson interviews the mother of a sixteen-year-old girl whose thong-style underwear was held up by her rapist's lawyer at trial. The lawyer demanded that the girl read aloud the slogan embroidered on it: LITTLE DEVIL. Three weeks later she took a lethal overdose of antidepressants. Another interviewee tells Ronson: "Shame is an incredibly inarticulate emotion. It's something you bathe in, it's not something you wax eloquent about. It's such a deep, dark, ugly thing there are very few words for it."

Anthropologists think shame evolved in early hominin societies as a means of enforcing social cooperation, but shaming has been rendered frighteningly efficient by cyberspace. Technology supplies speed, anonymity, and permanence: once you've been shamed on the Internet, you're shamed for life, despite the best efforts of pricey new services that claim to be able to scrub search results of victims' names. Ronson investigates these services and speaks to a woman who tried one, though a quick search of her name still brings up every detail about the jokey Facebook photo she posted of herself making a vulgar gesture in front of the SILENCE AND RESPECT sign at Arlington National Cemetery. The image was part of a running gag with a co-worker—a series of photos of themselves smoking in front of NO SMOKING signs and similar visual pranks. The woman, who didn't understand Facebook's privacy settings, failed to anticipate the rape and death threats from outraged patriots and veterans, or getting fired from the job she loved. (She worked with adults with intellectual disabilities, which was why she'd been at Arlington in the first place: she was on a field trip with her charges.)

Jacquet argues that shame itself doesn't have a determinate moral character; it's value-neutral. Shame is simply a norm enforcer—where it's gotten a bad

rap, it's because the norm being enforced is a bad one. Ronson comes to similar conclusions after finding that shame doesn't always exist in the expected places. To his surprise, men exposed for sleeping with prostitutes mostly escape the community's wrath; no one much cares these days, aside from their wives. The deshaming of sex is one of the big stories of our time, though shame has hardly died; it's just moved elsewhere. Being suspected of racism now seems like a bigger shame predictor than hiring hookers. But who's to say? Community standards are whatever Twitter users say they are: we're crowd-sourcing the moral order.

A fundamental difference between Ronson and Jacquet is how they assess the moral character of the polis. Jacquet thinks shaming is in the public interest because she envisions a community made up of concerned citizens who are invested in fairness and justice and united in wanting to save the planet from environmental degradation. For her, our enemies aren't our peers, they're corporations, polluters, and big-time tax dodgers. For Ronson, the community is closer to a mob: cruel, atavistic, random, adversarial, self-interested. Social-media shamers, he argues, want to bring people down for the fun of it, not because of ethical principles. We're waging war on one another's flaws while basking in the self-congratulatory illusion that shame-tweeting about Justine Sacco makes each of us a modern Rosa Parks.

Most worryingly, Ronson thinks, online shaming is increasing our cultural conservatism instead of pushing us in the direction of a better society; vengeance and anger have become default positions. Shaming revives the most vicious elements of public punishments like stocks and pillories and is too often motivated by bloodlust and malicious pleasure. It's a kangaroo court: you have no rights when you're accused on the Internet. Was anyone really emotionally damaged by Justine Sacco's misfired joke? Ronson notes uneasily that public shaming also enjoyed a renaissance in Mao's China and Hitler's Germany. As a formerly irreverent, lately self-censoring friend of his puts it: "I suddenly feel with social media like I'm tiptoeing around an unpredictable, angry, unbalanced parent who might strike out at any moment. It's horrible." ■