

THE TV COLUMN

Morning gabfests put up their dukes

Lisa de Moraes weighs in on the past week's ratings battle between ABC and NBC. Katie Couric co-anchored "Good Morning America," and Ryan Seacrest visited "Today." Visit washingtonpost.com/tvcolumn.

“Item 1 in the Gift Giving Code: If it has strings attached, then don't call it a gift.” Carolyn Hax, **C4**

MUSIC

Janus Trio, sans jolt

The young players, part of New York's new-music scene, fall flat at Atlas. **C3**



SUNDAY ARTS
Curiouser and curiouser

The Washington Ballet prepares to premiere its "Alice (in Wonderland)." **Coming Sunday**



Turning a scientific mind to sweet ideas

Bakery owner is at home in kitchen and lab

BY R.C. BARAJAS
Special to *The Washington Post*

On a perfect day, Winnette McIntosh Ambrose would be in the kitchen of the Sweet Lobby, the pastry shop on Barracks Row she owns with her brother, by 6 a.m., in her National Institutes of Health lab by 10 a.m. and home by 8 p.m.

But not every day is perfect.

On this day, Ambrose is in the throes of training a new baker, which makes her a little late to Building 6 on the NIH campus, where she dons a white lab coat and peers through a microscope at mouse retinal cells. The cells are being cultured on a new biomaterial that Ambrose hopes will provide them with a better living environment than regular substrate. She would like to see, someday, sections of this biomaterial transplanted into degenerating retinas to restore vision.

Usually, her two lives — one as a creator of fine pastries and the other as a biochemical engineer — dovetail in a strange kind of harmony. Ambrose has a simple explanation why. "A lot of what we

do in the lab involves a protocol of some kind," Ambrose says. "You figure out how to plan an experiment in order to test the hypothesis. When you do an experiment, there are proportions — so this idea of following recipes to get a desired result is very much innate to me. When it comes to the kitchen, it's kind of a similar thing. It was just a natural fit for me."

The fit proved so natural that in February, just seven months after opening its doors on Capitol Hill, the Sweet Lobby won Food Network's "Cupcake Wars." Ambrose, incidentally, has never taken a cooking class.

Any cook knows that science has its place in the kitchen — it thickens sauces, raises souffles and enables other seemingly magical transformations. But Ambrose understands the marriage of sugar and butter just as she understands the link between tissue and substrate.

And there's something more in the way this 36-year-old has dedicated her energies and expertise toward healing the most essential parts of the human body — the eye, the heart and the insatiable sweet tooth inside each of us. She is a perfectionist — tempered with a gift for madly creative improvisation. The same commitment to

BAKER CONTINUED ON C3



FAMILY BUSINESS: Winnette McIntosh Ambrose started the Sweet Lobby with her brother, Timothy McIntosh. Ambrose divides her time between the shop and the National Institutes of Health.

Mane attraction

D.C.'s 'brony' meet-ups corral 'My Little Pony's' surprising fans: Grown men

BY MELODY WILSON
Special to *The Washington Post*

The lights dim, and the crowd quiets. When a bright pink pony appears on the projection screen, the eight people onstage begin trotting along with it. One man, wearing a shiny pink hat shaped like a pony's mane, leads the others in song:

"Come on, every pony, smile, smile, smile! Fill my heart up with sunshine, sunshine! All I really need's a smile, smile, smile! From these happy friends of mine!"

About 50 people have gathered in

the Martin Luther King Jr. Library auditorium to watch and discuss the latest episode of "My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic." The event is a meet-up of D.C. area "bronies": adult men — and some women — who follow the animated TV show religiously. Make no mistake: This is not a small number of fans. Similar meet-ups have taken place across the country and the world since the show first aired in October 2010.

Standing in the semidarkness to one side of the stage is a tall, slim figure with wavy light-brown hair that descends past his shoulders. Eighteen-year-old Andrew Rodgers-Schatz — known as "R.S." to family and friends and as "Xiagu" to the bronies

assembled here — is the organizer.

A first-year computer science major at the University of Maryland at College Park, R.S. wears glasses and has perfect posture — as though he actually listened to his mother when she told him to sit up straight while he was playing his computer games. He is quiet, but when he talks about ponies, enthusiasm creeps into his voice. Many have tried to explain the show's allure, he says, but they can't quite put their finger on its wild popularity. The characters are "cute," he says, and they seem like

FANBOYS: Andrew Singley, top, has Trixie on his shoulder. Below, "bronies" Jason Meyers, left, and Fen Ingram check out stuffed ponies at a recent meet-up in the District.

