

# Turndevelt's Big Book of Forewords

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\*\*\*\*\* Dr. Lewis B. Turndevelt's Big Book of Forewords \*\*\*\*\*

## Preface

Let me begin by saying that I have a personal and moral objection against book introductions and prefaces. My reasons are numerous, but I will be focusing on just two for the purpose of this unfortunate, but publisher-mandated, preface.

The first is that the only reason they exist is to give would-be book buyers a convenient way to check over a book's contents before making a purchase. To the consumer, I'm sure that this seems like a good and reasonable thing to expect. After all, if someone is going to spend their hard-earned money on a stack of papers, they might like to have at least a false sense that somewhere in the middle of that stack is something of value and importance. Yes, I'm sure that the consumer does in fact feel this way.

Now let me tell you how I, the book author, feel. I think it's stealing. You stand around in the bookstore, killing time before you head off to your "real" entertainment for the evening, consisting of yet another regrettably awful Hollywood movie, and decide that you can at least browse over the preface of a book, hoping to find out what it is about, who this yahoo is that is writing it, and why can't they have comfortable chairs in this store anyway? So you, or someone that looks suspiciously like you, will read through the whole introduction, decide that the book is too complicated - too much English - and put it back on the shelf.

The reason I regard this as stealing is because it was my full intention for you to not realize this until well after you had purchased the book, taken it home, and cracked the spine of it so that the store wouldn't take it back. This was a very well thought out, highly involved tactical exercise on my part that was to all but eliminate the possibility of having this book returned. Additionally, my specific instructions have always been that the book should be constructed from the cheapest materials available, using bargain-basement quality glue as a page fastener; a fixative that would barely even hold up to the manhandling a book receives going through the checkout. This is a book you were meant to purchase and then be stuck with forever - "forever" actually meaning "in a loose pile inside the store's bag." In fact, I recall my initial conversation with my editor about how this book should be sold, which went a little something like this:

Me: Ted, I think the preface is a bad idea. I mean, you've read the book. It's sheer genius. Would you buy it if all you had a chance to read was a hastily thrown together preface, instead of the glorious prose inside?

Him (Ted): Well, I mean it's difficult to say. I haven't read the book. You were supposed to turn it in last week, what is taking so long? Plus, I would like to think that as a book editor I might be a little pickier about

that kind of...

Me: Just trust me that it is fantastic. And no, Ted, you're not. You're no pickier than the next person, who, unless someone else walks in here, happens to be me. You're a man that buys x-brand kitty litter simply to make a point. You've said so yourself. And to be honest, I'm not even sure what that point is supposed to be.

Him: I just don't think that you have to pay those outrageous, name brand prices just to get better clumping. When I scoop up those little balls of dried urine, they are perfectly clumped. You've seen them, I bring them in here all the time.

Me: Yes, we've all seen the clumps... But what I mean is that "picky" is never a word I would use in the same sentence as your name. Unless, of course, that sentence happened to be "I picky Teddy for my teamy."

Him: Cute, very cute. Are you done?

Me: "Does Teddy likey the drinke? Maybe he likey to picky another?"

Him: Alright, I think I see where this is headed, and it's actually pretty annoying...

Me: ...

Him: (squirting a leftover packet of ketchup into his mouth, since he is not picky enough to care about the contents of his afternoon snack)

Me: But as I was saying, prefaces are just really nasty and evil things. And superfluous too: the commencement speech of Satan. The public is over them, especially after all the mediocre ones that have come out the past few years. In fact, I told my mother that there might have to be a preface, and now she won't even read the book. Then she heard the same rumor from a friend, and is thinking about not inviting me home for Thanksgiving. My own mother, Ted! Do you see how a bad preface also makes the rest of my book look bad? The people are turning on us already.

Him: (still distracted and busy combining leftover packets of various origin into a buffet of condiments) Well yeah, they'll do that. The book is pretty bad; I think we can all agree on that. But you said the preface was a bad idea. There's nothing wrong with the preface, it's the pitiful excuse for a book that's the problem. The preface is fine.

Me: No, the book is the... What are you talking about? You just said you haven't read the book. Put down your ketchup for five seconds and listen to me! I haven't written the preface yet. I'm telling you this now because I don't want to write it.

Him: But they're actually very small things, these prefaces. I mean it's only going to be about this big (at which point he puts his thumb and index finger together to indicate the approximate thickness of your average preface). We can get a ghostwriter for it if that will make you feel better.

Me: No no, it's not just that... Look, I had an idea that I think will help the book sell much better. Since I have a feeling I'm going to lose the preface war, think about this idea: We should shrink-wrap the book.

Him: Excuse me?

Me: Shrink-wrap the thing, you know, like a CD, or a loaf of fancy bread. I think the cover actually looks pretty good, and if you can't tell that there is a preface you'd think that the insides should be ok too. So that's why I think we should shrink-wrap it, so that people don't know what's going on until after it's too late.

Him: Well, it's just that books aren't normally wrapped in anything. I mean, there are not too many people that will buy a book without being able to look at it first.

Me: Surely there are some that are shrink-wrapped?

Him: There are some gift-books, the kind that come in a box. Those are occasionally sealed up... Sometimes if there is a special promo item with the book, they'll shrink them together... I think some comic books may still come in those bags.... and most of your dirty magazines are in wrappers nowadays, so that's probably...

Me: See, now we're getting somewhere! Perhaps we could sell these at adult bookstores then? I mean it's kind of an adult item, since I don't foresee a lot of kids wanting to pick up something like this.

Him: Well, I don't think that's really the point... And fortunately we don't do a lot of business with those stores.

Me: Ted, we're trying to think outside of the box here. This is no time to be limiting ourselves. I mean, come on, are you kidding me? They're perfect! The convenient access from the interstate, the bright neon lights... These places are practically begging to take over the book market. All I'm saying is that we need to be developing core marketing strategies that are inclusive and not exclusive. Adult bookstores. Just live with the idea for a while, that's all I ask.

The conversation kept going like that, well on into the next day. We stopped for dinner and the occasional bathroom break, but mainly we spent our time weighing the pros and cons of shrink-wrapping the book, and also of including a book preface. As you can see, I lost that battle, and I'm more than a little bitter about it.

The second reason that I hate prefaces is that there are too many of them out there in the world already. And what is a preface anyway? It can't be anything of real importance, because if it was, wouldn't they - you know, "they" - have just put it in the body of the book to begin with? Why the special section for extraneous material? So it must be stuck up there at the front for no good reason. Well, if it's just a little extra padding to round out your book, does it really even matter what the preface is or says? No. Heck no, even! For this reason I would like to propose that from now on publishers just recycle prefaces from other books into new works they have coming out. Think of the time and money that would be saved by recycling, by giving back to the world what was already theirs. With that goal in mind, I would like to start the trend by declaring this particular preface is made up of no less than 68% post-consumer preface waste. In fact, all of the words that you read on this page have been used before in other publications, as well as many of the phrases and sayings. Some might call this style of writing "tired" and "lazy," or perhaps even "stealing," but I prefer to think of it as "frugal" and "efficient." I think my choice of words puts a more positive spin on the whole affair.

It would be both easier and more practical to develop this idea further into a working trend for all books. And I guarantee you that nine times out of ten neither you nor I would really even notice the difference. Have you ever read the original preface to *The Art Of War*? Well... actually, I haven't either, but I can pretty much guarantee you that if there is one, it is much more interesting, and informative, than this is turning out to be. Just imagine with me how much better off we all would have been if I had only lifted that neglected preface from the annals of history and stuck it right down, smack dab at the front of my own book. The acidic tone of my rambling would have been avoided, and perhaps we could have learned a little something about strategic positioning for surprise attacks on an enemy compound. We all would have felt pretty good about that, wouldn't we? Indeed we would have. And for those that did pick up on the lifting, they could just consider it getting a bonus. Nothing lost, and a little something extra gained. Like the free prize at the bottom of the box of cereal, or the fruit nestled at the bottom of a cup of yogurt. There is supposed to be fruit at the bottom, isn't there?

So in summary, I ask you... No, I beg you, shamelessly and beautifully as men are supposed to beg, that you

petition your local book publishers of choice and demand that they quit wasting our precious time and their precious resources by having people write new book introductions and prefaces. What's wrong with the old ones? And again I say, nothing. Nothing at all. But forewords, now those are another matter entirely...

\*\*\*\*\* Section 1: The Preamble \*\*\*\*\*

## Introduction

If we open up our Bibles to the book of Ecclesiastes, and scan down to the beginning of the third chapter, we find the familiar passage "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance." It kind of keeps on going like that for a little while longer, but you get the basic gist of it. There's a time for everything, and consequently, a need for everything. Lately, I have been missing out on a few of those things.

It's getting about that time. No no, not the time to kill... Right now I'm feeling that it's time for a break, time for a rest. For the past several years I have been dedicating myself to writing book forewords to everything from amateur moose-hunting guides to children's coloring books. Years. Sixteen long years, to be exact. It's quite a long time (and if you don't believe me, just wait around for sixteen years and see how long it takes), and it's now the perfect opportunity to take a break, stretch my legs and go outside to see what the world has to offer. So I plan on doing just that.

For the next year it will be a time to relax and enjoy, and a time for me to take a much-needed vacation. Where am I going? What will I be doing? Well, that's really none of your business, now is it? No, I should think not. Suffice it to say that where I'm going the ground will be cleaner, the fresh mountain spring water will be purer, and the sweet candy that the kiddies enjoy so much is available at the everyday low prices that you've come to expect. Or at least that's the trip to the snacks aisle at the local convenience store that I will be making before I leave on vacation.

But regardless of how much you insist on prying into my personal life, I still wanted to extend the courtesy of letting you know that I will soon be quite out of pocket. So much so that I am leaving behind this collection of book forewords, to be used in the event that one is needed and I am not around to hand-deliver it personally. They range in topic from niche cookbooks to pseudo-scientific journals. And somewhere in the middle of all that, you will find me, offering up support and adding my name as credibility to these otherwise doomed ventures. Not to say that they're all bad ideas, necessarily. In fact, a couple of them might make more than adequate reading while stuck in a traffic standstill on the expressway - the irony of which should not be lost on anyone.

But in the event of my untimely demise while traipsing through the jungles of the Amazon, or hiking up the treacherous peaks of Everest, or whatever it is that I'll be doing, I bequeath to the world my ultimate labor of love: book forewords to anything that might possibly come along. With some noteworthy exceptions, many of the books referenced herein have not actually been written - and we should all start praying right now that they never will be - but given the current literary climate, it seems to be an inevitable fact that not only will these books indeed be written, but they will subsequently be printed, distributed and marketed to the literate peoples of the free world. And once again, I blame democracy for allowing this to happen.

But I'm not here to point out the shortcomings of these works, or even to giggle and snicker at the very idea of the books themselves. No, I have a job to do, and that job is to simply write the forewords. Someone has to do it, and I'm the best that there is, so it therefore makes perfect sense that regardless of the quality of the main body of text they would still require a consummate professional to come in and wave a little magic over the beginning, in a desperate, last-ditch effort to save the book from itself. But my job is definitely not to critique

and ridicule these worthless piles of wood pulp, so I will refrain. And I'll do it honorably and with great reserves of dignity.

With that thought, my work here is done, and I am off to enjoy the fruits of my labor. I plan on becoming tan, rested and pampered. And the rest of you? What will you be doing? Well, I hope you are able to kill a few minutes of time with this book, while you are either waiting in the lobby of your family doctor to get that rash attended to, or perhaps while you are tragically stuck between floors in an elevator with a large, hairy man that considers patchouli a viable alternative to bathing. Regardless of what you're doing, I wish you well. And I in turn wish me the best of luck as I stretch out on the sunny beach of some clear-watered tropical paradise with a tall, cold beverage that I might be talked into enjoying; either that or hiking through the lush foliage on the side of a misty mountain at daybreak, where the only sound to be heard is that of my camera's shutter.

To every thing there is a season. And for every season there is a special vacation getaway package with great low fares.

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#### About The Author Or "A Detailed Answer To All Your Questions"

I've always found it interesting that books will routinely include an about the author section towards the very last page. So only after having finished reading an entire manuscript would the owner of a book want to know whom they've been listening to this whole time? Odd. An author's background and pedigree should be of casual interest to the fiction reader, and of tantamount importance to the non. And on a purely self-indulgent note, I want you to know as much about me as possible before we get going. I'm a fascinating and eccentric figure with whimsically colorful stories to tell. And I enjoy soup.

However, book foreword authors occupy a rather unique position in the greater world. For years I'm sure you've seen my name marquee'd at the bottom of book covers. It's not the first thing to grab your eye, but once you've discovered its presence you are ushered into a state of calm, bland serenity. And why not, because as far as book foreword authors go, I suppose I'm as recognized as any. And while it's not the most high profile of professions, it's not without its share of curious celebrity.

Perhaps exaggerated stories of the lavish lifestyles we foreword writers lead have become too prevalent. Tales of gold-plated bidets that spout champagne; urban legends of wardrobes made from nothing but sloth hides; rumors floating around the schoolyard about the house up on the hill owned by a madman who has built his own time machine from discarded engines off '68 Cobra Jet Mustangs. Well, I won't deny them as false - primarily because they're more exciting than the truth, and good stories should live on - but it does hit at the double-edged blessing and curse of the trade. Foreword writers are just famous enough to be misunderstood oddities, but not obscure enough to just be left alone.

I hope this new book will help to straighten out and clean up that mess. I fully expect that once people have the opportunity to experience the power and grace of a whole collection of forewords, instead of just the random one here and there, that this misunderstood but necessary art form will finally be thrust into the limelight of public conscience to be scrutinized and defined and appreciated once and for all. I'm also glad that I can be the catalyst for this change. I am willing to give up my own personal privacy to the benefit of this greater good. I am sure that at first the constant interviews and media attention will feel strangely narcissistic and pretentious... but I'll get over it. It's a small sacrifice to make in order to receive so much understanding from the world.

But once people have come to terms with the what and why of forewords, they will eventually get down to the who. Who are these writers? And more importantly, who am I? Who do I think that I am? Who has written treatises on who I probably think that I am? Who further has editorialized those treatises with the so forth and

the so on? These are all excellent questions.

Instead of answering them directly - please, let me keep a shred of mystery for the media hounds to sniff out - I would like to give you the brief synopsis of my literary journey, told not through lyric prose but instead through the broken stuttering of the common man.

1962. It was a harsh winter in South Carolina. However, seeing as I lived in South Dakota, I only gave it a casual thought. Personally, I've always been of the opinion that once a country has so many states that you have to further break them up into geographical namesakes, well, that's just too much of a good thing. But still geography intrigued me as far as I needed it to, and being a fellow "Southerner" I was busy keeping up with the regional home of my favorite author, Jesse L. Butterfield. As a young lad I would spend hours and hours during that and many other snowbound weekends poring over Butterfield's work. They were rich and satisfying crime novels. And there were only two of them. And I was not the best reader in school. But these books captivated me, each centered on the small town dealings of an honorable cop in the corrupt, seedy underbelly of rural South Carolina. His tales were populated with interesting and bizarrely idiosyncratic characters (read: suspects), all with sinister motives, and all spouting severely flamboyant backwoods Southern-isms, such as "You'uns coppers t'aint ne'er gonna step foot one on my property, no how!"

