historian, and conductor on the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia. “I think this is very moving, and very American in a way, the idea of ordinary people caught up in extraordinary circumstances and describing them in their own plain speech: the most harrowing, incredible, astounding narratives, with suffering and courage and joy and celebration—all these extreme human emotions.” (The work premiered at Carnegie Hall in 2018, and was released on CD this past spring.) The third oratorio in the series is A Nation of Others, set during a single day on Ellis Island in 1921. Originally scheduled to premiere at Carnegie Hall this summer, it has been postponed to November because of the pandemic. “Knock wood,” Moravec says. Which reminds him of one last thing, regarding the sand in the oyster and the gift of music in an upside-down world. “You know, one thing that’s kind of remarkable: when I play a Bach fugue, my fingers are doing what Bach’s fingers did 300 years ago,” he says. “There’s this very physical, visceral connection between me and a past composer, a very great spirit and imagination. And particularly in a time of extreme anxiety and uncertainty and disruption, there’s something grounding about that connection, which has survived world wars and holocausts and genocides and all the horrible things that have happened in the last 300 years. We still have it. And that connection to a tradition and the actual sound”—Moravec pivots to his piano, fingers cascading across the notes—“it’s not an abstract thing. It’s sound waves, and it’s still here. Music is essential to the fabric of who we are as human beings. And even if we’re not aware of it, it’s still there.” Like that motif woven through the arias in Sanctuary Road, “it still resonates.”

Seriously Goofy
Comedian Karen Chee finds her voice.

by JACOB SWEET

WHEN KAREN CHEE ’17 was a child, her parents proved definitively that TV was bad for her. During a Jeopardy broadcast, Chee’s mother had her count how many times producers cut to different shots. Each change, her mother said, sapped one’s ability to focus. Chee counted, and the number was astounding. “I was completely convinced by the argument,” she says. In the dentist’s waiting room, she would train her gaze away from the TV, desperate to preserve brain function.

As a writer for Late Night with Seth Meyers on NBC, her fear of television has long faded. Now she often appears herself, mostly on NBC, her fear of television has long faded. (Though TV comedy wasn’t a staple of her education. She was especially obsessed with late-night television. With her grandpa, she watched David Letterman, Conan O’Brien ’85, and Johnny Carson.

Encouraged by her drama teacher, she also started performing improv comedy. “I was really bad at acting,” Chee says of her early days. “And really bad at improv.” She “broke” constantly, giggling at jokes on stage that were supposed to be taken in stride. But she loved it: the playful atmosphere, the way that improv had rules and a structure, but that all the dialogue was made up. “That was really exhilarating,” she says. “I think joke, she’d write it down. She’d look up her favorite shows on the movie database site IMDb, find their writers, and watch other projects they’d worked on: an ad hoc comedy education. She was especially obsessed with late-night television. With her grandpa, she watched David Letterman, Conan O’Brien ’85, and Johnny Carson.

Encouraged by her drama teacher, she also started performing improv comedy. “I was really bad at acting,” Chee says of her early days. “And really bad at improv.” She “broke” constantly, giggling at jokes on stage that were supposed to be taken in stride. But she loved it: the playful atmosphere, the way that improv had rules and a structure, but that all the dialogue was made up. “That was really exhilarating,” she says. “I think
Amazon’s widening grip. And in promoting Life of A.J. Fikry while worrying about a world. The depressive air is no mistake. Novelist Gabrielle Zevin ’00 wrote The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry (2014) while worrying about Amazon’s widening grip. And in promoting her book, she championed independent stores, libraries, and devoted print readers. “Fikry was really about how we have some ability to affect what our townscapes look like and, to me, bookstores were, and are, an issue of vital importance—I really wanted them to survive,” she says from the Los Angeles home she shares with partner Hans Canosa ’93 and their two aging rescue dogs. “I mean, the French get it: they call books ‘an essential good,’ you know?”

The novel is heartwarming and beautifully crafted; each chapter opens with an ingenious plug from Fikry for a real short story hinting at what’s to come: “Lamb to the Slaughter,” by Roald Dahl, and “A Conversation with My Father,” by Grace Paley, among others. But it also offers a salient political and cultural critique—all Zevin’s fiction does.

Her 2010 book, The Hole We’re In, features a family sucked dumbly into consumerism and a daughter’s drive to transcend it. Zevin was interested in “Americans and debt, and how by oppressing people financially, you get to control them politically.” And 2017’s Young Jane Young was finished as Hilary Clinton competed with Donald Trump. It spans four women’s narratives across 13 years, focusing on protagonist Aviva Grossman, an undergraduate intern who has an affair with a married congressman. Strains of a familiar scandal exist, but Zevin’s scope is deeper, exploring slut-shaming, power dynamics, and the pigeonholing of politicized women. In many ways the book presaged both