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A RENAISSANCE MURDER MYSTERY

How a Family Heirloom Helped a Wesleyan Professor Solve the Famous Italian Pazzi Conspiracy **BY LAURA C. PERILLO**

One of history's famous unsolved whodunits is the Pazzi conspiracy, in which an attempt to overthrow the Medici family, rulers of Florence, led to a brutal and brazen murder. For 500 years rumors have circulated about who masterminded the conspiracy.

Now Marcello Simonetta, assistant professor of Romance languages and literatures, has cracked the case with the help of an ancient family heirloom. The evidence he unearthed points to the top of Florentine society and straight to the heart of the Vatican.

The key to the case was a code-breaking manual passed down through generations of the Simonetta family from their ancestor, Cicco Simonetta. Coded correspondence was common during the Italian Renaissance because writers had no assurance that confidential material would not be intercepted and read in transit.

"Using Cicco's code-breaking manual," says Simonetta, "I deciphered a

letter and solved one of the most ancient and exciting mysteries of Italian history."

The conspiracy involved two feuding families—the Pazzis and Medicis. The Medicis had been rulers of Florence for about 45 years at the time the letter was written.

Federico da Montefeltro, the popular Duke of Urbino, was the author of the secret letter. Its contents reveal that he conspired to overthrow the Medicis' reign and that his co-conspirators included Pope Sixtus IV, the Pope's nephew Gerolamo Riario, Archbishop Salviati, and other members of the Pazzi family.

Historians have known that the Pazzi family was implicated in the plot, but details were vague and the Duke of Urbino had escaped detection with his reputation as a noted humanist left intact.

"The Pazzis wanted their turn at ruling Florence," says Simonetta. "They

wanted the Medicis out of power and were prepared to use any method to oust them."

The plot hinged on an attempt to assassinate two brothers in the Medici family: Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici. Afterward, the duke planned to seize the city with 600 well-trained soldiers. In the newly surfaced letter, the duke insists on proceeding quickly with the assassination. He also expresses his thanks to the Pope for a gold chain that the Pope gave to his son.

"This proves the Pope bribed the duke into helping him turn on the Medicis," explains Simonetta. "In fact, one painting of the duke's son Guidubaldo shows him wearing this golden chain, as if the Pope were saying, 'The deal is now done.'"

The letter suggests a new interpretation of another painting of the time, a portrait of Duke Federico, painted by Piero della Francesca, preserved at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. The painting

is a one-sided profile to hide his loss of an eye due from a jousting injury.

"This famous painting is a two-faced profile, just as Federico, the duke, was two-faced, pretending to be allies with the Medicis while secretly conspiring against them," says Simonetta. "Thanks to the letter, we now know that the other side of his face is Federico's dark side."

During a high mass, on Easter Sunday in April 1478, Giuliano de' Medici was stabbed 19 times and killed. Lorenzo de' Medici was wounded, but a friend of his stepped in front of the attackers as Lorenzo fled to safety. The attack started a riot in which the city's residents brutally killed plotters inside the city and hung the Archbishop. Allies of the Pazzi family then declared open war on Florence. Within a few years, Lorenzo—later nicknamed the Magnificent—triumphed and went on to rule over the golden age of Florence.

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Marcello Simonetta unearthed surprising details about a Renaissance murder plot involving the Duke of Urbino, shown in a poster of Piero della Francesca's famous painting.

BILL BURKHART

SPRING '04

Lorenzo's survival was fortunate, according to Simonetta, because it was Lorenzo the Magnificent who eventually discovered Michelangelo's artistic talent.

Simonetta uncovered the letter during research for his doctoral dissertation. In July of 2001, he was granted access to the Ubaldini archive at Urbino, located north of Rome. While on a fishing expedition for his studies, he came across the curious, coded document written in Italian in 1478.

decode the letter. More important, he did not want to look in that direction, because he refused to spoil the image of the duke."

Eventually, the foreign press caught on to Simonetta's discovery, and articles appeared in leading publications in Italy, Spain, Russia, and Britain. The Renaissance murder mystery is also catching on in the U.S. media with stories in the *New York Times*, *Hartford Courant* and *Discovery News*.