So I guess you could say that reading that sentence is what made me decide to become a writer. But I didn't just rush right into it. No sir, that's not how things are done in South Dakota. In fact, I purposefully decided to wait many years until just the right time to begin honing my craft, and in the meantime determined that it was best to simply begin building life experiences about which to later novelize. In fact, I made a list of things that seemed to be essential fodder for book writing, for quaint and nostalgic flashbacks, and planned out the next few years of my life in order to fit them all in and keep myself on a schedule. Some of the many activities that I willingly took part in for the sake of the greater literary good included: 1. A traumatic and short-lived career in little league baseball, complete with catching my first and only centerfield fly ball with my head. 2. A science experiment gone horribly wrong that culminated in a brief expulsion from school, and afflicted my lab partner with a lazy eye. 3. Letting two friends talk me into throwing rocks at passing cars, one of which turned out to be my Mom's. 4. An awkward first kiss behind the gym at school, interrupted by her swiftly moving hand to my cheek, followed by the words "I said 'no', now leave me alone." 5. Whining for five weeks about how I simply had to have the latest fad tennis shoes, only to realize just two years later how utterly ridiculous they really looked. 6. Sneaking out, again with the same two friends, to attend my first rock concert at the downtown municipal auditorium. I ended up having to secretly soak my clothes after the experience, as the smell of "liberation" would have been too strong to explain to the parental units come laundry day. 7. Smoking my first cigarette. 8. Getting sick in front of a girl I had a crush on after smoking my first cigarette. 9. Skipping school, again with the same two friends (those knuckleheads... whatever happened to Ronnie and Merv, anyhow?), only to realize that all the rest of our friends were still back in class and we didn't have a car, so we walked down to the movie theater and caught a matinee of... I don't remember what it was, something about aliens living among us. It wasn't nearly as good as it sounds. 10. Getting in a fight with an older boy, that had obviously been in fights before, and losing badly. Then later explaining to my Mom why my lip was busted and swollen by making up some story about trying to "show off in front of the cute girls hanging outside the cafeteria. Boy, I learned never to do that again..." Yes, even back then I was beginning to hone my skills as a storyteller.

By the time I was ready to go to college, I had managed to check off most of the things on my life experience list. I felt able and ready to get this degree thing that would help propel me into the fast-paced world of writing. I opted for a Bachelor of Arts degree with an emphasis in journalism, because much to my dismay, they did not offer an emphasis in novel writing. But I was still excited, because hey, journalism can be fun too, right?

Sadly, no, it can't. I was to find that out the hard way after taking my first job out of school as a writer for the local paper. Keeping in mind that I was still in South Dakota. And I was working at a local paper. In South

Dakota. At this point, many writers would begin describing to you, with an excruciating amount of adverbs and adjectives, exactly how and why this scenario might not have been exciting. But as is the case with most adverbs, that's unnecessary. It takes up my time and tries your patience. All I really need to do is re-emphasize the words "local paper" and "South Dakota." I rest my case.

But I persevered. I made the best of a tedious situation, took a little creative liberty, and actually learned a few things that would benefit me later down the road. For example, when you're writing news articles, or any material based on current events or other "facts," you find yourself in the habit of doing a lot of research. Frantic, coffee-fueled research. A wise older writer explained the tricks of the trade to me that you don't have to read a whole article to pick up background information. Simply scan the first and last two paragraphs of said article and mentally fill in the blanks for the rest. Sometimes it's not even necessary to do that much. Also, it's typically a good idea to generalize your sources instead of naming them specifically. "A reliable source" is much more difficult to verify and/or refute than is "Deputy Sheriff Scotty Lochs." (I'd like to pause for just a moment here and address any of the youth that might be reading. Students: the techniques and shortcuts described in this paragraph are not to be taken and applied to schoolwork. Research on term papers and bug collections is of critical importance to your educational career. You are our future, as difficult as that is for both of us to swallow. Stay in school. Your pal, Lewis.)

So write, write, write on the local paper continued for a couple years there in South Dakota. Eventually I decided that I had learned all I could about school board meetings and highway expansion. It was time to move onward and upward to the Big City. No more small town soup and salad, I was ready for the main course. A buffet of opportunities awaited my arrival in the hustle and bustle of the metropolis. A veritable smorgasbord of options was available to me. So I did what any small fry of a newspaper writer fresh out of the sticks would do when the world is their oyster: I starved.

Turns out that for some reason they didn't need my expertise in.... well, anything. They pretty much had most things covered. I lived on various and exotic varieties of bologna and managed to scrape by cleaning up at the dog tracks (after the dogs, that is). One of my coworkers, an out of work transvestite party clown by the name of "Whistling Trixie," actually got me my first foreword assignment. I remember the day well, as Trixie walked up with a shovel in one hand and the hem of his dress in the other and said, "Shhh-ugar, didn't you tell me that you was a writer?" all the while pursing his lips as if a rubber band was keeping them tightly together. I stared silently at his latest outfit for the better part of half a minute because I couldn't even comprehend how it came to be an actual outfit that someone would wear. Fishnet stockings on top of ripped pantyhose underneath a pink party dress, complementing a leather bikers jacket with 'Road Queen' beaded on the back. It was almost as if a flea market exploded and smothered the poor man... woman... or party clown. I finally tore my eyes away long enough to manage, "I'm sorry, what did you say? I couldn't help but stare at your ridiculous clothes."

"Oh stop it, you tease," he whistled, apparently thinking that we were always playfully going on this way. "I have this friend that needs a little help with her book on makeup for the modern woman, you see? And I told her, I said 'There's a guy scooping poop with me at the factory that does some writing!'" (Trixie was always referring to the dog track as "the factory," not simply as a reference to the industrious evacuation of our particular canines, but I suspect also as an effort to imbue our plight with more masculine undertones, which suited him/her just fine.)

This friend of Trixie's, the one writing this book about makeup for the modern woman, was also neither modern nor a woman. Nor was (s)he doing much writing. So the previous request for "help" was a touch misleading, but I'm always up for a challenge. I pride myself in being a versatile writer with an array of styles from which to pull. And given the fact that I had seen lots of magazine advertisements for different types of makeup, I decided to give it a shot. Two weeks and five eyebrow pencils later we had finished the book: I, the ghostwriter, and Maxine - or Max for short - providing the important role of makeup tester.

At some point during the photo shoot phase, Max pointed out that we should really have a foreword to the book, explaining the importance of makeup to the modern woman. I thought this sounded like a reasonable idea, because since the book was indeed about makeup for the modern woman... well, it just made sense. And really when he mentioned that "we" should have a foreword, that of course meant my putting one together. I used my own name, because to be perfectly frank, it was a very good foreword. I challenge anyone to find a better foreword to a book about makeup for the modern woman.

That book went on to sell over five copies, one of which made its way into the hands of my current agent, who still claims that he purchased it for his aunt. The rest, of course, is history, primarily because it also happened in the past.

Since then I have written well over three filing cabinets full of book forewords, with more work in the wings. It's funny how life can pull a detour sign out from behind its back and send you down a two-lane country road in the middle of nowhere. But I really can't complain. Oh, I've still never been able to finish that novel I started - the one about aliens living among us, intended to fix some of the problems with the movie we saw as teenagers - but there's always a desire to make room for a good story.

But forewords are why we're all here today. There have been other prominent writers in the field - Fizzlepot and Cranwreath come to mind, usually as the result of heartburn - but it is my hope that my work in this collection will finally get the art form out of its infancy and up walking around and bumping into coffee tables. The coffee tables, of course, that I'm sure will all be holding copies of this book, as well as remote controls for flipping between television channels of the many late-night shows featuring an appearance by yours truly describing the bizarre story of how I owe my career to a cross-dressing dog track janitor party clown in leather.

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#### Foreword By Lord Byron S. Fizzlepot, III

It has been said that to be successful at anything, you must first sacrifice everything. I don't quite remember who said that, or really even precisely what they were getting at, but it is a quote that has stuck with me for many years, and I have always wanted to use it at the beginning of a foreword. So there you have it.

They're peculiar things, these forewords. You would think that it would be an easy affair to preface a book that has already been written. The main work is already done, so someone must simply go in and gush knowingly about either the brilliance of the author or the importance of the subject. It's like giving a toast at a wedding reception: it's not a time to freely speak your mind, or even necessarily to be honest, but rather it is your duty at that time and in that particular instance to smile, go through the motions, and praise the magnificence of the whole event. Oftentimes you are being sincere. But occasionally you can already feel the slime collecting on your skin.

Such is the predicament of anyone seeking to make their mark in the literary world by adding tag-alongs to other people's books. Is it enjoyable work? Oh, occasionally. Is it honest work? I suppose you could do worse. But like anything else, it's a business, and as such it requires a certain amount of thick skin and flexible conscience. Many times a foreword is written as a personal favor to the author, say from a trusted friend or colleague. But just as often, whether due to impending deadlines or a momentary lapse of judgment, there is a need to pull out the big guns and bring in a professional to get the job done quickly and skillfully. Either that or you find yourself with an author that has no friends or colleagues.

Which brings us to Dr. Turndevelt. How he fits into any of the above equation, I'm not quite sure. He is prolific. And he is seasoned, I'll give him that much. But other than that, I haven't the foggiest of ideas why anyone would either need or request his services for anything. Is he a good writer? I'm sure he is perfectly



capable of jotting down a post-it note list of sundries to pick up from the market. But as far as sheer literary abilities go... well, let's just say that some have called him the fast-food value meal of the book world. (Actually, I said that, but I'm sure others have thought it as well... especially after I tell them as much at dinner parties.) And it is my personal guess that his title of "Dr." is nothing more than a bizarre abbreviation for a first name. Perhaps Darius or Darren? I haven't quite decided. But it is due to nothing more than dumb luck that he has been allowed to enjoy the career that he has.

I remember a time when mine was the only name in town to know when a quick and/or vaguely important-looking book foreword was needed. I was on the short list of all the major publishers, as well as more than my fair share of fledgling startups. Actually, I was the list. For the better part of seventeen years I spent week after tedious workweek penning short and shockingly similar forewords to whatever book projects were thrown my way. It was monotonous, menial work. But it was work. Fortunately, times are different now. After doing time, as it were, I slowly but steadily built up enough contacts that someone was finally willing to take a chance on my pet project, my one true literary love: an annotated history of the drinking straw from 1888-1937. But it wasn't until my breakout book, *It Sucks: The Birth of the Modern Drinking Straw*, that I was finally able to leave forewords behind as a means of primary income.

But since someone has to do it, they went out and found another someone. They must not have looked very hard, but deadlines are just that. Oh sure, Turndevelt had been around for years, but references to his name in those days were generally followed by the phrase, "and I hear he's out of rehab now." So although I never meant to, I guess you could say that I inadvertently passed on the torch to Dr. Turndevelt. But where once the torch was a bellowing furnace of literary heat and fury, it has now dwindled to a disposable lighter with a filthy saying on its case that you might find at a truck stop (and this is in no way meant to cast any ill light upon truck stops, but you have to admit that they seem to be the only retail outlets that buy these items in bulk).

I wish him the best. This mighty task is not without its share of toil and heartache, but it can also occasionally provide the warm embrace of satisfaction. But I fear for the profession as a whole. Have we allowed the art to become watered down to the point where it's acceptable for the first thing you see inside a book cover to be a crude foreword that somehow tries to find it's humor by quoting a bumper sticker? Perhaps we have. And I throw the blame for this squarely on someone else's shoulders, because I have moved on.

Dr. Turndevelt, I wish you well. May your forewords be long and generous, and may the books they accompany shed new light on all manner of Southern cuisine, lawnmower repair, and the history of plastic surgery. May your rambling thoughts and meandering anecdotes be sutured up by some well-meaning editor who is most definitely underpaid and underappreciated. Continually strive to surround yourself with an elaborate support system of researchers, managers and others who can keep your backside safely away from the fire. Forewords are not particularly tricky business, but I'm sure you will do your best to make them appear that way.

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Re: Foreword By Elliott L. Cranwreath

I am a friendly and caring man. I have six cats, three pigeons, twelve pet mice and fourteen cousins - if you take into account several distant family members that I have only had the occasion to meet at infrequent, reunion-oriented gatherings - and none of them receive beatings by me, and in turn none of them has tried, successfully anyway, to eat one of the other members of this group. So I pride myself in an overall civility that governs my actions, and a more often than not functioning moral compass that renders the thought of incivility detestable in most circumstances. Therefore, it is with the greatest of restraint that I feel compelled to voice my opinions on the somewhat sad occasion of not being selected to write the foreword to this book. As a personal favor from the author I have been given this space to express concern with this decision, and to

hopefully avoid a similar occurrence in future works. As such, I am not being paid, which I feel affords me the liberty to properly speak my mind on the matter without filtering it down to placate some with the checkbook and others with the editorial pen. With that said, I would like to "dive right in" as the youngsters are saying these days - or at least they were, the last time I bothered to check in with them - to the subject at hand.

I am, by trade, a writer. A bloody good one at that, if I might be allowed the opportunity to toot my own whistle, as it were. I have been scribbling pen on paper for the better part of thirty years, and the worse part of twelve. I wouldn't so much say that I have a niche in the writing world, as I aim to excel at whatever the task at hand happens to be (the ones that help pay for the more expensive bottles of scotch that are the staple of any good writer. These are items which I might not normally be able to afford, at times leaving me with the cheaper, two-month-aged substitutes that hardly seem worth the effort to portion, although that has never stopped me before... but I do digress). I guess if one were to weigh, and I do mean that in the literal sense, the various types of vignettes and treatises that I have penned over the years, one might be justified in saying that the overall winner, in terms of word volume and weight in kilos, would have to be ceded to that of forewords to books. I would have to go back and actually count them all in order to give you a number with any amount of certainty, but if I had to guess I would put them somewhere in the five hundred range. This may seem like a grand amount to the uninitiated, but the sheer volume of romance novels that are written every year would alone keep someone like me in business indefinitely. Granted, I am not usually asked to preface anything that refined, but I think the example gets the point across.

But what I'm trying to say is that I am a professional at this sort of thing. I've done it before and I'll bloody well do it again. I can sculpt a deep, thoughtful foreword on grave matters of the day. I can crank out cheap, disposable forewords as quick as you please. It's as natural to me as saying, "Yes, I'd love another." Indeed, I even write forewords in my sleep nowadays, which to be perfectly honest yields some rather cheeky results. It's madness and exuberance all at once. In fact, I now prefer to not even read what I am discussing. I feel that it cheapens the art and dulls the spontaneity of the text. It should be fresh enough to eat, but just salty enough that it can keep for a while if necessary. In fact, I dare say that there is a science, or a tried and true system, to the whole thing that is regrettably formulaic but nevertheless necessary to properly introduce something. Or anything. It could be a cookbook devoted to leeks and barley, a pictorial essay on leaf blowing, or even a novella based on a made for television movie. It doesn't matter, and speaking from experience on all three examples it shouldn't matter. A foreword is a foreword is a foreword. In fact, even though I pride myself in being an expert foreword writer, I will also admit that I've recycled myself on occasion. They're spaced out, of course, so that their preponderance is not obvious. And you'd be surprised at how well a foreword to a murder-romance novel can be resurrected verbatim into a handbook for beginning yoga. It's frightfully easy. In fact, just the other day I was writing a rather charming, although unsolicited, foreword to a presidential biography, for whenever the need might present itself, and I was struck with how well it might also work in a study of 19th-century breakthroughs in horticulture. It's uncanny, this perverted circle of life that sometimes waves at you from across the pub. "Hello there," it might say, pint raised to either signal a greeting or the need for a replacement.

