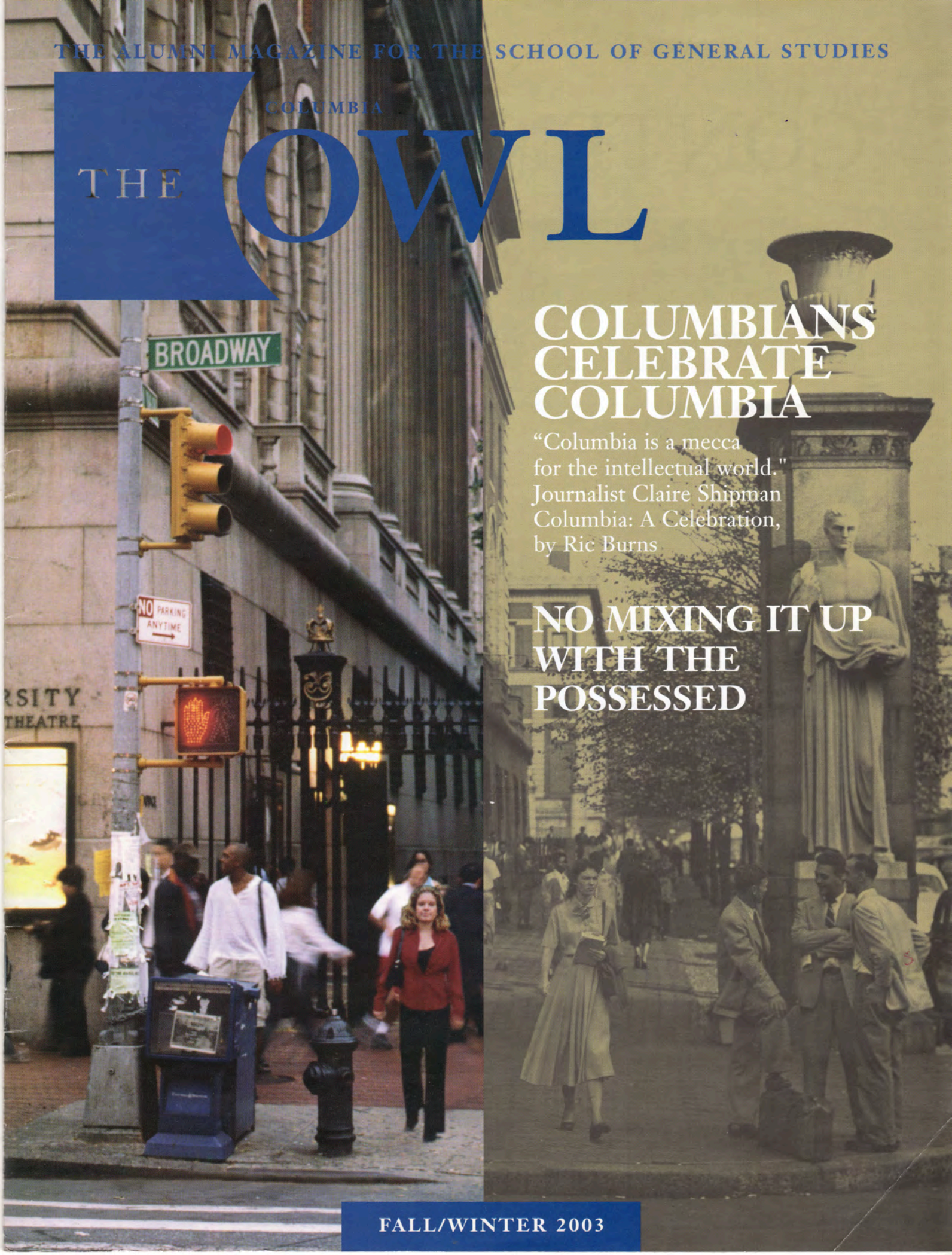
THE ALUMNI MAGAZINE FOR THE SCHOOL OF GENERAL STUDIES

# THE COLUMBIA OWL

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Columbia: A Celebration, by Ric Burns

## NO MIXING IT UP WITH THE POSSESSED

FALL/WINTER 2003

Lisa Collier Cool '77 has a curiosity for the mysterious. In *Beware the Night*, she reveals the details of New York City police Sergeant Ralph Sarchie's supernatural encounters.

