

LETTERHEADS

THE OP-ED PAGE OF *THE NEW YORK TIMES* is a familiar venue for the public intellectual. There, academic mandarins descend from their rarefied chambers to offer eight-hundred-word distillations of their views. It's less well recognized, however, that the *Times* has another arena for intellectuals with an appetite for the public eye—a forum that requires an even greater talent for pithiness. It's just a few inches, a turn of the head, to the left: the letters page.

Although Alan Wolfe and Kathleen Hall Jamieson may be better known to the Op-Ed editors, Felicia Ackerman, a professor of philosophy at Brown University, *owns* the *Times* letters page. Since 1991, the *Times* has published seventy-four of her epistles, including six so far this year. And were it not for the *Times's* notorious stringency, readers would see far more of Ackerman: She estimates that for every letter that runs, she's written three or four others. That comes to at least a couple of hundred letters to the editor of America's newspaper of record—to say nothing of the missives she's published in the *Utne Reader*, *The American Prospect*, *The New Republic*, and *Lingua Franca*, among other places.

Critics of twentieth-century analytic philosophy portray the field as hermetic and self-

regarding. But who better than an analytic philosopher to expose the contradictions and weaknesses embedded in the daily news? A typical Ackerman letter appeared in the April 29, 2001, *New York Times Magazine*, in response to an article called "How to Be Popular." The piece included an anecdote



PHILOSOPHER, ESSAYIST,
AND LETTER WRITER
FELICIA ACKERMAN

about a junior-high society queen who deigned to give comfort to a victim of bullies. Ackerman wrote: "Tory's act of taking the victim's hand and walking him 'to the nurse and then the guidance counselor' illustrates our tendency to see all problems as psychological ones. It is insulting to take the victim of bullies to a guidance counselor, as if he were the one who needed to change."

On March 18, Ackerman criticized a piece in the *Travel* section. The reporter had waxed nostalgic for Samoa, where she'd lived as a child,

and rued the changes she had seen there on a recent visit. If the author "longed for 'simple childhood pleasures like McDonald's'" when she herself lived there, Ackerman demanded, "why does she begrudge Samoan children the pleasure they will get when McDonald's comes to Samoa? And why does she consider it a 'downside,' instead of a sign of wonderful progress, that 'the islanders seem to take a certain comfort level for granted'?"

Certain subjects almost always get Ackerman's blood boiling: corporate invasions of privacy, activists who want sitcom characters to be "role models" ("Eek! Eek!" she exclaims when a reporter uses that phrase while interviewing her), and—absolutely above all—anyone who thinks high-tech health care for the elderly is dehumanizing. A few years ago, when the *Times* writer Vicki Goldberg sang the praises of hospices, Ackerman retorted: "Being, as Ms. Goldberg put it, 'locked in the cold, metallic embrace' of a life-sustaining machine, like a ventilator, is just as compatible with being 'wrapped in the love of family' as is writing articles with the aid of a cold, metallic word processor."

Although an against-the-grain, anti-P.C. strain gives some of her letters a neoconservative flavor, Ackerman is a solid lefty.

She simply prefers, she says, to comment on subjects that she thinks no one else will write letters about. As crunchy *Utne Reader* subscribers have discovered, however, there's one area where she doesn't hew to the left-wing party line: "I like the kind of liberalism that is about people, not California condors or whooping cranes," she observes.

As it happens, Ackerman's interest in extra-academic prose

Nations translator who published 123 letters in the *Times* from the time he left his job in 1987 until his death in 1996. (He submitted 859.) In recent years, *Times* policy has limited readers to one item on the main letters page every two months.

Ackerman does, however, have one rival to the throne of top academic letter writer: Norman F. Cantor, the retired New York University historian of the Middle Ages. Cantor's

and the World It Made (Free Press) hit best-seller lists this year. "I don't turn them out three times a week."

Explaining his motivations, he says: "There are a million copies of my medieval books in print, but I regard myself as a cultural critic as well as a historian. I'm particularly concerned with the training of historians, and who trains them, and how that impacts on the general culture."

Those who rallied to Stone's defense implied or said outright that Cantor was a crank. It's the inevitable charge leveled at a frequent letter writer. Ackerman says it's an unfair one: "Why is it more likely that a person who writes letters to the editor will be called a crank than someone who writes Op-Eds, or short stories, or essays—all of which I've also written?"

CHRISTOPHER SHEA

The philosopher Felicia Ackerman is a familiar presence on the *New York Times* letters page. Since 1991, the *Times* has published seventy-four of her epistles.

is long-standing. She also writes fiction. In fact, her 1988 short story "The Forecasting Game," published in *Commentary*, won Ackerman an O. Henry Prize. As for her strictly academic work, she is trained as a philosopher of language—formerly writing papers pointing out flaws in the ordinary-language wing of that subfield. She now writes about medical ethics, particularly end-of-life issues, and also about the fifteenth-century English poet Sir Thomas Malory, who is something of an obsession for her. (She has been known to end conversations and personal letters with a phrase from Malory's *Morte Darthur*: "Have ye no drede.")

As prolific as she is, Ackerman is not likely to challenge the epistolary record of Louis J. Herman, a retired United

output is less impressive by some measures—fewer letters in the *Times*, a more variable voice—but he is Ackerman's equal in range of subjects and far surpasses her in vitriol. When Lawrence Stone, the distinguished English historian, died in 1999, Cantor published a letter in the *Times Literary Supplement* calling Stone's book *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641* "second-rate R.H. Tawney Marxism" and charging that the historian's work generally was "verbose, disorganized, and often erroneous." When C. Vann Woodward died last year, Cantor did a similar, if slightly less withering, number on him, in the *TLS*.

"I don't have any compulsion about this," protests Cantor, whose book *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death*