So imagine my horror... no, "horror" is much too bland a word for this discussion... imagine my sudden incontinence at the discovery that not only had I been overlooked to provide the foreword for this book, but the second slap in the face upon realizing that the honor had instead gone to none other than Lord Byron S. Stinkypants, XXIV. I understand the good Dr. wanting to "bury the hatchet" - in a symbolic sense, mind you - with his former arch-rival by giving him the honor of writing a foreword to his forewords book, but let us move on and forget this man who has been a boil on our backside for far too long. Please do not misunderstand, I have no quarrels with "Loud Bryan" in matters to which he is obviously more experienced - pruning comes to mind - but I feel that it is simple negligence on someone's part that he is in any way considered more of an expert in this field than am I. In fact, to be perfectly honest with you, his having left the field of foreword writing to pursue his "art" was generally met with loud and boisterous parties throughout the publishing industry. "Good Riddance" was, I believe, the slogan for that year. Not to mention that you

generally want someone competent to pen a word or two for you. And when dealing with the foreword to an important anthology of the genre, and a work of sheer finesse and brilliance such as this one - or at least I assume; I haven't actually read the book in question but this is an example of something I might say if I wished to appear that I had - I don't think that is too much to demand.

I feel certain that the obvious error - and perhaps slight to me personally, although I will try to refrain from delving into that line of reasoning - for this whole predicament lies squarely in the untrained, gnarled and deformed hands of whatever cockney editor was put in charge of this book. The mad, hungry ogre and his band of flatulent trolls... It's incomprehensible that anyone with half a brain stem would have allowed this travesty to take place. When I think about the demented fools that must crawl to their workstations only long enough to coat their desktop with a fresh layer of drool, I can only weep at the insanity that must crush their souls, and pray for their sterility. I happen to be quite good friends with the author of this book, or we were at least mentioned in the same quarterly once, and I must advise him as a friend to quickly and efficiently terminate his editor's life support system - since I would assume that an error of this magnitude could only be performed by a person that has been comatose for some time - before he is given the ability and/or authority to wreck this otherwise perfect and blameless literary masterpiece. (Yes... sometimes I amaze even myself with how good I am at these sorts of things.)

But since I have been graciously given this platform to voice my concern at this dirty whore of a mistake, I suppose I can't be too harsh. Many younger and less secure writers than myself might have taken this opportunity to verbally attack the situation and those involved in it. Personally, I think that's just tacky. It lacks taste, which I have in spades. Refinement. And today is too beautiful and life is too short to be consumed with who did what and this or that editor that should be carved up and served to wild dogs. In fact, I wish him well. I can only honestly hope that this misunderstanding will go unnoticed by the general populace and that riots don't break out in the streets, resulting in trash cans and telephone booths being thrown through no particular editor's window on the first floor of a publishing firm that should probably remain anonymous, due to the fact that mail-bombs and death threats seem to be more common these days. No, I'm sure nothing of that sort will come to pass. After all, forewords are rather trivial things if you really think about them. Nothing more than an opening slot at a concert. No one's really there for them anyway, except to maybe encourage them ever so civilly to let the main act have a go at the stage.

But I try not to go through life with too many regrets. It's only natural to hope that some opportunities will in fact pass you by. There are only so many hours in the day that a foreword writer can keep writing them without having to run to the store for another bottle of scotch. So perhaps I have said enough already. It is getting late, isn't it? I don't see my jacket anywhere... should still be in the parlor, I suppose... well, no matter.

In closing, I feel that, despite the lack of a proper foreword, one can still derive a small portion of enjoyment from this excruciatingly wonderful book. I know I might have done so myself.

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Endorsement by Robert Q. Finley Interim-President, Mid-Southwestern Kentucky Book Nook Club

It is indeed an honor to be able to endorse a book such as this. When we, the Mid-Southwestern Kentucky Book Nook Club, first heard rumor of it's being in the works, well, let's just say that we promptly postponed our meeting that evening to find out what, if any, information we could dig up on the good old Internet regarding the book's contents. I remember that on that particular evening we were scheduled to discuss the eighth chapter of some John Steinbeck novel, and frankly this particular series of discussions had become a bore. Many of us - well, actually everyone except Glenda, who recommended the book, and which is not her real name by the way - had found this particular book to be quite the snoozer. In fact, I can't even recall which title it was, as we never really felt the urge to continue on after this break. I know I speak for at least myself, Elizabeth, the Gibsons, Samuel Jr. and Stan and Fran H. when I say that much of the group soon remembered

why it hadn't read any Steinbeck since high school. It's dreadfully taxing and depressing, and actually caused us to lose three members during that short time. Since we really can't afford to lose any members, it was decided by a simple majority vote that Glenda no longer has any say in books that are proposed for discussion.

So news of this book was not only a welcome diversion to our club drudgery, but also an exciting highpoint for the entire year, especially since we had declared it the "Year of the Southern Author." And although this particular author isn't necessarily Southern by either birthplace or current residence, he has publicly admitted to enjoying sweet tea, and in the end we decided that was probably close enough.

Also, many of us had the occasion to meet the author in person. It was at a book signing in St. Louis, which was in support of his first effort, Dr. Lewis B. Turndevelt's Big Book of Bibliographies. And although St. Louis is not actually in the immediate Mid-Southwestern Kentucky area, it still seemed close enough to justify a road trip with some of our group. After all, how often do opportunities like this come along? Not everyday, unfortunately. The signing turned out to be a wonderful success, and we all immensely enjoyed our little excursion. I am now the lucky owner of a signed first-edition debut, which will not - I repeat, NOT! - be removed from its protective Mylar sleeve for any reason.

With such fond memories of the trip, I was wondering how our little group could become involved in and show support of the new book. The usual fliers around our local independent bookstore and incendiary, anonymous letters to the editor of the newspaper didn't quite seem to be enough for a book of this stature. We wracked our brains for several hours during one particular meeting and still came up with nothing. Finally, when we were nearing the end of our rope of ideas, a voice from the back said, "Why don't we ask to write a foreword to the book?" It was perhaps the most half-baked idea we had heard all evening, but it was the last thing to be mentioned, so we decided to give it a shot. Personally, I had my doubts that forewords were even used for the type of books he normally writes, but I must admit that I was a little bit giddy just entertaining the thought of being involved in some way. What an opportunity if we could somehow make it work!

Well, I soon pulled out the ole quill and ink and began fashioning a letter to the author suggesting our willing proposal. I think my main selling point was, "with the involvement of our organization, it is sure to bring some celebrity to the region and in turn make the book a hit throughout Mid-Southwestern Kentucky." I sent the letter off and waited for what seemed like years, but was actually only seven weeks and five days. The returning envelope had an antiqued parchment look and felt very thick. Professional, I guess is how it seemed. I feared for the response, knowing that the odds of rejection were quite high. Our club treasurer, who happens to be a part-time accountant and quite good with numbers, put them at something like 1,038,597 to 1. But I was undaunted, knowing that our motives were pure and that an author that could write such endearing prose could not possibly have a completely calloused ear. I felt that there was nothing to lose, so I carefully steamed open the envelope - which I have also saved for posterity - and began reading the response. The author graciously thanked us for our interest in the book and said that although there was no need for an additional "foreword, per se" - those are his words, and I have the letter in its own protective Mylar sleeve to prove it. "Per Se." How French! - that he would still be glad to include an endorsement from our group in the book itself!

So that is where we are right now. And let's get right to it, shall we? At the current time I have no idea what the book will be about. If I had to guess, and if my colleagues on the author's Usenet group are correct with their wild and varied but nonetheless persistent speculations, it is quite possible that it will involve a Brazilian drug czar of some sort, and a bizarre chain of events that sets the fragile ecosystem of that country on its head. Or at least I certainly hope so. Either that or a gripping romance novel set during the Civil War that involves a dying Confederate soldier trying to come to grips with a war against his fellow countrymen. Some of the other guesses that I have heard have been little more than attempts to turn the book into an exposé on government scandals and conspiracy theories that reach right on up to the White House and beyond. Chances are good that it will not be another book about bibliographies - or another glorious book about heart-breaking bibliographies, and true love! But it can be dangerous to speak for another, and even now I fear for my life.

All that to say, buy the book.

Regardless of the book's subject matter, I would like to propose to the people of this great land of ours that this would be an excellent time to start up a book discussion group within your area or social group. As the members of the Mid-Southwestern Kentucky Book Nook Club can attest, it has certainly altered our complete perspective on life, in everything from breakfast cereals to disputes over dry cleaning bills. There is a certain harnessing of large, unused portions of the brain that quickly become engorged with knowledge and insight once one becomes sucked into stimulating thought over a well-written book. There are so many advantages that I couldn't possibly begin to name them all. Suffice it to say that you would be a complete moron to not at least try it out for yourself. Grab a book, any book, and sit down with some random strangers, who will soon become your closest confidantes.

No one should have to wander through the wilderness of book discussions alone. Sometimes it can be very beneficial to have some initial questions prepared to spur on more enlightened dialogue. Depending on what you are studying, there may already be wonderful resources available to you from brilliant minds that have picked apart and bled the very life out of some of the most popular books from throughout the centuries. I highly suggest that you invest in some or all of these to help you along the way.

In the event that there are not supplemental materials available for your chosen title, don't fret. There are vast amounts of undocumented but otherwise lengthy dissertations on books of various types available on the Internet, with new ones popping up every day. But perhaps you are researching a brand new book. You're a pioneer, alone out on the wild tundra of the literary world. Never fear. I have prepared a few generic questions that should help you along. Even though we do not yet know the subject of this book, there are certain key questions that you should store away for whatever book you are reading. Use these as a starting point for your own enlightening discussions: 1. What are the key trigger events behind the main character's repressed homosexuality? 2. What is the author trying to show us about racial injustice in our modern world? 3. Describe in one hundred words or less how the dialogue, or lack thereof, contributed to the overall tone of silence that is inferred between chapter breaks. 4. Why? 5. What about the little children? And when? 6. How far have you read? Are you enjoying it?

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#### Interjection By The Editor

Standards. That's what we need around here. Big, scary standards that are etched into the base of a gigantic stone monument that stares you down as you walk through the entrance to our building. A monstrous hunk of chiseled granite, perhaps in the shape of an eagle, or a greek god, or even the Queen Mother herself that would hold forth our stated aims and unwavering principles for all to see. The talons, or arms, as the case may be, would hold the top of a seemingly endless scroll that slithers down the entire length of the statue, becoming one with the very floor tiling itself to list out everything that we've ever thought, decreed, or even joked about during the course of our business. Nothing should be left out.

Yes, standards are what we need. I, all of a sudden, realize this great need for standards because it would appear as if we have allowed them to slip as of late. As a publishing house, there are things that we do, things that we won't do, and things that we couldn't do even if we wanted very badly for them to be done. We have been in business for over thirteen years, and in that time have devoted ourselves to one thing: making books. We make books and that's all we do. And we do it well, I might add. Just a glance over the trophy cabinet near the executive washroom - just a glance mind you, as to stare any longer at the sheer blinding brilliance of a well-polished faux gold leaf bookend is enough to make even the most seasoned awards viewer avert his gaze in hopes of finding a more dull-finished honorable mention plaque at the bottom - well, is quite enough, frankly. But we have evidence of having published a successful book or three in our day.

We plan on continuing this business of book publishing for some time to come. We rather enjoy it, and even though it is largely without glamour or tangible reward, we can't really imagine doing anything else. One of those "else" things would be running a newspaper. I bring this up only because it would seem that is what this tepid excuse for a book introductory section has amounted to so far. The thought of a bad editorial being paraded around the front of one of our publications... well, that's just shameful and wrong on so many levels. But so far, and I would like to end this now before it progresses any further, that is all this book has amounted to: one appallingly bad amateur editorial after another.

As the editor, I have allowed it to progress much farther than any sane editor should - which is to say not at all. I do apologize. Silly me, I was hoping that our standard form letters of "No thank you, we do not require any book foreword services at this time" or "I cannot decipher your handwritten request but I am sure that it could be better handled by our customer service department than the editor to which it was sent" or perhaps "Please reference our previous notice to you stating our full intent to press charges if you badger us with any more letters of this sort" would suffice for most reasonable people. But you see, that's where I was mistaken, in assuming that I was indeed dealing with reasonable people.

I would like to point out that as of now I am the only sane person involved in this project. I have been "requested" to include three rather sad forewords to a book that is still being finished, mind you. To say that I am disappointed that these requests are all I have heard from the actual author in weeks would be my ever-recurring understatement. I am having difficulty stomaching the notion that this is all happening simply based on some loopholes in our standard author contract, which quite frankly is long overdue for an update.

Which brings us back to standards. Standards are more necessary now than ever, because without them I will be doomed to "editing" - which in this case is a rather loose and unfortunate term, as to bring the current submissions up to code would involve my having to rewrite them from scratch, and that hardly seems in keeping with the spirit of the word "editing" - the existing text for others to read.

I am filled with regret, remorse, and fatigue. And I'm hungry. But in case the situation does not improve and I am left with my current task for an unforeseen number of additions to come, please do us all a favor and skip straight to the index. At least one of us can be spared. Godspeed.

\*\*\*\*\* Section 2: The Forewords \*\*\*\*\*

### American English Dictionary Expanded Edition

As a writer, I depend upon words for my very livelihood. Time was, not too far in the past, that there were only a few dozen words to choose from. If you walked into any given debate hall, sparring minds would simply stare back at each other with insulting eyebrow raises and infantile mouth gestures, because there was an insufficient amount of words to bear the full load of an intellectual discourse with rebuttal. Likewise, if you wished to begin a brawl at the local pub, your choice of childish taunts were limited to grunts and whistles, so much so that the only effective way to get some action brewing was to pull some unsuspecting chap's suspenders, or sacrifice your own bottle of beer on his bony head. The lack of words was quickly tearing this country apart, and the cloud of confusion hung thick and heavy over the grunting and whistling populace.

Those were dark days for all citizens, but especially writers; so scientists set out to correct the problem and provide us with more and variant word options. Working long hours in their damp, stifling basements, these lab-coated technicians devoted themselves tirelessly to filling in the linguistic gaps with big and impressive words, words so necessary to a modern society. It's hard to believe that at one point people were at a complete loss as to a term for a group of military officers holding state power in a country after a coup d'etat. But now we just take it for granted that we can throw around the word "junta" and converse with clarity and brevity with our fellow man.