# NO MIXING IT UP WITH THE POSSESSED

BY ROXANA PETZOLD, GS '01

Lisa Collier Cool smiles slyly as she recalls these instructions from the exorcist with whom she recently collaborated. In *Beware the Night* (St. Martin's Press, 2001), Cool and co-author, New York City police Sergeant Ralph Sarchie, detail his encounters with the supernatural and his effort to protect people, body—and quite literally—soul. The day after publication, the book reached number three on the Amazon.com bestseller list. And blockbuster movie producer Jerry Bruckheimer has optioned the film rights for Disney Studios and hired the same screenwriter who wrote *Training Day* and *The Fast and the Furious* to work on the script. But it is neither the success of *Beware* nor the bizarre experiences that went into the researching and writing of the book that delights Cool at this moment. Rather, it is her recollection of a Columbia linguistics professor who once cautioned her that there are very few "unique utterances" among English speakers—most things spoken being formulaic or having been said "a million times before." Cool takes a sip of tea and considers: "'No mixing it up with the possessed.' I doubt many people have ever said that."

Amid the flash of Hollywood and encounters with other things demonic, hers is an unexpected comment. Clearly Lisa Collier Cool is a writer heart and soul, and one who will not suffer devils of any sort. After reading her latest book, one might even argue that Cool's vocation was God's will.

*Lisa Collier Cool, journalist and author of six nonfiction books, is passionate about her craft. She offers one ingredient for her success. "I'm really interested in a good story."*

Reared among manuscripts and authors—her father founded the literary agency Collier Associates, where Cool briefly worked as an agent—Cool has always enjoyed reading and writing. She first put pen to paper, albeit construction paper, in third grade when she wrote the novel *The Mark of the Swishing Pig*. The mystery centers on the detective work of a few dolls who are intent on tracking down a villainous candy store robber. "I was a big fan of Nancy Drew and read every book," laughs Cool. Naturally, the dolls apprehend the bad guy.

In recent years, Cool's writing has focused on the mysteries that stem from human health care and medicine. Her articles investigating subjects from plastic surgery to cancer have appeared in over 300 newspapers and magazines, including *Parenting*, *Woman's Day*, *American Health*, *Harper's*, *Family Circle*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Penthouse*, and *The Daily News*. Her work has also been picked up by the *Associated Press* and *Reuters*. Last year, Cool received the American Society of Journalists and Authors' Outstanding Article Award for "Could You Get Hooked on This Pill?" published in *Self*, in addition to receiving the American Society of Plastic Surgeon's Media Circle of Excellence Award for her article "Plastic Surgery, Inc." published in *Ladies Home Journal*, and the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery's Journalistic Achievement Award for "10 Years After Plastic Surgery" published in *McCall's*. Among Cool's many other awards for her reportage – including the Donald Robinson Award for Investigative Journalism and the 2003 June Roth Medical Journalism Award—is the 1999 National Magazine Award for her

article entitled "The Preventable Cancer." One in a series of articles on colon cancer published by *Good Housekeeping*, the collection received an award from the American Digestive Health Foundation and was featured at a White House press conference led by Hillary Rodham Clinton and Katie Couric. But before you get the wrong idea, keep in mind that award potential is not a consideration for Cool as she develops an article.

"I'm really interested in a good story. I like to talk to people and find out their stories and tell people that [they] can gain valuable information. Somebody can read a health article and that can make a big difference to them."

Cool has seen firsthand how her writing can help people. Once, after reading her article on diabetes, a tennis partner told her she was able to identify several symptoms she had been experiencing and quickly made a doctor's appointment. Though the friend eventually tested negative for the disease, the article had alerted her to its symptoms and prepared her to recognize them in her friends and family.