PREMIUM IN WORKPLACE

BEAUTY LIES IN THE EYE OF YOUR EMPLOYER

Beauty is most certainly in the eye of the beholder, but according to new research by Wesleyan economist Tanya Rosenblat and Harvard's Markus Mobius, beauty is also in the eye of your employer.

If you're beautiful and confident in the workplace, you're well on your way to the top, they conclude in "Why Beauty Matters," a study that has captured the attention of the national media with stories appearing in the *Baltimore Sun*, *Hartford Courant*, *Boston Herald*, and *Portsmouth Herald*.

In their economic experiments, which simulated a workplace, beautiful people earned 10 to 15 percent more in salaries than the rest of their less attractive co-workers, the authors report.

Rosenblat originally decided to study the beauty premium during one of her undergraduate classes in 2001. "I was trying to come up with a simple and interesting case for my students to write about," she says. Students responded eagerly, and she began to delve further into her research with her co-author.

To prove their theories, Rosenblat and Mobius gathered subjects from a pool of undergraduates and graduate students from the Universidad Nacional de Tucumán, Argentina, from August 2002 to March 2003.

Their studies concluded that physically attractive workers are more confident, which helps them obtain higher wages and that they are (wrongly) considered more able by employers. These workers also have certain communication and social skills that raise their wages when they interact verbally with employers.

To conduct their experiments, subjects were divided into artificial labor markets of workers and employers.

The workers were told they were "hired" to perform a skilled task of solving computer mazes. Workers were then given the opportunity to interview with five different employers to negotiate wages.

"All employers saw the same résumé of each worker (including practice time) but differed in the mode of interaction with the worker," the researchers explain.

The employers were then divided up into five categories that ranged in the degree of interaction from those who saw only a written résumé to a group that saw a résumé, a photograph, and conducted a five-minute face-to-face unscripted interview with each candidate.

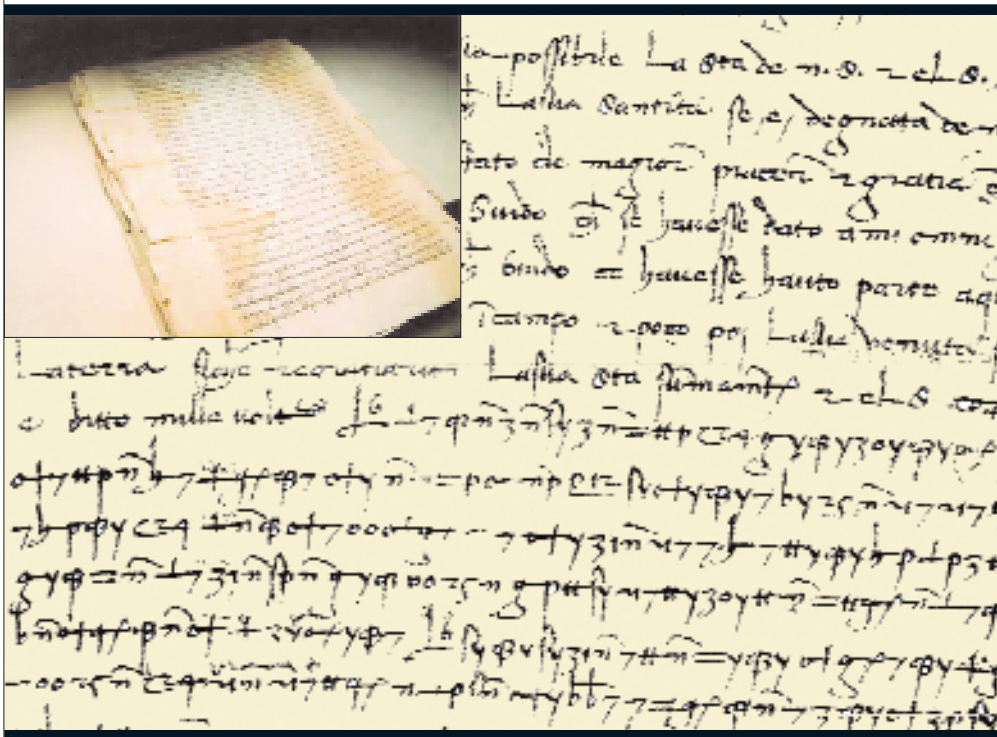
The beauty measure was constructed from ratings by a panel of independent evaluators. "There is a lot of agreement on what is considered beautiful across genders and across cultures when we only consider ratings of facial photographs," says Rosenblat. "This is a surprising result, and it allows for a meaningful analysis of the beauty premium."