So we are all indebted to the brave fellows - and gals, since modern feminism has provocatively shimmied its way into the highest ranks of the dictionary world... and in the process has provided us with words such as "provocative" and "shimmy" - who have sacrificed everything in order to beef up our anemic vocabularies. These brave and selfless pioneers saw the pathetic lay of the land, with people simply using the words "bypass" and "avoid" over and over, and expertly decided to create "circumvent" as a way of adding a little spice to an otherwise bland conversation. These dictionarians - and if that's not a real word, then I humbly suggest that it most certainly should be - have not only serviced a need for more and better words, but have gone one further and created a myriad of words that most people will never even know about. Some folks might call that showing off, but I like to point to it as an example of good old-fashioned hustle. For my money you can't have too many synonyms.

So in the grand tradition of making more words than anyone could ever possibly need, we present to you the new Expanded Edition of the American English Dictionary. Building upon the sturdy foundation of the Regular Edition, the new Expanded Edition takes a good thing and just goes one better with it. One of the first advances that you will notice is the addition of over 5,000 new scientific and technical terms. No longer will you have to settle for saying "doohickey" and "protruding dingus." No, we now have official terms for that stuff. And if a nuclear engineer ever comes over to do some basic repairs on your core reactor, you won't have to be the sucker for getting stuck with extra parts and labor charges that you didn't understand the need for. Nope, because chances are good that we're now including those words too.

Another feature to the Expanded Edition is the expansion of our illustrations. As any comic book reader will quickly tell you, pictures only enhance the power of the written word. They're what make the story. This was recognized and reflected in this new version, with the addition of countless photographs and illustrations to back up the premise that words really do mean something. For example, you're pretty sure that you know what a phylactery is, but sometimes a quick glance at a photo can go a long way towards helping jog your memory. And for the novice dictionary reader, the colorful black-and-white photos are a fun way to get started in the exciting world of definitions.

Part of the dynamic of our modern culture is that language, particularly in the case of English, is constantly morphing and changing to help better meet the needs of those who use it. For example, a simple greeting between friends can sound remarkably different depending upon region, and sometimes even within the same city. One set of strangers might acknowledge each other by saying "Good morning, how are you?" while yet another group might employ the phrase "Whaddup, dawg?" in a gay use of urban slang that is fun for the whole family. To help reflect and better understand these rapidly changing linguistic needs, the new Expanded Edition has included a wide assortment of newly developed words and phrases from popular culture, some of which are fresh off the streets. And for the kids out there that just can't get enough of the naughty cursings that seem to be so popular amongst the youngsters today - much to the chagrin of their parents - this new edition has included many of those as well, each complete with a bland, semi-inoffensive definition to help you more quickly and accurately understand how your friends are ridiculing you.

The American English Dictionary, Expanded Edition, has been redesigned from the ground up to offer the finest in ergonomic comfort. Experts from the fields of typesetting, paper manufacturing and embossing were all brought in as consultants for this new publication, in a collaborative effort to offer you the finest and most functional dictionary ever created. A common problem in the past has been the strain on both the hands and the eyes that ensues from continuous definition reading, as the hours tick one past the other. To help combat this, new fonts have been utilized to help maximize fluid page justification and minimize eyestrain. Also, specially treated paper has been manufactured that offers the most comfortable page-turning experience that you've probably ever had. And if that wasn't enough, new hardbound covers have been scientifically calibrated to lie naturally and sturdily on any desk or podium. No more hunting around to find just the right dictionary surface. All of this was done as a labor of love to provide you, the reader, with the most enjoyable and rewarding dictionary reading experience possible.

But the real test of any dictionary comes in its everyday use. Is it something that the average person - let's say you, for example - can prop open on a lazy Saturday evening, while sipping a freshly-squeezed glass of mango-tangerine-persimmon juice? Or to put it another way, is the dictionary what we in the literary profession would call a "page turner?" After countless nights of juice and turning, this writer for one thinks he is dangerously close to possibly maybe being able to answer that cryptic question with a hesitant "yes?" And the reason is because I - and you as well, as you will soon find out - realized, somewhere in the middle of the G's, that this dictionary is indeed speaking my language. I read the definition for grunion, and finally got it. Not only did grunions and their spawning habits begin to come alive for me, but so did all the rest of the words that followed. And why? Because anyone can take the time to carefully roll out the dough of the English language, sprinkle some extra flour of organization around to keep it from sticking to everything, throw in some sliced apples of accessibility, maybe a cup of sugar of enhancements, definitely some cinnamon of layout design, a generous portion of the butter of simplicity, and then bake it for 45 minutes at 350 degrees. But what these guys remembered that is so often forgotten is that you really need to put all that stuff in a pan first. And sometimes that is the most important step of all.

And don't forget that most wonderful, and mysteriously intangible, dictionary element that can make or break the most carefully researched of editions: Love. And this, my friends, is truly made for people who love dictionaries by people who love dictionaries. Enjoy with a loved one.

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### Modern Advances In Construction: Working Together For You

Buildings. You see them everywhere but how in the world did they ever get where they are? Is it magic? Perhaps. But maybe there's more to it than that. I've been doing some research, with the able help of this fine book, and I've stumbled upon some answers that may shock you. Indeed, they may just frighten you. But hopefully, in the end, they will untangle some of the knots that you keep tying. And we really wish you would quit doing that, because it's really annoying, and just creates more work for the rest of us.

Buildings have historically been and probably always will be made from stuff. From the moment we discovered that there was dirt just lying around on the ground for the taking, we began collecting it up and constructing things with it. First we made little balls. Then we mashed in the center of those little balls and learned how to make bowls. Sometime after that we learned to make edges and corners, and thus rectangles were eventually born. And then, of course, after rectangles, we quickly advanced to putting them together to form skyscrapers. And it all started simply enough by just finding some materials with which to work.

But there is a limit to the types of materials that can be used for buildings. Stone, wood, brick and vinyl siding have long been popular choices. However, water, yarn and tuna casserole have yet to capture the public fancy. And although not without value, Jell-O has never found its rightful place among building contractors. Perhaps it is too many episodes of This Old House, but it seems we have become set in our ways concerning acceptable building materials, and it once appeared doubtful that feelings would change anytime soon.

But in the words of that great national anthem that talked about changes, "they're coming to America... Today." In fact, "Today" it is not uncommon to see burly construction workers and pale, whining design students working side by side to come up with new ways to fashion crude tract housing and pre-fab office complexes with ideas that are fresh and exciting. Take, for example, the recent trend in using wood to create a more natural feel for furniture. And the recent introduction of linoleum has revolutionized the kitchen industry. Yes, never before have so many diverse elements come together to make a cohesive whole.

And it's not just newfangled trendsetters that are making all the waves. Longstanding stalwarts in the housing industry are also feeling frisky. Why just yesterday shag carpet was all the rage. But when people started losing pocket change and small animals in its evil clutches, the carpet industry stepped in with bold,



innovative, new plans. Thin, wimpy carpet is now the flooring of choice in many of your more popular dentist offices, and for good reason. Its low profile and quick wear make it ideal for low-ceiling areas. And for those of you without vertical space issues - such as those with vaulted ceilings, or others who are bedridden - there is, of course, the option of plush, spongy carpet, with its patented whisper-quiet touch, for those times when you fall smack on your rump roast, but you'd rather the neighbors didn't know.

Exterior construction and interior coverings are all well and good, but what about good, practical storage for my loot? Well, you're in luck - and by "you", I of course mean "me." Cabinet technology is light years ahead of where it used to be. There once was a time, not too long after we triumphantly emerged from the primordial slime wielding beanie babies and baggy pants, one had to actually open and close cabinet doors in order to retrieve their treasured stuff. Well, no more I say. Today, we have a grand assortment of sliding and rolling mechanisms that can keep doors and their nasty edges safely out of the way. Or, if you prefer, there is also a modern design trend borrowed from the fun-loving Danish known as minimalism, which suggests a way to clean up your living space by having your dwelling stripped of everything but essentials that are openly displayed in cabinets that have no doors at all. It's wild and reckless fun from those crazy Danes.

But possibly the greatest boon to modern homeowners, that are perhaps doing some construction of their own - as well as landlords that are too cheap to contract out their maintenance repairs - has been the lowered cost and ready availability of power tools for the consumer. Any trip past your local hardware mega-store is sure to tell you that not only does every single human being in America converge there at any given time, but that we should all sell our stock in tech firms and invest it instead in manufacturers of wood screws. The consumers have spoken, and occasionally it has been through naughty words as they desperately search for an empty space in the parking lot.

Part of the popularity of these stores lies in the fact that power tools are just plain fun. What lucky kid wouldn't love to receive a bench grinder under the tree come Christmas? And just the thought of what could be done with a jigsaw is enough to make even the most urban of males long for the thrill that can only come from etching out an intricate back for a homemade rocking chair. And what housewife wouldn't want to have her own arc welder, for whenever the urge strikes to make a grill for the backyard completely from scratch, or when you just want to touch up those little jobs around the house. It's amazing and utterly boggles the mind the breadth and scope of tools we have at our disposal. And the marvels of levels that use lasers to do their dirty work are so far beyond the scope of this manuscript that you might as well be asking us how computers work.

Speaking of, computers have come a long way in modernizing not only power tools, but also the overall functionality of the home/building. Originally conceived for network play of Doom and internet porn, computers are now being used for more practical applications, such as bringing efficiency to electronic, radioactive ovens - or "microwaves" - as well as playing an integral role in the design of digital sound reproduction platters, otherwise known among intelligentsia as "compact discs." It seems there is no end to what computers can do. "The possibilities are endless, and the limits aren't too shabby either," said Microsoft founder Bill Gates, in a keynote address regarding how computers can benefit even traditionally backwoods industries such as waffle manufacturers.

"So what does all this progress mean? How does it help me, a lowly consumer?" you may be asking yourself. Well, sadly it won't help you a whole stinking lot. Were you just a little smarter, or a little richer, or a little bit better looking, you might have a small shred of hope of improving your quality of life with these technological marvels. But unfortunately, and lamentably, that will never happen for you. These wonderful and strange apparitions are well beyond the reach of a simpleton such as yourself. In fact, I suggest you give up now and throw in the towel while you still can. Leave the big toys for the big boys, as they say somewhere in the swamps of the South.

As you read through this book, there will undoubtedly be questions spring up in your mind that are just plain

common sense to the average Dick and Jane, but will cause you undue emotional distress. You will be simultaneously shocked, aroused, and confused by what you discover in the how-to sections, but I urge you to not actually bother your already perplexed mind with trying to decipher the meaning in any of this. You might want to frequently just put the book down and take a walk. In fact, by all means, please walk around, enjoy the buildings and admire the fact that they were constructed at all. Notice their vinyl siding and seamless gutters. Marvel at the faux hardwood floors of your neighbors, and perhaps even ask to see an extra can of the sealer they used on their back deck. But please, whatever you do, don't try to further confuse your pea-sized mind with how any of this actually came to be. Just accept the fact that progress is being made, and leave it at that. To borrow a phrase from one of the chapter headings of this book, Progress: Going Forward. For you.

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### The Wonders of Water

(As a literary exercise, I have been asked to play devil's advocate regarding the merits of water and everything it does for us. The author of this book felt that it would be a good idea to start the topic off with a challenge. Sort of throwing the gauntlet down, if you will, for why we should give water a second thought. So please keep in mind that what follows is an attempt to do just that. I secretly relish the exquisite taste and refreshing qualities of water and would hate to get on its bad side simply because of a little jokingly antagonistic foreword I was asked to write. After all, it's just in fun. You know, Ha Ha. For giggles, and all that. Please, water, don't cut me off. I beg of you...) Look, I don't mean to sound picky or even ungrateful, but it is my feeling that water has been getting a free ride for far too long. Ever since I was a little kid in science class, all I've heard is "Ooh, water's so great. Building block of life. A hundred-and-thirty-thousand-percent of your body is made up of it," or whatever. Well, pardon my bluntness, but what have you done for me lately, water?

Let's examine what this substance is all about. First off, water is a drink. Not only is it a drink, but it's also the basis for all other drinks. Okay, fair enough. But answer me this: If water is so great, why has it been living in complacency for all these years? At least Coke had the guts to branch out and try New Coke. It was a really stupid idea, but at least they went for it, and in spite of this slight misstep they've still managed to eek out a multi-bajillion dollar company. And coffee had been stuck for years at a quarter a cup at gas stations, until Starbucks came along and proceeded to turn it into a premium blend, complete with a premium price. See, that's the kind of innovation I'm talking about.

What has water done in all this time? It managed to create a cozy niche business of bottled water that has surprisingly high returns. Well, whoop-te-freaking-do, Water! Like what liquid isn't in bottles these days and doing better because of it? Can you imagine the shame that would come to the dairy business if you could only get milk out of a drinking fountain? A bottle is a good start, but what else you got? And pretty much every other major beverage out there has bested you in the appearance department. Sure, clear water is minimal and somewhat classy - in a conservative "less is more" type of way - but we are currently awash in beverages of every conceivable color and opacity. We've got yellow drinks and green drinks and red drinks and purple drinks. And if you go to a fountain machine, you can even mix a few of your favorites together and make a whole new color (that still always ends up brown, but you know what I'm getting at). The rest of the drink industry is definitely in high gear when it comes to color. Water, how long do you really think you can survive in that kind of competitive global market?

And let's talk about taste for a second. What does water even taste like? Nothing. And that is exactly my point. Who wants to sit around drinking nothing, can I see the hands? "Hey Bob, would you rather have a cool, refreshingly sweet citrus-flavored soft drink as some respite from the numbing heat, or this clear stuff that doesn't really taste like anything?" I don't know Bob - and to be honest, I'm not sure why I'd be offering him a drink, but since I've started this example I should probably go ahead and follow through with it - but I'm willing to bet he's already eyeing that sweet nectar of citrus goodness, even before I finish my statement. Because when you think of clear, what conclusion does your mind automatically come to about whatever it is

that's clear? That's right, it's thinking that a lazy wad of high-school dropouts didn't even have time to give something a color. At least white is something, even if it's not very creative - and tune in next week, when I'll be giving the milk industry a piece of my mind.

Ok ok, I'll go easy on water's imaging and product innovation, mainly because I realize that for the past few years water has had a notoriously bad R&D team working for them. But let's focus on a much more fundamental problem that has really been getting me going. I guess the source of my frustration is that for all my life, we've been singing the praises of water, waxing poetically about its many virtues. But when was the last time water ever actually did anything? Huh, can anyone tell me that? As best I can figure we've pretty much been stuck with the same amount of water for as long as anyone can remember. It just moves around. If it's frozen, it melts. If it's liquid, it evaporates. And if it's evaporated, it just condenses and turns right back to liquid. Even the stuff that we drink, or that is consumed by plant and animal life, it eventually just gets {ahem} "recycled" back out into the wild. And then, weather patterns, gravity and a host of other things see to it that water gets distributed back around where it should be. But through all of this (even the {ahem} "recycling" part) water is just along for the ride. And what has it actually been doing to perpetuate itself? Exactly diddly-squat, that's what.