Cool hopes that one of her current projects will help to enlighten parents as well as offer them hope. She has been following a couple whose newborn was diagnosed with an extreme form of Ebstein's Anomaly, a rare heart defect that affects approximately 400 babies a year. Long hours with the distraught, Missouri-based family offered Cool an intimate view of their battle with the disease and the impact it has had on so many areas of their life. Eventually told by the doctors that their child's condition was getting worse and the child would soon die, Cool witnessed the parents preparing for death.

"Someone once described my job as 'listening to sad stories,'" Cool offers. "But I don't think of it that way—it's more like helping to prevent sad stories."

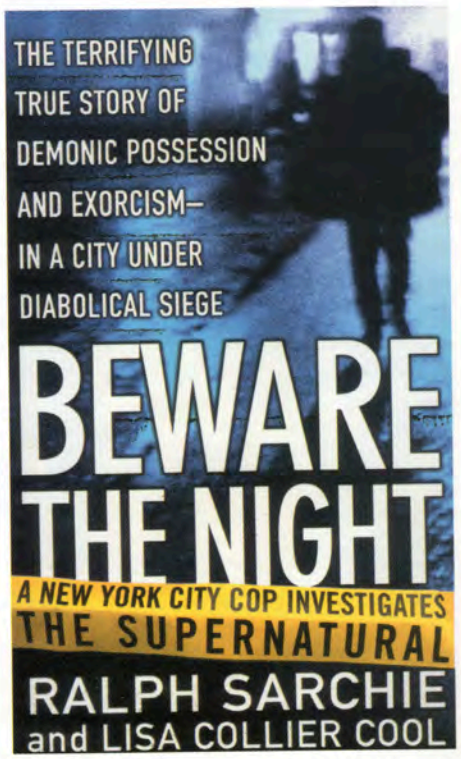
But even this particular story has a happy ending that was in part brought about by an article that had been published on Ebstein's Anomoly. Discovered only moments before the parents were to leave the hospital, the article detailed a new procedure that produced successful results. The doctor who had developed the procedure was immediately contacted and surgery on the baby was performed soon after. Cool reports that all in the family continue to do well.

Although Cool can recall no particular event in her life that helped stimulate her interest in medicine, it had developed enough for her to declare her major at Shimer College in Illinois to be pre-med. "I thought it would be so cool," she reflects, but adds modestly that class demands exceeded her academic stamina. Writing, however, came easily to Cool—as did the praise for her writing.

"Writing," Cool declares without a hint of regret, "is better than practicing medicine."

After a year at Shimer, which has since merged with the University of Chicago, Cool spent a year at Oxford. It was there that she began to feel shé needed to take her education more seriously and decided that when she returned to the States she would attend Barnard. As fate (or other supernatural powers) would have it, Cool missed the Barnard deadline. However, the deadline for The School of General Studies was later and she sent her application there. Cool enjoyed being a student at GS as an English major. Academically she did well, finding the classes challenging and the teachers inspiring. Of course, there is always one teacher who is challenging, though not in an especially academic fashion. In this case, Cool battled her English composition teacher, a strict grammarian who handed her a B for the semester. And although she chuckles as she recalls the teacher, it seems Cool can still taste a hint of bitterness: "It really annoyed me," she confirms.

However, Cool did experience a near storybook revenge. "Soon after graduating from college I sold my first work. I called my old teacher up pretending to want her advice about publication contracts, but really [it was] to say, 'Nah-Nah! I've sold a story.' I was gratified to see how surprised she was."

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Of course, a writer's life is never *that* easy, and in spite of the excellent education provided by GS, Cool learned that writing for popular magazines is not like writing for a literature class. "I had to unlearn some of my writing habits from college to avoid sounding too pretentious. Popular magazines want a very friendly, conversational style, which wouldn't be appropriate in formal writing."