BRONIES CONTINUED ON C3



PHOTOS BY LINDA DAVIDSON/THE WASHINGTON POST

BOOK WORLD

In 'Calico Joe,' Grisham knocks it out of the park

BY STEVEN V. ROBERTS
Special to *The Washington Post*

John Grisham's legal thrillers are dense and hefty, full of twists and turns and tension. His latest novel, "Calico Joe," is not like that at all. It's a sweet, simple story, a fable really. And like all fables, it has a moral: Good can come out of evil; it's never too late to confess your sins and seek forgiveness.

Writers who deal with baseball seem drawn to its mythic dimensions. Whether they produce a novel ("The Natural"), a movie ("Field of Dreams"), a play ("Damn Yankees") or a song ("Mrs. Robinson"), they often focus on outside heroes, their feats and their flaws. Maybe it's the grass or the lights or the uniforms. Maybe it's the strict geometry of the playing field that turns players into archetypes, characters in a morality play: stars and bums, good guys and bad guys. And so it is with "Calico Joe," a story about two men whose lives are fused together by one terrible instant on Aug. 24, 1973.

Wearing the white hat is Joe

Castle, a 21-year-old rookie first baseman for the Chicago Cubs. Calico Joe (the nickname comes from his home town of Calico Rock, Ark.) bashes home runs in his first three at-bats in the major leagues and is hitting above .500 six weeks later when the Cubs play the Mets at Shea Stadium in Queens.

Wearing the black hat is Warren Tracey, a 34-year-old journeyman pitcher for the Mets with a reputation for hitting batters — and the bottle — with equal determination. His first time up, Calico Joe whacks a homer off Tracey. When he comes to bat again, an 11-year-old boy in the stands, Tracey's son, Paul, has a very sick feeling.

He's obsessed with Joe, keeping a scrapbook that records all of his dazzling deeds. And he knows his father is about to throw at Joe's head. Paul knows this because Tracey has called his son a "coward" for not challenging batters with inside pitches in Little League. Years later, as he narrates this story, Paul recalls the game at Shea: "I wanted to



Calico Joe
By John Grisham
Doubleday.
198 pp., \$24.95

BOOK WORLD CONTINUED ON C4

Adult fans ride a 'My Little Pony' high

BRONIES FROM C1

"actual people." He continues, "The writing is witty — it's a smart show."

Today's episode centers on three young ponies that join their school's newspaper. A new editor comes in with guns blazing: "No more namby-pamby like last year's editor," she proclaims. "But Namby Pamby was a great editor!" the ponies protest. The bronies in the auditorium hoot with laughter.

Like many of the fans, R.S. got into the show at the prompting of a friend. He and about 90 others attended the first BronyCon in June. The best part, he says, was hanging out with bronies from across the country.

Riding that high, he founded the D.C. Brony Meetup. He advertised on Equestria Daily, the news site for bronies, and about 35 people attended the first meeting in July. Membership and attendance have increased since. The meet-up has 227 members registered online, about 50 of whom regularly attend meetings. (BronyCon drew 300 to its September gathering and more than 800 in January.) Such meet-ups have an "amplifying effect" on his enjoyment of the show, R.S. says. Although he usually chats online while watching a new episode, "it's hard to maintain real friends online."

During the week, Andrew Singley, 32, models mathematical problems as an analyst for the federal government. On weekends, he watches "My Little Pony" with his wife, Samantha, and 5-year-old daughter, Dayna, in their Silver Spring home. In October 2010, after watching an early epi-



ENTHUSIASM: Steve Decker, 32, holds up a plush Applejack as Simon Ladd, 27, looks on at a recent meet-up. The fans of "My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic" often collect T-shirts, pins and stuffed toys.

sode of the first season on Hasbro's animated TV channel, the Hub, Singley was hooked. He brought his daughter and wife into the fandom.

Hasbro's third iteration of the classic TV show was intended for young girls such as Dayna; its creators never expected men such as her father to be a driving force behind its popularity. Lauren Faust, also known for her work on "The Powerpuff Girls" and "Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends," wanted to create a show that would be enjoyable for parents, too. But neither Faust nor Hasbro was prepared for the overwhelmingly positive response they received from the unusual

demographic of mostly 20-something, mostly white men.

In a generation weaned on irony and sarcasm, such fresh-faced delight can seem startling. But bronies thrive on the convivial bonhomie of the show.

"The show just has this effect on people," R.S. says. "It manages to inspire a community around it."

Several bronies have clipped small figurines to their name tags or necklaces. Singley carries Trixie, a stuffed pony — known as a "plushie" — that his wife made for him. Katie Gardner, a 16-year-old high school student from Maryland, carries a custom-designed plushie nearly as tall as she is.