But you know what? I'm a fair man. I'm a patient man. And I'm open to whatever water would like to say in defense of its worthless, lazy, good-for-nothing self. I'm sure it has another side of the story - probably that someone else has come up with - that would shed a different light - and perhaps a lazy, clear, taste-free light - on the subject. Far be it from me to judge before all the facts are in. And although I'm not holding out a lot of hope for water to step up to the plate even now, I am still willing to extend it the hand of courtesy. And if need be, I will also use that hand to smack water across the face, wake it up from it's nap and repeat everything that I've just said in order to get this discussion moving along.

So with that in mind, please enjoy this propaganda-laced book on why water thinks it's so great.

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### The Children's Emotional Development Series

You know, it's not easy being a parent, especially in this day and age. Kids are growing up by the minute and parents can't do a thing to stop them, try as they might. These kids are just going to get bigger and bigger. And that's where the problems start. If kids would just stay the size of a football, everything would be fine. You could cart them around in pretty much anything - wicker baskets and grocery bags come to mind - and if they were ever harassed by the other children for being little you could always calm them down by saying "Don't you worry, the other kids are all the size of footballs too." And then cheer them back up by smiling and saying in your best snookums voice "And who's my little NCAA regulation size? That's right, it's you! It's YOU!" and then playfully tickle their nose; or their stitching, if you're lucky enough to have a child that's actually a football... but perhaps I'm starting to take this analogy too far.

But you know what, these kids are sure enough gonna start growing up on you. And as they do, there are going to be new challenges that they face every step of the way. Just when you get them walking, they have to be potty-trained. And just when you get them potty-trained, they want to get their ears pierced. And the moment you let them get their ears pierced... well, that's when they start getting hooked on the illegal drugs. Am I being a little bit melodramatic? Oh, but I wish that I was, you simpletons. You poor, gullible, naive dolts. My pity and condescension go out to you.

But being the responsible parent that you are, you are probably wondering, "How? How can I protect my child from all the heartache and pain and cruelty that can stem from growing up in these troubled times?" You do well to ask these tough questions of yourself. And you do even better to come to us with these questions, because the good people of this book have spent long, tedious hours doing the research necessary to develop a

system of learning materials that will help you equip your children to better cope with life in a trouble-free, non-confrontational manner. They call it the Children's Emotional Development Series.

The need for this series has been around since the dawn of man. And although there's nothing we can do about the poor saps that grew up before scientists and doctors were able to construct these learning materials, you can at least thank your sweet behind that they're around now. The goal for the Children's Emotional Development Series is to offer the emotional learning tools necessary to help parents mold the little kiddies of today into the non-rebellious teens of tomorrow, and subsequently into the business majors of the future. The key is to give children educational tools that are simultaneously creative, but not so creative that they require any special talents; challenging, but not so challenging that they could ever make a child frustrated; and that are super easy on their fragile egos. Nothing zaps a kid's desire to learn faster than something that is either too hard or that is not reflective of their own unique set of abilities. So with the Children's Emotional Development Series they've hit the perfect balance of easy enough to entertain and challenging enough to be considered semi-educational. And we hope you will agree.

The first installment in this series is a line of coloring books. It was important to start the program out first for the younger kids, in a desperate attempt to reach them before it's too late. Some of the older children that have progressed on into the 5-6 age range... well, forget it. You might as well teach them how to sweep chimneys now because they'll never amount to anything... uh... I mean, the development of more advanced tools will begin as soon as possible. Please keep checking the website for updates!

But these coloring books are really something super special. The thought process behind them was "Let's make coloring books for children that don't really know how to color, by people that don't really know how to draw." One of the many frustrating parts of being a child is that as coloring is one of the first hand-eye coordination skills we try to teach them, we run the risk of already alienating those that are not particularly... oh, how do we say, "creatively enhanced" or "motor centered." Normally, kids might see a page from a coloring book, with its complex character shapes and pre-determined color objectives - things with sky and grass, and other objects that are easy to color "wrong" - and just throw up their hands and say "Screw this, man. I'm gonna go grab me a juice box." And you know what, they have every reason to be upset.

So how are these books different? First off, people have been hired that can't draw to save their lives to create these coloring books. We think you'll agree that these are truly some of the most gifted untalented people around. And after a hastily thrown together brainstorming session, these savants scribble down whatever it is that first pops into their heads and it is rushed to the printers before there's even been a chance to clean up the insides.

The reason this is all so important is that by taking out some of the glitz and polish that characterize so many other coloring books on the market, some of the barriers have been broken down that exist for many of the less-than-coordinated or under-creative children out there. They look at these simple, raw books and realize that finally someone is communicating to them on their level. Finally, there are books that are neither overly challenging nor do they even demand much creativity. In fact, hopefully they are so bad and so simple that pretty much any child that's even awake could draw circles around what's in there - and really, if they can draw circles then they are far too advanced for these books and can move on up to the second level series - giving them a much needed self confidence boost. And that's the whole point of this endeavor: helping children feel better about themselves.

The first book is subtly titled Bob's Lazy Afternoon. It follows Bob as he sits around his house, watches TV, and maybe takes a nap or something. Children will feel very much at ease, as they have done many of these same things. Bob is someone that the children can relate to. And Bob is certainly not cavorting around with strange and colorful animals that would only serve to confuse children. And he is definitely not busy having exciting adventures that would only give children ideas for getting into mischief. No, Bob mostly just sits there and practices being quiet. Kids will love it!

There are so many other exciting releases planned. Currently the finishing touches are being put down on a set of reading primers, the first of which is called *Bob Knows Ten Words*. The whole book is just made up of ten words, so children will not feel overwhelmed by all the many weird and confusing combinations of letters that you get in so many other books. It lets them learn at a gradual and measured pace. The sequel is called *Bob Now Knows Seventeen Words*, but this book should not be rushed into, so the publication date is being deliberately delayed for another year or so. This is just another of the many services provided with the Children's Emotional Development Series.

I guess the bottom line is this. Challenges: Kids don't like them and sometimes they cause low self-esteem. Kids have enough problems these days fitting in, what with the pressure to wear baggy pants and carry cell phones and all, that there is no reason to tax them more than they already are. Listening is key, and just as important for parents as it is for the youngsters. Let's start listening to what our children feel comfortable reading and studying. Perhaps then we'll all learn something.

So give the Children's Emotional Development Series a try, and see the importance that alternatives can bring. Finally there's a book series for every child.

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### Complete Spelunker's Guide to Clarksville, TN

Assuming that the sun was shining and that the birds were chirping, one could say that it was a sunshiny, bird-chirping day that heralded my visit to some of the caves of Clarksville, TN. The sun actually was shining, and the birds were indeed chirping, so I guess what they say is true.

I've always been intrigued by the word "spelunking." Who can fathom what wonders it entails, and what mysteries it shrouds? It seems that with every mesmerizing syllable, a new petal of wonder is revealed, while twelve more become strangely veiled. How miraculous! How bizarre! My brain was relentlessly turning somersaults in an attempt to unlock the secrets of this obfuscating, splendiferous word. So while I looked up those two words, I also took the liberty of finally checking out spelunking as well. Turns out, it's actually just a fancy-pants way of saying "going to check out some caves or something." Those that practice this art regularly will argue at length about the proper use of the term, as some of these die-hards consider spelunkers nothing more than wannabe posers and that any real caver would rather be called just that: a caver. Obviously these people have issues that are much deeper than just some silly holes in the ground, so we will leave them alone to sink ever downward into their private pain. But for the rest of us, magical wonders await.

Spelunking. Besides just being a cool sounding word, spelunking is also an excellent hobby for those of you that haven't been able to settle on one yet. It's not something that you can do just anywhere, so make sure that there are actually spelunking opportunities in your area before you get yourself all worked up. Or just have plenty of gas money and a fresh air filter, because you'll need to do some driving.

The world of spelunking is an exciting one for those that happen to live in northwest Tennessee. Home of the infamous Dunbar Cave State Park, Clarksville, TN, is visited every year by literally millions upon millions of avid spelunkers. Perhaps that figure has been inflated drastically by yours truly for shock value, but I think you still get the point. It is visited. And definitely by people. And occasionally those people are spelunkers, or are at least aware of the term.

For me, my fascination with the strange underworld of caving began the moment I stepped into Clarksville's legendary caves. It also ended the moment I walked out, but I'll never forget those six minutes. It was mystically magically special (and neat). I happened to stumble upon a tour that was already in progress, and even though I hadn't paid the required fee, I decided to grab a quick freebie anyway by listening in to a small bit of what the guide was explaining. As it turns out, the caves were created by the seepage into the ground of

carbonic acid, which he described as being more or less like carbonated water. If this is true, the parents of the world have a great rebuttal to tell their kids whenever they scream and yell for a soft drink. But that was all I learned, so please don't ask me any more questions. Unless it is about the dank.

There is something to be said for well-preserved dank. The kind of dank that you can't shake off no matter how hard you try, and the kind that seems to swallow its surroundings, regardless of the time of day. Dunbar's dank is second to none. And so are its fresh piles of guano, so please be careful where you step. And even a casual stroll through the cavernous structure should yield ample opportunity for wondering out loud what the whole deal is with bats. Why all the secrecy? Why the sleeping upside down, and what's with all the horror stories and bad rep? Is it just so they can have the caves all to themselves? I've said it before, and I'll say it again: bats are selfish little turds.

The walls tell a grand and colorful story about the history of not only the cave, but of the whole area itself. I wish I had had the time to check out those walls, and maybe press my ear against them for a quick story, but as it so happened there was a fallen, decaying tree trunk on one of the walking trails nearby, and it was needing attention from my good kicking foot. But no matter, I feel pretty confident that this book will go into long, tedious detail about the history of the region, it's geological importance to speleologists - guys and gals that really get into having a technical name for going caving - and some other yadda yadda that you'll probably end up skimming through at a brisk pace. But before you think that Dunbar Cave is all there is to spelunking in Clarksville, think again! ...Please, for the sake of this book, think again. And just keep thinking about that while the author tries to dig up some more places to go see. I'll try to buy us some time, so I urge you to just keep thinking...

Ok, got it. Apparently, Dunbar Cave State Park contains some eight miles of underground caverns. Now, according to our calculations, the park itself is only about... well, maybe two miles or so squared. Is it? We're still looking into that. But the point is, since the park is located in the middle of a residential neighborhood, there's bound to be some good caving action underneath the residents homes in the surrounding area. Kids, grab your shovels, because if there was ever a time to find your own super-cool and super-secret Fortress Of Super Cool Secretness, now is that time. We promise you, scout's honor, that if you discover some caverns tucked way underneath your back yard, you'll probably also eventually hit upon some skeletons and bats while you're at it. Plus it will really give us something else to use to help flesh out this book a little more. Thanks!

But as I was saying, caving is a wonderful pastime that the whole family can enjoy (keep digging while I stall them!) with many wonderful and great, big wonderful bits of wonder to be had and wonderfully enjoyed throughout the year. (Faster, you little booger-eaters, faster!) So as you thoughtfully consider your options for weekend recreation (come on, more digging, less playing!) or perhaps even a frolicking summer vacation that is sure to both entertain and educate the little ones (hurry up! I'm starting to lose them...), we ask that you give caving a second thought. A long, hard, thoughtful thought (have you found anything yet? I swear, what am I paying you kids for?), complete with furrowed brows and sober head nods (look, I am going to feed you to the bats myself if you don't make with some caves!)... And don't forget the word "spelunking." Ha Ha.... Any pastime with a word that fun has got to be....

Oh, forget it. I'm just gonna go snorkeling.

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My Life And Times By Dr. Lewis B. Turndevelt

I try to be very sensitive to the fact that, on occasion, my ideas are too ambitious and revolutionary for their own good. My life has been riddled with radical concepts and inventive systems that for whatever reason are just too ahead of the times. But the times they are a changing, just not quickly enough. So until they pick up some more speed, I will need to tone down my genius and let everyone else just catch up for awhile.

The reason for this admission on my part - and unfortunately what makes the whole thing even sadder - is that I have received a publisher mandate to revise and condense my autobiography. A work in progress for the better part of 40 years, my autobiography has quietly been turning the literary world on its ear, and spinning it around like a dreidel during Hanukkah. I have no idea how turning something on its ear makes any sense, but I'm not the one that comes up with these sayings. No, I have been busy doing other things. And those other things are the subject of my ongoing autobiography.

As soon as I became literate, I decided that it was in the world's best interest for me to begin documenting my life and times for posterity. In the event that I ever became famous, I knew that this info would prove invaluable to future generations that desired to know exactly who Lewis B. Turndevelt was and what made him tick, and all that. And what better way to accurately chronicle a life than to capture it in real time. So every year I have been publishing a report on my happenings, thoughts, developments and overall hijinks. And so it has become an ongoing and quite fascinating "as it happens" account of truly one of the most written about figures of our time: Me.

The downside to this literary phenomenon is that the complete set has grown to quite a lengthy collection. I believe it was my editor who, on the occasion of the printing of my 28th volume, called me up to say, "This set is about 27 volumes too big." Now one could make the argument that that is actually much, much too short to fully capture how one person has spent their entire life, but I think the point he was trying to make was that its current volume precludes it from becoming what they in the industry call a "beach read." And it's a point well taken. And although the set has seen brisk sales - perhaps brisk is a little misleading, but we do move about five or six copies a year, so that family members can keep up with my whereabouts - the business side of me can understand the need for something that is a bit more streamlined and commercial. In a world where peanut butter and jelly are now available in the same jar - because when you're in a rush, you simply cannot be bothered with two - the idea of quick and fast has also quickly and fastly made it's way to the book world. First there were abridged notes for school children to catch up on literary classics without having to actually read the stupid books. And now we have condensed versions of multi-volume autobiographies.

Many people might see this as selling out on my part. They notice the success that I have enjoyed and their jealous subconscious comes to the conclusion, "Well, I guess he'll do anything to make a quick book... er, buck." And they might be right. I have been known to take money and to subsequently run with it. Sometimes even all the way to the bank, which, being a distance of three miles one way, can be quite strenuous. But I can definitely see an upside to this whole thing. Perhaps it will be used as a sampler for the real article. Legions of new people will stumble upon this single-volume work, as it becomes the new hot item on everyone's holiday shopping list. And once they taste the sweet, intoxicating liquor that is found within, they will become hooked. Addicted. They will desire more. Yes, even need more. Many of the youngsters will become so carelessly attached that they will begin selling everything they own in order to afford each new volume that is released. And the black market? Well, unfortunately the black market has always been a sore subject with me.

Even now, I feel that the tide is turning. Through a shameless streak of self-promotion, I have been doing my part to point people in the proper direction of these works, hoping against all hope that even at this late hour we might be able to talk The Man back into individual volumes. Why just yesterday I was brought in for questioning at the local police station. As I was being interrogated under the searing heat of a 60-watt bulb, the pig pointedly asked me, "Where were you on the night of September 28, 2000?" And even though I didn't have the foggiest clue what I might have been doing at that time, I was at least able to plug Volume 36 of my autobiography for his later perusal. That's the power of this series, to magically transport the reader to another time and place, and relive someone else's experiences. So much rich history in those books... So many tales of wonder... So many questions left unanswered, that are then later answered in subsequent volumes as a cheap and flimsy sales gimmick.