Cool's first assignment was with North American Newspaper Alliance (NANA), a syndicate which promised to pay her $35 on delivery. That was all the incentive she needed, and she happily went off to cover a group of Libertarians who had been promoting a candidate named "Nobody." (Their slogans boasted, "Nobody will lower your taxes; Nobody will keep his campaign promises.") Cool worked all night rewriting her 500-word story, striving for the perfect article and expecting to discuss it with the editor in the morning. Instead, he asked, "Are you sure you spelled 'Parsippany' right?" then made it clear there was nothing further to discuss. Cool remembers the awkward moment and suppresses a laugh at her own naïveté.

"I confidently assured him I did (spell Parsippany correctly), and he replied, 'Okay.'

Okay?

'Okay,' he said, and I realized our meeting was concluded!"

Cool continued to write for NANA, and continued to receive a check for $35, until it occurred to her that somebody may pay more than this amount. She has since published five nonfiction books and numerous magazine and newspaper articles. But her experience only partly prepared her for work on *Beware the Night*. Her agent, Jimmy Vines, who had read an article in the *New York Post* about a cop who was also an exorcist and conceived the idea for the book, did not immediately bring it to Cool to co-author. Cool concedes that she shares few similarities with Ralph Sarchie, the quintessential, tough-talking, seen-it-all, Bronx-beat cop who is also a devout Catholic and

*Lisa and her husband John live outside Manhattan. They have three daughters, identical twins who are away at college and an aspiring ballerina who is a high school student.*

demonologist. The subject matter was also a departure from Cool's previous books. Yet the subject, the indomitable police officer, and the challenge this book would present her as a writer, intrigued Cool.

"My greatest challenge of all was to write a first person book in not only a man's voice, but a macho man, who is a New York City cop and also religious. A very unique man."

Cool remembers trying to describe the feelings Sarchie experienced after fasting in preparation for an exorcism. She decided "giddy" was an apt word until Sarchie told her he was "never, EVER giddy." Nor was he "lightheaded" or "dizzy." At a loss for the word that signified Sarchie's disposition after a three-day fast, Cool finally asked him outright, "What are you?"

"Hungry!" she relays, and bursts into a laugh.

The partnership has certainly been a successful one. Despite learning that the first two writers with whom Sarchie had worked had possibly experienced supernatural phenomena (causing one of them to quit outright) and that her involvement could put her and her family at risk, Cool charged ahead and began taking notes. She also acknowledged to Sarchie that she was neither Catholic nor especially religious. Nevertheless, once they decided to work together, Sarchie insisted he survey her house before proceeding with the book. Cool remembers the day he arrived at her house bearing blessed salt, a few vials of holy water, and holy candles. Sarchie walked around and shortly after declared it, "pure, clear, and demon-free...and very beautiful besides."

While Cool never had any direct experience with the demonic, and can offer no absolute explanations for what she details in *Beware the Night*, she admits there were times she was genuinely frightened while accompanying Sarchie in what he refers to as "the Work."

"On the first exorcism I didn't know what to expect. Originally it seemed that very little was happening, and I was beginning to feel disappointed. Then all of a sudden this individual began speaking in a different voice, saying strange things."

Cool also remembers entering certain houses and experiencing them having a distinctly "oppressive" feel. One house in particular had "cold spots" that could not be accounted for in a satisfactory fashion. At an apparent loss for words (or answers), Cool concludes simply, "Some of these things are amazing."

Meantime, while the screenplay for *Beware the Night* is being developed, Cool is back in her own home, one she shares with husband John Cool (another member of the GS community) and her 13-year-old daughter, an aspiring ballerina. Cool's identical twin daughters, age 19, are both at college.

Cool also has returned to more familiar subject matter. She is currently at work on an article that details how doctors neglect women's nutritional needs and is completing research on another story about sexual harassment and sexual assault among students while in school. As with earlier articles, Cool no doubt has selected these subjects because she hopes someone will find the information useful.

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*Roxana Petzold currently works in documentary film and multimedia production.*