Rosenblat and Mobius eventually learned that the more attractive workers were better at negotiating salary, but were no better at solving the puzzles than the rest.

This means, says Rosenblat, that employers wrongly attributed higher skill through direct stereotyping—visual interaction—and through indirect stereotyping. "Oral communication led them to believe that the more beautiful workers were more able."

Is there hope for the less attractive workers of the world? Rosenblat assures us there is. "They can still get ahead in the workplace by demonstrating their credentials—their education, their prior experience, etc. Employers want to be reassured that they're hiring a skilled and productive worker."


"I KNEW I WAS LOOKING AT SOMETHING IMPORTANT HERE BECAUSE THE LETTER WAS DATED ABOUT TWO MONTHS BEFORE THE ATTACK ON LORENZO AND GIULIANO IN THE CATHEDRAL."



"I knew I was looking at something important here because the letter was dated about two months before the attack on Lorenzo and Giuliano in the cathedral," he says.

"The letter was actually in the hands of another Italian historian before I discovered it," Simonetta adds. "He, however, wasn't fortunate enough to have my ancestor's manual that I used to

Simonetta moved to the United States in 1995 and earned his Ph.D. in Italian from Yale in 2001. He recently turned his dissertation into a book called *Secret Renaissance: The World of the Secretary from Petrarch to Machiavelli*.

He plans on writing another book about the secret letter and the Pazzi conspiracy directed to an English-speaking audience. 

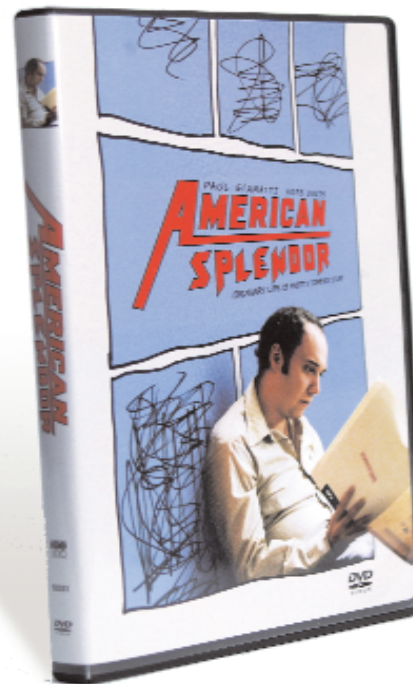
WORTH WATCHING

Spring 2004 DVDs

American Splendor

(HBO Films and Fine Line Features, 2003)

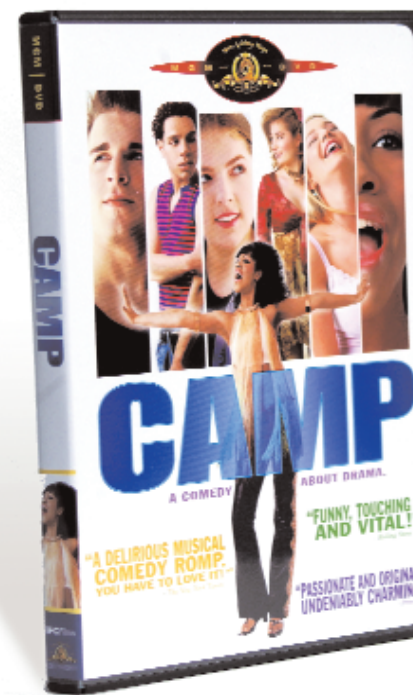
Documentary filmmakers **SHARI SPRINGER BERMAN '85** and Robert Pulcini made their narrative feature film debut by jointly directing and writing the screenplay for this highly original comedy-drama based on the autobiographical comic books of Harvey Pekar, a former file clerk in a Veterans Administration hospital in Cleveland, Ohio. Paul Giamatti and Hope Davis head the stellar cast of this inventive movie, which magically combines dramatic scenes, documentary footage, and animation and includes commentary by the real-life Pekar. The dramatic scenes capture visually the rust-belt milieu of Pekar's comic book world with an earth-toned palette that recalls the gritty naturalism of past American films such as *Fat City* and *The Deer Hunter* (from the 1970s) and *Midnight Cowboy* (1969). Derservedly acclaimed by critics across the country, *American Splendor* won numerous awards including the Best Adapted Screenplay award from the Writers Guild of America, as well as an Academy Award nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay.