But anyway, for now at least that is the plan. If things go well then perhaps the powers that be will see fit to at least release condensed versions of each volume in the anthology, instead of just this one super-condensed

volume. But we vote with our pocketbooks, and I need your vote.

In the end, it's all about exposure, and a little exposure here is definitely better than no exposure at all. And may a little bit of exposure yield a little bit of inspiration. I can only hope that my life will be as inspiring to you as it has been to me. And also, I can only wish that you would take to heart these words that I've written. But please only take them after you have paid for them. It would be much appreciated. Thank you.

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### Things Too Horrible To Mention

Books of the horror genre have long had one thing in common: they aren't very good. "Why is that?" you may be asking out loud, in a crowded cafeteria, as the filling from your tuna fish sandwich carelessly eases loose from its prison between the bread. You reach down to pick up the lump and place it back inside, but are suddenly gripped with the shocking knowledge that you have absolutely no idea where your applesauce is that you were going to have for dessert. You know it was around this morning when you packed your lunch, but now it's gone. It's almost like it just vanished... into thin air!

And therein lies the horror, and also the answer to your question. You see, tuna fish and applesauce aside, there is nothing more frightening than the day-to-day horrors that lurk just around every corner. Under the hood of your car. Eating away at the underside of your deck. In the backroom of any given fast-food burger joint. Nothing but horror. Pure, 100%, Grade-A, corn-fed horror.

Slowly, horror writers are starting to come around to this fact. Because in their effort to imagine and conjure up terrifying scenarios involving monsters, aliens, ghosts or even psychopathic slashers, they end up creating nothing more than a hollowness we feel deep on the inside that reminds us, "Pe-shaaaww! That's not scary. Scary is when your kid's diaper is full in the car and you realize you forgot to bring spares. Now that is scary! Try again, Mr. King."

So, the horror of the everyday has become a new popular subject among authors of the scary things, as even book people try to latch onto the pathetic success of reality television. New reality books are literally cramming the shelves of your local bookstores and screaming for attention, much like a small child that wants candy. But as they say in the dairy business, the cream will rise to the top. And we are lucky to have cream like this new book, Things Too Horrible To Mention. All we have to do is scrape it off the top and whip it like it's bound for market. Rich, smooth whipped cream full of delicious, dairy-fresh horror.

But let's talk about the book.

Root Canals. Pickled Eggs. Toe Fungus. Construction Delays. Adam Sandler. Generally when we think of the phrase "things too horrible to mention" these are the things that first spring to mind. But that's not an entirely accurate category for them to fall under, because although all of them are capable of inducing fright to the point of insanity, none of them are in fact too horrible to mention. The reason is because we just mentioned them, and therefore we have nullified their rightful place within that category. "Unfathomable Evil" is probably much closer. Because even though they can be mentioned, we still cannot fully fathom the depth and weight of their evil.

And such is the problem with the new book by the title of Things Too Horrible To Mention. The title is a complete contradiction to the book itself, as it is nothing more than a rather lengthy discourse - and mention - on things that are purportedly too horrible to indeed mention. However, the subjects that have been picked are about as close as you could probably come to filling this void. Because I find that although they have been mentioned, they are truly far too horrible for me to further mention them to you. I just can't do it. Nothing in the world could possibly prepare me for even beginning to mention even the smallest hint or broader,



watered-down version of most of them. Too horrible. Much, much too horrible to even mention. Don't try to make me, because I can't. I CAN'T!!!

But kudos must go to the author, for even as I began page one, I was immediately and intoxicatingly filled with an acute disgust for every single sentence I read. That morbid indignation, mixed with an unwavering curiosity for how much worse it could possibly get, carried on with me till the very last page.

The book is slow going, I'm not going to lie to you, since its reading requires frequent and repeated trips to the bathroom to either lose your lunch, or to try in vain to wash off the dirt from your soul. I wish I could describe to you some of the horrific atrocities that are found within the book, but as I stated before, it's just not something that I am capable of mentioning. I actually tried for three hours the other night to explain one of the chapters to a friend, and in between nervous stammering, I only succeeded in fainting three times, screaming in horror eight times, crying like a whipped pup for twenty minutes straight, and vomiting neatly into their lap two-and-a-half times (the "and-a-half" time was interrupted by more screaming). But your results may vary, so please don't use me as a measuring stick.

It's amazing how little we really appreciate the delicate balance of our world and everything in it. And how if we allow ourselves to slip up for even a moment, things can go devastatingly, horrifically wrong. In fact, there is this one section in chapter nine that talks about... well, let's just say that it will be a good while before I feel comfortable operating a cheese grater again.

But in the end, there is a lot to be learned from a good scare. Valuable life lessons about... well, stuff... and then some other stuff that I shudder to even mentally reference now. But read the book and you'll see what I mean. In fact, I have a feeling that as soon as you finish, you will want everyone you know to also read it. Well, perhaps "want" is not the most appropriate word. You will probably just suggest that they read it, not because they want to - and not because you actually enjoy remembering the atrocities you read about - but because it builds character, not unlike brussels sprouts, which are given a casual mention in chapter... actually, I've said too much already.

So although I probably haven't been able to mention as much as a book foreword would normally encourage me to, I feel strongly that it may not even be necessary. Word-of-mouth is becoming quite overrated, and word-of-action will soon be all the rage. Because there is a lot to be said for having a friend take you directly to a bookstore, drag you over to the horror section, quickly point to a title on the shelf and then run screaming like a schoolgirl back out of the building. That's the kind of recommendation that stays with you.

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### The Psychology Of Humor

The Pope and a lawyer are riding an elevator up to heaven. Upon arrival at the pearly gates, there is a mad rush of angels, saints and other holy people eager to greet them. As they step out of the elevator, the lawyer is quickly hoisted over the shoulders of the waiting throng and carried off, the angels cheering and celebrating excitedly the whole time. They soon leave and the Pope is left alone, somewhat disappointed at his own lack of a joyous reception. St. Peter notices this and comes over to him saying, "Don't feel bad. We get Popes in here all the time, but it's not every day that we get a lawyer."

Ha Ha! Oh, for fun... You see, the above paragraph is an example of a joke. For years, people have been busy coming up with these witty treats of anecdotal humor to entertain friends and bemuse strangers. In fact, humor is one of the oldest means of expression between humans, dating back well before the invention of the crude finger gesture. But perhaps you noticed that although the joke listed above was both entertaining and educational, it didn't make you laugh out loud. In fact, it might not have even cracked a smile on your otherwise charming face. And I can't say that I would be surprised if you glanced over the text without so

much as a second thought as to its humorous effort. Or perhaps you haven't laughed in years, are completely devoid of a soul, and can often be heard telling the nice little old ladies at the grocery store that hand out samples to "Bugger off, you little vultures!"

But why is this? Why are we as a modern society less prone to laugh our silly heads off at the work of some of the world's finest and most skilled jokesmiths? And if we're not laughing, then who is? And where are they? And how? And if not soon, then why? And for when not?

Fortunately for us, the answers to these questions are much simpler than we sometimes make them out to be. The good news is that they are readily available due to the scholarly research found in this book, *The Psychology Of Humor*, which goes through great pains to discover and pinpoint exactly why we find humor entertaining, and how much of it we can hold at any one time before going into a spastic fit, much like sugar shock. The bad news, however, is that this is actually a book that involves some reading, which is an activity that is neither entertaining nor humorous, but rather a dreadful burden of intellect that the learned shoulder and the guileless pity. So perhaps you can find someone to read it for you.

Remember back with me, if you will, to your younger days on the elementary school playground. Your friends, or perhaps you yourself, would enthrall the assembled masses with a joke passed down from an older sibling, or perhaps some junior high student on the school bus. And then what would happen? Laughter. Hearty, juicy, scraped-knee, bubble gum in your pigtails laughter. In fact, it seemed that back then whenever a joke was told there would be peels of laughter ringing loud and true from the teeter totter all the way over to the monkey bars. But today, as you sit through a seminar, or perhaps even a sermon at church, where the topic is prefaced with a funny anecdote, there is generally only a grin or two from the crowd and then you quickly move on to the topic at hand.

This phenomenon is discussed quite thoroughly in the section regarding humor's economy of scale, and how its dramatic effect all boils down to the simple principle of supply and demand. To go back to our playground example, we soon see that it wasn't the location or even the assembled audience that helped sell the joke, but rather the fact that that was like sixty years ago, or so it seems. Back then, there were only about ten or twelve jokes in existence, and we were just glad to have those around. In fact, if you think about it, half of those jokes started out with someone walking into a bar, and the other half were of the type that we'd dare not let our parents know that we knew. But we didn't care about the content because we were thrilled that there were any jokes at all.

But times are different nowadays. There have been so many jokes invented since then that we don't even know where to keep them all. Books upon books of jokes have been written, movies starring some of Hollywood's most dreadful actors have paraded jokes before millions, and there is even a market for tried-and-failed jokes on bubble gum and candy wrappers. There are so many jokes lying around the place today that we're knee deep in punch lines and we couldn't be more sick of them. Most people feel it's time to thin the herd, and fast. Jokes are taking up far too much precious space and unless we get rid of a good bulk of them, we're in danger of clogging up areas that could rightfully be filled with new and better forms of expression, such as punk band flyers and recipes on the inside of soup can labels.

But it's not simply the sheer volume of humor that we've created, it's also just a matter of the changing of the times. Do you remember mood rings? Sure, we all do, with their magical powers to tell us exactly how someone was feeling. But now, unless you scrounge around at some of your more discriminating jewelers, mood rings can be a scarce commodity. Where once the shelves were littered with the stuff - mood rings even being used as napkin holders and aquarium gravel - now they just sit in a dusty bowl at the "Everything's Under \$1 Store." Why? Why is this? For the love of cheap crap would someone please tell me why?!! The reason is because mood rings, like most everything else that's sold in America, were a fad. Sure they were popular for a while, but we've moved on to arguably bigger and better things. Like nose rings, with their magical powers to become painfully annoying during a sinus infection.

But could humor be just like everything else, a fad? The Psychology Of Humor seems to think that it might be. According to extensive and painful research performed on caged animals undergoing bizarre probing experiments, the results are beginning to indicate that humor just isn't that funny to us anymore. Oh sure, there are still some rural folks scattered about South Dakota that probably find it as interesting as they always have, but what you must understand is that South Dakota has traditionally been about six years behind the times. Granted, they can grow a mean field of corn, but other than that they're not too up on the trends. Come on, South Dakota, get with the program!

The Psychology Of Humor is an important study in a time in our nation's history when we are on the verge of taking ourselves too seriously. And perhaps that is for the best. There will always be a niche market for humor. The comic strips in your daily paper are mostly safe, and the water cooler will still be used mainly for gossip and some anecdotal witticisms, much more than it will be for water. And pretty much any humor that is off-color will stick around, at least as long as there are junior high boys being produced - and the book points out that currently the production of junior high boys is at an all-time high. But the wind is blowing, and beginning to take some of the pollen of humor with it. It will land somewhere, Canada perhaps, and continue to flourish for another season. But don't be too surprised if you wake up one day and find that the humor you once thought so bright and promising is now as dull as Grandma's nice silver, that you're never allowed to use, and so it just sits there in its case, tarnishing itself to sleep. The crazy thing is, you probably won't even mind. Why? Because our sources within the entertainment industry tell us that despair and gloom are hot in Paris right now, and set to make a big splash over here next spring. We can hardly wait! So long humor, you sucker. We'll soon enough be weeping bitter tears over you. And loving it!

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### How To Be A Struggling Musician

It is the dream of every great American to at some point in their life stand up on a stage in front of thousands of screaming fans, grab the microphone with their free hand - the one that isn't brushing back their sweaty mat of hair - and say "Can I get some more vocals in my monitor?"

Grab any kid over the age of thirteen from anywhere in the country and chances are pretty good that he is either in a band, knows someone that is, or can at least point to some groups he's heard about in the neighboring county. Everybody else is doing it so why not me? He's playing music. She's playing music. The guy at the coffee shop is playing music. Even you're playing music.

Which brings us to you. Why do you want to be in a rock band, or be a solo folkie, or an eccentric punk screamer? You have dreams of one day making it big out there, selling millions of albums and having people throw their spare undergarments up to you on stage, as well as some spare hotel keys, just for safekeeping, of course. And you've even decided that it's important enough to you to put in the long hours and sacrifice it takes to grow your hair out and/or shave it regularly in strategic places. But the one thing that you are failing to see in this whole scenario is that you have zero talent. You suck. You suck really bad.

This courageous lack of talent that you possess is what makes you a handsome candidate to be a struggling musician. Because struggle you will. You will forever struggle, and almost as much as your audience. Those that have heard you sing, and others that have witnessed your inept instrument handling can attest to the fact that you have about as much business being up on stage as Hobbits would on the basketball court. And so this book is for you. Because since there is not much that you can do to fulfill your dreams of being a successful musician, the route of struggling artist is going to be much more your style.

Now that you've decided to inflict your unintentionally atonal pop songs on the world, you could probably stand some direction on how to effectively make that leap from "person with no discernable musical ability" to "bona-fide, seasoned struggling musician." This book will show you how.

But before anyone lunges skull-first without protective headgear into a career in the musical arts, it's important to start with a little bit of history. Your history, in fact. Why are you here? What exactly do you think you're doing? Whatever gave you the stupid idea that anyone even remotely cares to see you play your out-of-tune guitar on stage and call the hounds of war with your off-key caterwauling? The answer to all these questions is a simple one: it looks like an easy way to be cool. Easy enough for even a moron like yourself to pick up the basics. And the more garage bands that come around year after year, the easier it looks.

But unfortunately, all of these people are doing it wrong. That's why it looks so easy, and that's why you think to yourself, "Hey, even I could do that." That's because you most certainly can; you can suck just as bad as they do, and perhaps even worse. They've taken a highly complex Western cultural tradition of theory, chord structures, orchestration and technical discipline, and have whittled it down to the two chords they could figure out on their own and decided to just wing it with the rest. Well, the only problem with that is that by "winging it," your results will probably be about as impressive to others as if someone decided to "wing it" as a surgeon simply because they happened to catch a couple old episodes of E.R. on syndication.

But still we dream. We dream of the rock music that moves us so much, and we want to share that with the world. Rock 'n Roll. Its appeal is vast and great. For decades we have witnessed some remarkable talent set up shop in venues across the country, and beyond, and have proceeded to rock them old school. We, in turn, have felt the drummings and the screechings that can only come from the rock and roll music, and while holding up our disposable lighters we have said, "Yes, we endorse what you're doing! And perhaps give us an encore, if you please! Thank you!" And so from this remarkable musical experience, we - or maybe just you - decided that all rock concert experiences must also be this exciting, and that this is the kind of excitement that you simply must have for the rest of your life.

But hold on there, Buddy Holly. Before you run out and sell everything you have for a new set of Ernie Balls, it would probably be in your best interest to do a little bit of research first. You know, find out exactly what you're getting into. Learn from those that have gone before you and blown it big time. So a good route would probably be to attend a few amateur nights in your area and scope out the competition. Perhaps laugh at their mistakes, all the while making a mental note to yourself of what does and does not please an inebriated audience. Yes, you could go through all this trouble, or you could just read this book instead, which chronicles out the mistakes made by some of the sample performers included on the accompanying video. I myself perused this ancillary material at length and found it wildly helpful in pointing out what not to do on a stage. (And please note that the footage is not mixed in 5.1 surround sound, because to be quite honest, it really wasn't worth the trouble.)