Collecting gear is a big part of "My Little Pony" fandom; this is a subculture that literally wears its heart on its sleeve. The majority of the bronies at this meet-up sport T-shirts featuring their favorite characters: Applejack, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Twilight Sparkle.

R.S. wears the gear to signal that he's into ponies, he says. When he's on campus, he'll meet other fans and maybe even receive "a random brohoof on the street," he says. (A brohoof is like a fist bump. A fist bump is like ... oh, forget it.)

There is no shortage of "My Little Pony" merchandise. This iteration of the show was devel-

oped, after all, by toy giant Hasbro to boost sales of its signature toy line. In fact, "My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic" first caught on when a Cartoon Brew article criticized it as the end of "the creator-driven era of TV animation." It quickly became an Internet phenomenon among those who read the article, watched the show and got hooked.

From "My Little Pony's" consumerist roots has sprung a creative revolution. Equestria Daily serves as a centralized news source, and other sites and networks have sprung up. YouTube is awash with remixes of pony songs, as well as the documentary "Ballad of the Brony" and a presentation on the physics of "My Little Pony."

At the meet-up, fans are hunting for Easter eggs, some of which contain tickets to a free raffle of T-shirts and figurines from Toys R Us. One brony struggles to comb the mane of his newly won Rainbow Dash toy. "I don't have a lot of experience doing this," he says. "I never thought I'd get a brushable."

Others cut out pieces of felt for a community art board of the District in springtime, complete with the Washington Monument, cherry blossoms and, of course, a herd of ponies. One pony rears up on its hind legs on top of the Capitol. The finished product will be part of the Traveling Pony Museum, which will begin at June's BronyCon — expected to draw about 2,000 people, says John Feulner, head of VIP relations at BronyCon — and will tour various meet-ups and conventions in the United States.

"We decided to do felt this time, because it would be a fun project that even people without art skills could do," says Gretchen Sprehe, 29, of Arlington. Gretchen, an artist working on an e-book to

document the brony movement, is the meet-up's crafts organizer. She considers herself a mother figure of sorts, because she is older than many of the bronies and because she is a natural leader.

But wait — girl bronies? Is that allowed?

"Brony" is unisex," she says.

Isn't there something a little weird about grown men playing with rainbow-hued ponies? Pamela Rutledge, director of the Media Psychology Research Center, doesn't think so. She says, "They're just a fan base revisiting childhood and some of the things they have left behind" — and, in some cases, the things they didn't get a chance to experience the first time around, such as brushing a pony's synthetic mane.

It's escapism in a positive way, she says: "It really is just different ways people have of fulfilling these very fundamental human needs."

For all his flamboyant pony shirts, R.S. has received surprisingly little flak. "I would've thought it was weird — I did think it was weird, when my friend first told me about it," R.S. says. "But no one cares." And if he ever did feel ostracized? He shrugs and spreads his hands. "Haters gonna hate, you know?"

At the end of the meet-up, the bronies gather in front of the library for a group picture. Passersby shoot them curious looks, but the bronies, with figurines and plushies in hand, pay them no mind. They've found the very love and acceptance the show promises. Friendship truly is magic.

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GO ONLINE See photos of the "bronies" event at washingtonpost.com/style.

Mixing her love of science with sweets

BAKER FROM C1

trial and error that is evident in her design of a cardiovascular stent (Ambrose holds a patent for the first Food and Drug Administration-approved carotid stenting device) is evident in her colorful macarons, which sit in mouth-watering rows in the Sweet Lobby's custom-designed cases.

Fascination with science

As a young girl, growing up in a middle-class family on the Caribbean island of Trinidad, Ambrose exhibited a highly motivated and ambitious nature. She always had a fascination with science, as well as an interest in languages.

"I knew from a fairly early age that there was this place called MIT, where you studied engineering, and you had to work really hard to get there. It was my goal from very early on." At that point in her life, she'd had little exposure to things culinary. "What I did do," she says happily, "was eat a lot of really tasty food."

At 19, she entered the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on scholarship, beginning a double major in chemical engineering and French language and literature. "So having this kind of dual mind-set is something I've been comfortable with for a long time," Ambrose says.

Almost immediately, she met fellow Trinidadian Ricardo Ambrose, a Computer Science major, and fell in love. They were married six days after graduation.

The food at MIT was ghastly, she says, so under Ricardo's direction — he was an accomplished cook — they began preparing and freezing a month's supply of meals. Soon, they were entertaining friends — he cooking the main courses, she the appetizers and desserts.