Camp

(IFC Films, 2003)

STEPHEN TRASK '89 wrote the original music for this exuberant comedy about a summer drama camp in upstate New York where a variety of misfits come together to perfect their theatrical talents. Based on the experiences of writer-director Todd Graff, the captivating movie is filled with joyous musical numbers, performed by an abundantly gifted cast of unknowns who know how to steal the show. Trask, who wrote music and lyrics for the successful stage and screen versions of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, has also composed original music for the recent films *The Station Agent* and *Prey for Rock and Roll*, and for an MTV rock adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*.



Firefly: The Complete Series

(Twentieth Century Fox, 2003)

JOSS WHEDON '87 was the creator and sometimes the director and writer for this unjustly short-lived television series set 500 years in the future that integrated elements from deep space science fiction and the Western. The intelligent and sharply plotted series follows the adventures of Captain Mal Reynolds and the motley crew of his ramshackle ship *Serenity* as they make a living performing legal (and illegal) deeds, all the while fleeing the clutches of a totalitarian regime called the Alliance. The four-disc set has 14 episodes (including three that never aired), insightful commentary by Whedon and others, deleted scenes, and three making-of featurettes. Good news for fans of the show: Whedon will direct a feature film entitled *Serenity* based on the series, scheduled to be released by Universal Pictures in 2005.

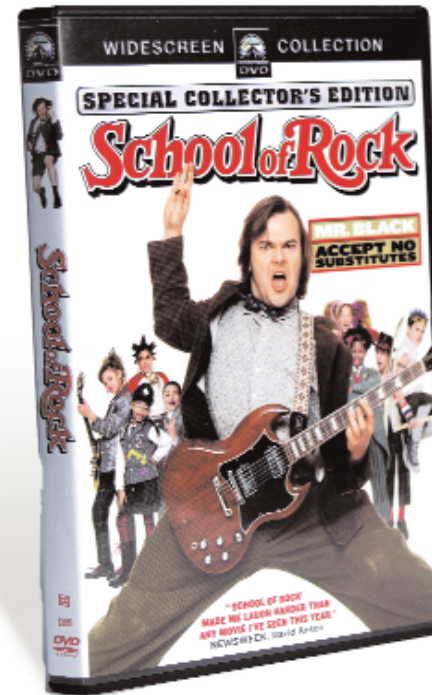


School of Rock

(Paramount, 2003)

MIKE WHITE '92 (*Chuck and Buck*, *The Good Girl*) wrote the clever screenplay for one of the funniest movies released in 2003 (he also appears in the film in a supporting role). Jack Black delivers a spectacular comic performance as an out-of-work guitarist who, in order to pay the rent, manages to find work as a substitute teacher for shy fifth-graders at a snobby prep school. When he discovers his uptight students have musical ability, he decides to teach them what he knows best—how to play and appreciate rock and roll. Watching these well-groomed youngsters transform into enthusiastic rock performers makes for terrific entertainment. Director Richard Linklater (*Dazed and Confused*, *Waking Life*) does a wonderful job with his talented cast and keeps everything family-friendly without being overly saccharine. The DVD has some nifty extras, including Jack Black's pitch to Led Zeppelin to use one of their songs in the movie as well as commentary and interviews involving all the key players. White is currently working as creator-writer for the television comedy series *Cracking Up*.

—David Low '76



KANEM JOHNSON '04

A BASKETBALL STAR WHO LISTENED TO HIS MOTHER

Kanem Johnson '04 is a lanky, 6-foot-4 basketball player from an inner-city high school in New Haven who listened to his mother.

While he dreamed of stardom at a Division I school, she insisted that he keep academics front and center. As a single mother of three boys and an immigrant from Jamaica, she placed a high value on the kind of education that she herself had never been able to obtain.