Exhibit A was, to put it nicely, wretched. Just a lone trooper with an out-of-tune guitar, playing mostly to himself. The singing was bad, the guitar playing was elementary, the songs lacked interest - and quality - and there was no stage presence to speak of. Other than that, however, he did a fine job of filling up a thirty-minute slot - the venue manager gave him a full thirty minutes, because apparently the buffet wasn't ready yet - all the while singing to one straggling concert-goer brave enough to stand within a hundred feet of the stage. She was either related, lost a bet, or was too conspicuously located to gracefully exit once he began doing unspeakable things to his guitar and the very idea of music. Needless to say, the crowd needed no prompting to begin clapping as he left the stage.

Exhibit B was exponentially better than their predecessor. Just some college dropouts that decided to put a band together. You know, to play some rock 'n roll or something. They weren't breaking any new ground, just the occasional string. The guitarist was a joy to watch. He had the gaunt, disinterested rock star look that only a Britpop wannabe can have. Constantly smoking and dramatically ripping out chords one at a time, he is proof that rock 'n roll is never natural, it must be constantly forced, with awkward and spastic energy, from the instrument. Exhibit B did a credible job of keeping the masses drinking and clumsily dancing. There was energy that only skinny white guys with guitars can deliver, and they were in tune. What's not to like?

Exhibit C broke the mold quite heavily with their bizarre blend of a freeform rock, fusion-jazz, techno-reggae, polka-grunge type of thing. It was a confusing mix of styles that left the band as bewildered as the audience. As the three minutes of feedback started their performance, no one was sure if it was part of a song, or if they were just really that bad at plugging in and tuning their instruments. Eventually, the drummer decided to give it a beat, and they just went with it. Throughout the entire set, the band members could be seen shaking their heads at each other. They only played two songs, but they were each fifteen minutes long. The band announced from stage that they were busy working on their demo, and the only response from the crowd was a guy asking a neighbor if they were going to finish their beer.

And the stories continue on like that, each with suitable moral lessons for you to digest. But your biggest moral dilemma will be figuring out how you are going to eat without resorting to knocking over a liquor store just outside of town. You will have to be prepared to not make any money from shows, because once the biker bar in a town 200 miles away actually agrees to pay you \$50 for a set, and then you factor in gas money, a small fee to your cousin for letting you use his van, and then Zingers and chocolate milk at the gas station for food both ways... you're actually already in the red.

Which finally brings us to the chapter on cooking, because to survive you are going to have to get mighty creative with the food you prepare for yourself. For the beginning struggling musician, there is really nothing to eat except for raman noodles. Three meals a day for several years you will eat nothing but this simple food staple. It's cheap, filling, and will have you crying like a stuck pig in less than a week. But after a couple of years of doing time, as it were, you will probably be able to move up to a more exciting level of culinary delight. This next phase will have you needing to become accustomed to two things: peanut butter, and macaroni and cheese. There are over sixty recipes involving both of these ingredients that will yield some interesting and unforgettable dishes. And thirty of those involve using both peanut butter and macaroni and cheese together. Bon appŽtit.

But perhaps my foreword here has come off as a bit harsh to you personally, what with its making fun of your lack of musical ability and hope for the future and all. But the reason for it is this - and listen very closely, because this is actually the point of the book that the author is trying to make: only the strong will survive. There are approximately eighty-seven million struggling musicians in the United States alone, so the only thing that will set you apart from the herd is your tough-as-nails, "I could care less how much you make fun of me and my lack of talent" attitude. That's all that will get you through. In the end, if you are willing to put in some hard work, make tons of sacrifices, have lots of friends that want to bum a smoke off you, and maybe learn how to use a capo, you might just have what it takes to be a struggling musician. And that's where the real adventure starts. This book is a road map to the exciting world of crashing on a stranger's couch, so borrow your cousin's van and don't stop the rocking!

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## Travel Guide To Burma

It is interesting that the subject of travel should come up, because, as it just so happens, I was thinking of doing a bit of traveling myself sometime in the near future. Now granted, I am a man of the world. I have been around. As you might well imagine, I have been known to have occasionally "been there" and to have periodically "done that."

I'm not exactly sure where that might be, or what that might have been, but you can rest assured this evening, as you are sipping your chai tea and channel-surfing with your digital cable, that... well, ok, even if I haven't actually been there, and even if I would never do that, no matter how much money you threw my way, you had better believe that if I were to lower my standards that I would be the best there, doing that. Any happening world traveler should be able to say as much. And I most certainly am that thing. The world traveler, that is.

Well, perhaps not the world insomuch as it encompasses the area outside of the United States. Actually, the phrase United States itself might be a little misleading, as even it tends to encompass quite a large area of farmlands and pubs that haven't quite had the pleasure of my scrutiny.

Now that I think about it, Rhode Island is still a fairly daunting task for any man of the world. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I've "been around the block." Several, if you must know, and I am unafraid to explore more. Because really, if you have been around the block what have you, in fact, done? Yes indeed, you have traveled. You have risked the unknown and ventured outside of your poorly-lit basement long enough to see what wonders and mysteries lie beyond your everyday and out into the great unknown - the great unknown meaning, in effect, Mrs. Penderton's house.

The traveler uproots himself from his easy chair and screams out to the world, "Where is my remote? I know I left it around here somewhere... Oh, never mind, I'll just head down to the store and buy a new one." As you can see there is a little Lewis and Clark in all of us. And it is a spirit that continually yearns for more than can be found within the normal confines of the "9 to 5," past the borders of "the daily grind," around the block from the "same old, same old" and just up the street from the siren's song of the marathon known as the "rat race." Yes, I think it's safe to say that we all get a bit antsy and need to stretch our legs a little bit from time to time. So what do we do during those times? That's right, we travel.

And the subject of travel is what brings us to this book. For that's what it concerns itself with, the broader topic of travel. I would wager the time of day in Istanbul that it will not be so presumptuous as to suggest where one should travel. Heavens no, as that is a dreadfully bullish and snotty thing to push upon another. No, I think it's safe to say that this book will do what most great travel books throughout the centuries have done: inspire you to travel. Period. And then after that, you are on your own.

And neither will I be suggesting where you should go. In fact, I haven't the foggiest idea of where you are right now. Come to think of it, this whole conversation has become rather perplexing. Haven't you decided where it is that you'll be going? Why do you even need the book? If you want to go somewhere, just hop in your little boat and get going, don't waste your time reading about it. How much idle time are you given anyway? Are you on your lunch break? Are you stuck on the train? Is this just another book that will never leave the bathroom? Good heavens, man, get on with your life and stop wasting it reading! Nothing good ever came to anyone that just dawdled away their hours with a book that may or may not even be about the place they're visiting. Have you been to Burma? Do you know anyone that has? Well then, for all you know the pictures in this very book are actually from Burma that someone has forged off on you in attempts to sell a stupid book! (If for some reason this book actually ends up being a travel guide to Burma, then you can replace the references in the past few sentences with the township of Altoona, Pennsylvania.) So put this book down. What a stupid book! This is a stupid, stupid worthless book! I hate it. I hate it and I hate you. I hate all of you. You, over there, bring me my meds...

Ed. Note - I would like to apologize for the odd foreword presented by Dr. Turndevelt. It should be noted that at the present time he is experiencing a severe reaction to his sinus medication. The doctors assure us that it is only temporary, but we are in a bit of a time-crunch and need to go to print with this book. So whatever his condition, time is money and books need to be sold. However, it will now be our policy to require book contributors to undergo a rigorous, but fair, drug-screening test before being assigned to projects for our company. We feel that in this day and age, what with cold medicines being so popular amongst the young people, that we need to take a stand against the rampant tide of substance abuse that is sweeping around our little country and carrying off our brightest and best in it's deathly-tight, talon-like clutches. Thanks in advance for your understanding and support. A portion of the proceeds from the sale of this book will go towards the ongoing fight against over-the-counter medicine, or "dope" as it is more commonly known.

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## The Max Peters Mystery Anthology

I wasn't looking for a new book foreword assignment, but sometimes opportunities just sort of fall into your lap. Literally. This one fell a little harder than most, and almost positioned itself so as to be painful in a very tender location. If I hadn't been reading a paper in my editor's office, I might have seen it coming, pointy corners and all. Either that or I would have felt freer to let out a little yelp after it had done its business. But as we all know, I am a professional, and will conduct myself in a professional manner regardless of how painful the circumstance might be. As it was, I just looked up in time to see a ponytail attached to a short, plodding woman who ambled away at a relaxed pace. On a normal day I might have cared who was tossing objects my way. But this was no ordinary day. This was a much-needed non-ordinary day. Because as soon as I stepped outside I was going to begin my weekend off: a long-deserved getaway to some of the more exotic casinos of the South, below the fabled Mason Dixon. I would be gone three days! Plus, it was also getting close to lunchtime and I had not yet had my soup, but I planned on doing that soon and hopefully afterwards it would magically transport me into a more content and alert state. Or would it...?

After the initial jolt of having something heavy and cornered thrown down onto my private regions, I decided it was best to look down and see what it was. It was a non-descript plain brown paper wrapper that was not so subtly encasing a large book. I decided to leave it wrapped due to my eagerness to begin my vacation. But walking out of any building with a plain brown paper wrapper-covered object is simply screaming for someone to investigate you and your various deeds and goings-on. I'm not exactly sure how plain brown paper wrappers came to deserve this treatment, but I would guess that it has something to do with criminals being notoriously cheap and frugal when it comes to supplies for their trade. A noble quality, but it really hasn't done too much to help the rest of us that are also cheap and frugal. But at least the generic wrapper gave me a good couple of seconds of distraction to scurry out before anyone realized that I had neither signed in nor out during my visit. Plus, I really didn't care what was in the wrapper. Most people would care. Normal people would be curious. But like I said, I was about to be on vacation. Little did I know that it was a vacation of... Murder!

Well, perhaps that's not entirely true. But after I had finished scurrying out of the building, nervously darting my eyes this way and that, and then back this way, I was sufficiently ready to go grab some lunch. There is a little diner just a few blocks down from the office that I enjoy visiting whenever I am in the area, so I made a quick stop at my car, just long enough to throw the not-so-sneakily disguised book in the back seat.

It was an enjoyable walk over to the diner, but something felt weird, odd, and almost different-like. I tried to brush the feeling aside and just enjoy the nice summer heat, and the sunshine beating down on my face. As I approached the entrance to the diner, I happened to glance up at the sign. Part of the neon was buzzing and flickering, creating a lazy strobe effect on the letter E. "Strange," I thought to myself, "the letter E is usually fine..." But I quickly brushed the thought aside as a minor flaw that would soon be attended to, and stepped inside to take a seat at my favorite booth. After all, I was on vacation, and vacation is no time to notice things out of the ordinary. Or at least that's what they wanted me to believe...

The corn chowder was a tad bit saltier than usual, but still rich with wholesome corn goodness, so I was satiated. But the fruit salad was also salty, and so was the apple pie a la mode. In fact, it was really salty. Just at that moment, a waitress came by with a coffee pot. The only problem was that she was not my original waitress, and I had never seen this particular woman before in my life. And I was not drinking coffee. "Would you care for some more coffee, sir?" she asked. "Actually, I'm not drinking coffee, I just have water" I replied. "But I could go for a refill, please." She nodded as she turned around and said "I'll be back in just a minute." I took it all in stride, because to be quite frank, I'm a savage hunk of a man. Women are drawn to me, and often rendered confused and/or speechless in the process. My raw, musky odors lure them into my web of manliness and they just can't help themselves. Some will wink, others are more likely to offer me coffee even though I am obviously not drinking any, and then still others will just swoon and faint. But saying "I'll be back in just a minute"... that's a new one. I wasn't quite sure what to make of it. As I've stated before, the fact that I

was on vacation probably clouded my reasoning a bit. But then, perhaps someone was just waiting for me to let my guard down...

True to her word, she did indeed come back, and this time brought more water. When I asked for my check, she pulled a pen out from behind her ear and scribbled some numbers on a slip of paper and said, "Have a nice day, Hon." Her quaintness amused me, but yet also left me baffled. What were these numbers she scribbled down? I left some money on the table, but discreetly placed the scribbled piece of paper in my pocket. I had a feeling that there was more going on here than met the eye.

Further down the road I made a quick stop at the convenience store of my choosing to pick up some travel food for the adventures that awaited me on my trip to visit the various and exciting casinos of this great land of ours - or at least those within a 300-mile radius. It is important that one prepares oneself properly for such trips, because the likelihood of being stranded out in the middle of nowhere without a bag of sunflower seeds is a very real and dangerous probability in this day and age. And I have learned the hard way from past journeys how devastating this can be. But as I was procuring snack items and filling my vehicle up with rich, delicious petrol, I couldn't help but sense a foreboding presence emanating from the back seat of my car. Somewhere in the general vicinity of the plain brown paper wrapper, strange and eerie vibes were darting around, bumping into one another and saying "Pardon me, I didn't see you there." But more than that, I could sense that everyone else I ran into could also tell that I must be harboring some dark secret on the worn back seat of my '91 Yugo.

I stepped up to the cash register to finalize my purchases and the attendant cryptically asked, "Will that be all?" I was taken aback, as I had purposefully laid everything down on the counter that I had been carrying. "Yes, of course. Is that not enough? Should there be something else?" I replied inquisitively, as if to suggest that this stranger might be able to provide me with some secret information. "No, I just wanted to make sure that was everything," he responded. It was not overtly obvious, but I could have sworn that he winked. I in turn replied, "I'm pretty sure that's everything." My response was slow and careful, as I did not want to raise any undue suspicion. "Very good, so I'll just ring up these items then," he said dramatically, as if waiting for me to interject with my own secret information. "Yes, that would be fine. Thank you." My words indicated a note of finality to the exchange, but even though his hands were busy scanning the items on the counter, our eyes never strayed from their constant lock on one another, as if a stare-down was the only way to decide the winner of this round.

I exited the store slowly, being careful to check behind me in case anyone was following. They weren't... or were they? But as the coast appeared to be clear, I proceeded to get in my car and begin the journey home. Fortunately for me, it is not a great distance from the store to my house, which was a relief because my nerves were already frazzled from the bizarre activities of the day, and I wanted nothing more than to be safely home for a few minutes to gather my things and my thoughts. And my medication.

I opened the front door of my house and was greeted with a strange, unsettling silence. It wasn't just the fact that there was no sound... well, actually I guess that is more or less the gist of it. But it was strange nonetheless. So I set the ominously mysterious plain brown paper wrapped book down. Way down, on the floor next to my easy chair. It was not going to startle me. It couldn't slide or fall and cause me further alarm, because it was already on the floor, and that's about as far down as it could possibly go. I turned on the lights and the air conditioner to bring some artificial activity back to my dwelling. But as I reached for my meds, my sweet, candy-like meds, I was suddenly struck with the realization that I had forgotten to get my prescription refilled. This was very strange, because usually I pay very careful attention to my prescriptions, and can generally be counted on to jump the gun and try to get them before it's time. In fact, my pharmacist, Jimmy, will often jokingly comment "I declare, Lewis, you'd think you were coming in here for medicinal marijuana, the way you were waiting outside the store for us to open. Ha ha ha..."