During a semester at the Sorbonne in Paris, Ambrose discovered French patisserie, particularly the macaron, that whimsically colored and filled almond meringue. Her admiration was based strictly looks — on a student budget, she couldn't afford them. Only years later would she taste one, but she was determined to learn how to make them.

'A global perspective'

It was after graduate school in the Biomedical Engineering Department at Johns Hopkins University when Ambrose began her methodical experimentation with making the technically precise macaron.

"It was about finding existing recipes, figuring out how to modify them and making them my own, combining my technical background with what I call a global perspective." She laughs and says, "A lot of trial and error, too."

Jennifer Elisseeff, Ambrose's adviser at Johns Hopkins, says that she was good at bringing different things together. "She

was the one to bridge all the people she had to work with. In science, you don't usually see people with such social skills," Elisseeff says.

After Ambrose obtained her doctorate in 2009 and eight months after accepting a job at the NIH's National Eye Institute, she decided the time had come to put her culinary ingenuity to the test and open a boutique bakery with her younger brother (and fellow MIT graduate), Timothy McIntosh. He moved to Capitol Hill, where Ambrose trained him in the techniques she had taught herself.

It took 10 months to convert a 100-year-old former hair salon to the sleek storefront that is the Sweet Lobby. Ambrose was involved in every detail, from the high-capacity commercial kitchen to the color palette. The boxes, labels, even the tags were hers from concept to creation.

Creativity in science can progress at a glacial pace. "I think that the gratification you get from the life in pastry is a lot more immediate. I can come in with an idea for something I think would be amazing today and see it tomorrow. There are loads of opportunities for being inventive in science — that's what it's all about — but knowing whether or not your inventiveness plays out to impact people is a very delayed process," Ambrose says.

Keeping both worlds aloft is a Herculean task. "It has segmented my life in two," she says. Until she won "Cupcake Wars," she never told anyone at NIH — not even her boss — about her "other" life at the Sweet Lobby.

"I feel that when you're in one sphere, it's important to focus on that sphere," she says. "Unnecessary distractions can detract from the integrity of what you're doing in that space."

But if she had to choose? "I really don't like thinking about it," she says, frowning. "Most of the time, I am at peace, but I would not be entirely truthful if I said I didn't feel conflict at times. But it's my choice." She smiles.

"At the end of the day, too, we have to be careful not to take ourselves too seriously." Because when you live in two worlds, every day cannot be a perfect day.

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MUSIC REVIEW

Few sparks from the Janus Trio at Atlas Center

BY STEPHEN BROOKES

The concert by the adventurous young Janus Trio at the Atlas Performing Arts Center on Thursday had all the makings of a high-voltage evening. The players — flutist Amanda Baker, Beth Meyers on viola and Nuiko Wadden on harp — are seasoned virtuosos and key players in New York's new-music scene, and the program was made up almost entirely of hip, new pieces from hip, young composers. Moreover, the Atlas may be the best place in town to get up close and personal with new music.

So why, then, was the evening such a dud?

Maybe it was the half-empty hall, which can dampen any group's mojo. Or it may have been the odd-slash-lofty thesis of the evening, which, as Baker explained, was to "explore the static of one's mind to discover what really exists" (a tricky game, as we know). But probably it was just the general sense, as the evening wore on, of self-involved music being played without much passion or discernible fire.

Angelica Negron's "Drawings for Meyoko," for example, opened promisingly with



DAWN WALSH/ARIEL ARTISTS

VIRTUOSOS: The players are seasoned, yet Thursday's show had little passion.

crumpling paper and an amplified banjo over a pulsing electronic track, but the trio played it so diffidently that you worried the musicians might fall asleep. Jason Treuting's "I Am Not (Blank)" followed and, while not entirely (blank), came pretty close: a work whose surface simplicity masked

an inner lack of powerful ideas. The group shook off its torpor in Barbara White's "Gather," providing the accompaniment to a grainy, jittery black-and-white film projected behind it, and the music was intriguing at first, both well crafted and full of life. But you got the point in a minute or two, and from then on, both music and film went round and round in circles, exploring the compulsive repetition of a meaningless task (you know: commentary on modern existence, et cetera) until the static in this particular mind began leaking out the ears.

Things did pick up after intermission; Martin Matalon's "For-

mas de Arena" was a wonderfully engaging work, full of colorful textures and an alert sense of purpose, and Wadden's superb, dancelike playing on the harp was a joy to hear. Paul Clift's "How Do You Express X?" had a compelling, otherworldly melancholy to it, and "New Gates" from the brilliant Kaija Saariaho provided some of the most sophisticated and imaginative music of the evening. Alas, it was too little, too late: The concert closed with a smattering of applause, a collective shrug and a hasty rush to the doors.

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