So Johnson came to Wesleyan and this winter ended his fourth and final season as Wesleyan's all-time leading scorer, with 1,692 points. He also is the most accurate shooter in Wesleyan's history (with a 58.5 field-goal percentage) and was named first-team All-NESCAC in his junior and senior years through a vote of the conference head coaches.

Johnson became the player every opponent tried to stop, according to Head Coach Gerry McDowell. He has a trademark turn-around jumper that he executes one-handed and a gentle stroke from the free-throw line. He has shown admiring crowds huge one-handed rebounds that have helped him lead NESCAC in rebounding as well as scoring. He is one of only three players who are nationally ranked among the top 20 in Division III for both statistics.

Johnson was a disciplined athlete and improved every year as a consummate team player, adds McDowell. "Kanem showed genuine care and concern for all his teammates. He brought younger players under his wing, into his home and shared his

experiences with them in order to help them through their tough times."

On the way to this athletic achievement, Johnson discovered another world.

"I came here with the intent of just playing ball and then going to Europe for a semi-pro league," he says. "I wound up getting much more than just a degree."

He is quick to credit his mother for telling him that he "had to go to a school with great academics." After graduating from Hillhouse High School in New Haven, he followed in his older brother's footsteps by spending a post-graduate year at Northfield Mount Hermon, a well-regarded prep school.

(His brother then went on to Amherst; a younger brother also is headed to Northfield Mount Hermon.)

Burton Saxon MAT '71, a teacher at Hillhouse and family friend, cites Johnson's mother as "the most remarkable parent I have known in my 33 years as a teacher." She constantly checked homework assignments, attended all of her sons' games, and served as a second mother to many of their friends.

At Wesleyan, Johnson has majored in government and African American studies. He has been active in the Black Latino Brotherhood, helping to bring speakers to campus, and he served on a group to advise the African American Studies program about student concerns and interests.

Johnson recently told Sean Barker, a sports writer for the *New Haven Register*, that he'd received his first letter inviting him to attend a basketball camp with scouts for European semi-pro teams. Since Johnson never was able to arrange his schedule to spend time abroad, he notes that a stint with a Belgian or German team has some appeal. Ultimately, though, he has his heart set on a job in finance.

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BILL BURKHART



At the urging of his immigrant mother in New Haven, Kanem Johnson '04 came to Wesleyan, where he set the all-time scoring record and thrived off the court.

Wesleyan!

CAMPAIGN NEWS



ANNOUNCING THE SUZANNE LEMBERG USDAN UNIVERSITY CENTER

At a recent dinner for trustees and Wesleyan alumni volunteers, President Bennet announced that the new University Center will be named for Suzanne Lemberg Usdan in honor of the late mother of John Usdan '80, a trustee, and his brother, Adam '83, who together have contributed a lead gift to the Campus Renewal Fund. Construction of the center is scheduled to begin in the spring of 2005, and the building's opening is planned for fall 2007.

SURDNA FOUNDATION GRANT SUPPORTS SERVICE-LEARNING CENTER

The new Service-Learning Center, directed by Professor of Sociology Rob Rosenthal, has received a second grant of \$75,000 from the Surdna Foundation. Grants to the Service-Learning Center support the development of service-learning courses across the curriculum and help the Center provide technical support for course development, a library of service-learning resources, and connections to community organizations. The Surdna Foundation, which was established in 1917 by John Emory Andrus, Wesleyan Class of 1862 and former Wesleyan trustee, has been a generous supporter of Wesleyan.

SARAH WHITELEY BEQUEST IN MEMORY OF JACK WHITELEY '25

Sarah Whiteley has left a \$250,000 bequest for scholarship support in memory of her late husband, John Cecil Rushworth (Jack) Whiteley '25. Jack Whiteley, himself a scholarship recipient at Wesleyan, majored in history and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. An astute scholar and businessman, his career spanned the North American and European continents and included high-profile assignments with Scott Paper Company and the international division of Ford Motor Company. Mrs. Whiteley's generous bequest will benefit future generations of Wesleyan students while providing a lasting memorial to the spirit of Jack Whiteley '25.

SPRING '04

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