(As a side note, I've always wondered about medicinal marijuana and how it comes packaged. I assume you



can't get it filled by your local pharmacist, so do you just take a scribbled doctor's note to your local pusher and he then goes through the trouble of contacting your insurance company so that it will go towards your premiums? And do they still roll it up into those cheap looking little joints or are they professionally manufactured, like cigarettes? And if you are allowed to use them for medical reasons, are you then also allowed to do so in public, simply explaining to the server at the bar "Oh, it's ok. I have a doctor's note." So many questions, and yet so little time to properly formulate my own wild theories. Why? Because as I stated earlier I am trying to leave town on vacation, and it's very difficult to stay on task when I keep getting sidetracked by my overactive imagination. As you well know, I could discuss medicinal marijuana all day if you let me. So you must not let me. You must put your foot down and say, "No, Lewis, you have been on this parenthetical aside for far too long as it is. Please focus and finish what you were saying." And, as always, you would be right in correcting me. And I would thank you.)

But the realization that I would not be traveling with a full prescription - of this or any other drug for that matter - put a serious kink into my plans. It was almost as if someone were purposefully trying to stop me from taking this vacation. It's almost as if, and I hate to even utter the word, but it's like it was almost a case of... Sabotage!

And that's when I remembered the book. The plain brown paper wrapper of a book that had heralded the start of all these strange happenings. What was in that book? What was it about? Oh, how would we ever find out? It was a mystery. It seemed to be a riddle wrapped up in an enigma, deep-fried in a medium of puzzling obscurity, and served with a side of conundrum, and salad. Somehow I knew that I would never get to the bottom of this whole thing until I ripped that mocking wrapper off the book and exposed it for what it really was. So that's what I set out to do. No, I was not afraid of the book and so I decided to just walk over there pronto and do just that. Yes, I would begin walking shortly. Probably... Eventually... Well, maybe as soon as I managed to take my hand off the cabinet door to my precious medicine and begin actually moving. Yes, maybe then is when it would happen...

(Insert large space of unaccounted for time here... probably as a result of a sugar-induced blackout from the salty pie a la mode, which of course needed extra packets of sugar dumped on top to help mask the saltiness...)

I don't recall how, but I did manage to begin moving toward my easy chair. My head began swimming, and I feared that I would lose my balance and reel straight into the coffee table. But it's important to keep as much focus and presence of mind as you can. Must... move... feet...forward... I could feel myself losing control of my body and its various functions, and I became aware that I was indeed moving but I had no control over it. All I knew was that I... must... solve...mystery...!

Upon finally sitting my soiled pants down on my easy chair, I decided that I would finally open up my mysterious plain brown paper wrapper package, and see just what this book was all about. Well, grab me by the curly locks and call me Shirley Temple! If it wasn't the latest installment in the famous Max Peters: Private Eye series, by that daring young novelist Dirk Feltz. This particular book was a collection of short stories featuring the sly Mr. Peters, entitled The Max Peters Mystery Anthology.

It's not often that I am giddy with excitement upon receiving a book foreword assignment, but this was a rare treat. Mainly because Mr. Feltz is actually a good author and the Max Peters franchise is successful. I was glad to finally be able to attach my own name to something without spending days wracking my brain for whether or not I should hide behind a pseudonym, in order to mask the crippling shame that invariably comes from writing a foreword to yet another lesser piece of literature. The other thing I was happy about was the fact that, as a self-proclaimed Max Peters fan, I already had the next book, and therefore would not have to wait in those excruciatingly long lines at the bookstore at midnight with all the other freaks who would no doubt be dressed in elaborate Max Peters costumes, simply to be the first on my block with a copy. Because that battle was already won. I had the copy right in my hands. As well as a formerly mysterious plain brown paper wrapper to go along with it.

But the best part of it all is that I was finally afforded the opportunity to share with the world my thoughts on why Dirk Feltz and his Max Peters series is perhaps the finest writing of the past twenty years. It's marvelous, and full of mystery, and men smoking pipes. I love it! Because in this day and age, with our microwave pizzas and our instant pudding, we have become addicted to the automatic and the automated. And because of that, the fine art of hiring someone to snoop around for you has been lost. Because now we simply just "log on" to the Internet and "download" any item you please, and there is a whole world of unverified information available at our fingertips. But the Max Peters series magically whisks us back - even though it's set in the present - to a simpler time when a bumbling gumshoe could pull an all-nighter and get to the bottom of a crime for you, lickety-split. And also provide some grainy, poorly lit surveillance photographs as evidence.

And then there are the pipes. People don't smoke pipes enough these days. No, they're too health-conscious and worried about cancer and all manner of made-up ailments that are nothing more than a ruse to keep you buying expensive prescription drugs - although the drugs are pretty good, so don't conclude from this that I'm knocking the drugs. But in the process we have lost sight of why pipe smoking was so important to us in the first place: because it looks cool. And it characterizes mystery. Personally, I wouldn't trust a detective that didn't have a pipe. Sherlock Holmes had a pipe and that should be reason enough right there. But so does Max Peters. And that's just one of the many touches that make the character so believable and authentic. Another is that he drinks scotch and mumbles a lot. And nothing says sleuth quite like a mumbling alcoholic. Granted, there are other mumbling alcoholics that aren't detectives, but they usually don't smoke pipes, and that's the important distinction that I think Dirk Feltz is trying to make.

But gently nuanced characters are only one of the ingredients to the Max Peters success formula. Another key one is actually creating a good mystery, which is so important for mystery novels these days. I can't tell you how frustrated I have become with other mystery books of the past few years. At its essence, a mystery should confuse and bewilder us. We should be so swept into the tangled web of the story that we forget to bathe for days on end. We should walk around the streets of our town, dirty and unshaven, thinking "I know that the knife had traces of Penelope's fingerprints on it, but doesn't the fact that it was found at Captain Ketchup's house make Victor the murderer? But how can Victor be the murderer if the butler has already confessed to the crime? Is he secretly covering for someone? But also the butler was seen smoking a pipe, which means that something mysterious must be going on..."

That should be the level of our confusion. But lately I am finding that mysteries are not even compelling enough to cause me to forget my car keys. And if you know me, you know how easily I can become confused, so the fact that this minimum level of confusion - let's call it the "Lewis Confusion Threshold" - is not being met should really tell you something. It should tell you that there is a very good reason why Dirk Feltz is the most popular mystery writer today: his books are the most confusing. And I love them!

For all of the fans out there, this is the collection we have been waiting for. In amongst all the short stories, some of which pre-date the first official Max Peters books, we will finally be able to piece together some of the history about Max that has only been hinted at up until now. Where he came from, why he writes with his left hand but plays tennis with his right, how he keeps his pipe lit while smoking in the rain. Yes, this collection, along with being a series of entertaining stories, will plunge us ever deeper into the mysterious world of Peters and his private dick ways.

But for those of you that might be new to the series - and if you are, you should be ashamed for hiding under your rock for so long - then this is a grand introduction into what makes the world's foremost detective tick. I'd love to give you an example but I fear that if I begin retelling, I will just blab my silly head off and give away some spoiler. And besides, it's much more interesting to hear it straight from the mouth of Max Peters himself. Mainly because of the whole mumbling thing.

So dig in gentle reader to the joys of a good mystery. Settle in with a nice tall glass of scotch and let either it or the story whisk you magically away.

## \*\*\*\*\* Section 3: The Intermission \*\*\*\*\*

## Intermission Foreword

Old Age. There's something about it that makes me want to talk like a feed salesman every time I get an ailment. Because dad-tooting-blasted, the achings have started up again and I don't know if it just means another cold snap is headed our way, or whether I should rethink telling Old Man Crenshaw that planting soybeans is good for this next season. Either way, I'm a-creaking and a-squeaking, and I need to haul my posterior - that has it's own problems that I won't go into right now, seeing as how some of the lady-folk may be reading and I don't wish to offend - over to old Doc Weston's and get myself looked over.

Problem 1: My bursitis is acting up again, and I fear that my shoulder sockets are just going to give up the fight one of these days. There is a burning sensation that starts at the joint, and then spreads outward like an exploding pi-ata, only without the presents and the thrill of the hunt. Hopefully they can hook me up with something stronger than just cortisone this time. Don't get me wrong, I'm thankful for taking the swelling down a notch, but I don't really feel that I've gotten my money's worth from the doctor unless I'm good and loopy when I leave. Go ahead, Doc, give me some of the good stuff. I'm a big boy, I can handle it. I know that last time I got a little too friendly with the nurses - who really shouldn't be wearing those cute skirts around guys that are high on pain killers - but given the circumstances they should be used to that kind of behavior. But if they would just go ahead and give the full dosage, everything will be fine. That's what I'm paying for.

Problem 2: I'll try to be as discreet with this as I can, but I have what is called in the medical profession as urethritis. Basically, it hurts when I wee-wee. And when you get to be my age, going wee-wee is a precious thing, both when you mean to and sometimes when you don't. So I need to get that checked out. Fortunately, Doc is used to my visits by now and our coughing sessions are about as relaxed and pleasant as they can be between two grown men. And while he's prescribing a treatment, it will be a good chance for the two of us to finally hash out once and for all how the Packers are going to do this season, and whether the Vikings are going to be a factor or not. We'll call them the V-factor, because it's important to create your own inside slang when discussing sports and analyzing the competition.

Problem 3: This one isn't medical, but since I'm going to be contributing to a lot of lab work over the next few days, and this book needs to stay on schedule, I can't afford to let this time go to waste. I was talking to my editor the other day, and he said, "Look, Lewis, I know about the problems you have urinating. I think by now you've told all of us about your problems. But we have to get this book done. I don't care how you do it, just stay on schedule. Have the doctor jot some stuff down for it while he's scribbling up some prescriptions, I don't care. And when can I see a rough draft, or even page one of this stupid book?" This struck me as a bit odd, since usually he does care. He cares a lot, to the point of being a nuisance. But something in his insensitive bedside manner lit a fire under my fanny that just will not go out, so I've devised a plan that might be crazy enough to work.

Solution: Fortunately, my ever-able assistant - who is urinating just fine, from what she tells me - has agreed to fill in for me over the next few days. I plan on being pretty doped up, courtesy of modern science, and probably not in the best frame of mind to be writing things that I don't want to regret later, so I feel confident that she at least can't do any worse. Her name is Valerie P. Groundwater, and since she is constantly doing fact-checking and research work for me, she is familiar with this particular project, and its inherent challenges and obstacles. I have given her a couple of titles to hash out - titles that, just between you and me, I had been avoiding anyway. I've never actually seen her writing skills in action, but she does have excellent penmanship, and that has to be worth something.

So during the next few pages, you will be taken on a wild ride through Valerie's brain as she courageously tackles some forewords that have literally been on the backburner for some time, as my kitchen also doubles as an extra study... mainly because I am quite fond of the take-out food. I have encouraged her to make these

forewords as insightful as possible, but as long as she clearly labels them as her own work and not mine, I guess I could really care less how they turn out. Either way, I'm sure you will enjoy them as much as you would have otherwise, had I not given you this long disclaimer, but I just wanted you to understand that I am about to have my inflamed shoulder attended to. And did I mention the drugs? The sweet, candy-like drugs that they should be giving me? I can't be held responsible for what goes on while I am under the knife, which is just a form of expression, and I can only hope that a knife goes nowhere near my urethritis-inflicted area.

But please do enjoy the next few pages, and when I return I will resume the forewords with vigor, and with a new lease on life that can only come with pain-free urination and a non-inflamed shoulder socket. God bless the medical profession and that voodoo that they do. And God bless Valerie who, by the way, should probably drive me back from the doctor's office, given the potency of the drugs I anticipate demanding.

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#### Definitive Beanie Baby Pricing Guide for July 1997 Foreword by Valerie P. Groundwater

It is my understanding from reliable sources within the book publishing industry that this book is already scheduled for the bargain bins. And since it hasn't even been published yet, this can only mean that the powers that be have decided that beanie babies are no longer a liquid commodity. I mean, how dare they, and who gets to make these decisions? This is the deepest of shames, since they were once the red-hot hope of the toy collectible market.

But putting aside for the moment our sorrow and anguish at this sad state of affairs, it is still important to note that for all practical purposes, July of 1997 represented the pinnacle of beanie baby hysteria - or at least it did for me, and I can only guess that that excitement was mirrored by so many others around the world. This pricing guide represents an important snapshot of consumer trends from the mid- to late-1990's. Beanie babies proved the pundits wrong by showing that, yes, people will indeed pay outrageous sums for sweatshop produced beanbag paperweights.

It was a carefree time in our nation's history. We were not yet aware of the naughty shenanigans of the President, and we hadn't yet felt the bitter sting of Microsoft antitrust trials. However, the Spice Girls had topped the album charts, so it wasn't all good times... Concerned, but not too concerned, is how I guess you would have described us. And frenzied toy shoppers all, although I guess you could say that some were just jumping on the bandwagon.

But to help set the stage for this discussion, let us first go back in time a bit. The year? 1995. The place? Iowa State University. I was a sophomore majoring in International Micro-Economics. It was as interesting as it sounds, and so I needed a diversion, and fast. Many of my sorority sisters had mentioned that having a "hobby" was the new big thing. It seemed like everyone was finding one of these hobbies, and I certainly didn't want to be left out of the fun. So one weekend I blocked off an entire Saturday for the sole purpose of finding my own hobby. Something that would be interesting and meaningful to me. Something that I could pour my heart and soul and every available free moment into. Something that would become such a fanatical obsession that the average run of man would look upon me with a generous mix of both fear and pity.

I thought about stamp collecting, but knowing my love for licking and sticking, the temptation to use them would have, in the end, overpowered me. I researched taxidermy and had almost settled on becoming an expert on wild exotic game, until I discovered an antiquated law in the school handbook forbidding dead animals in the dorm rooms. I even thought for the better part of an hour about becoming a Trekkie, but given the fact that I can barely remember where I put my keys, I knew there would be no way in Dr. Helen Noel that I could keep track of all those episodes and minor characters. "I'm sure it would have been fun," she said and stared off into space, the final frontier...

But I kept searching, knowing that the perfect hobby had to be just around the corner. And sure enough it was. I turned the corner, and there sat a little girl in front of the fabric store waiting for her mother, playing with two little dolls that seemed to be flimsy teddy bears.

"Hi there! What you got, are those some of your favorite dolls?" I asked. "Yeah, these are my new beanie babies. I just got them today," she replied. "Wow, those are really pretty. What did you name them?" "Oh, I didn't name them. They already come with names. See." She then showed me the little booklet things that were still attached to their butts. "Pretty neat-o! I like them." "Thanks, I hope to get more soon and add them to my collection."

And at the word 'collection,' a light bulb went on over my head. It was the cheap fluorescents in front of the fabric store that were triggered to come on at 6pm, but they reminded me that the day was almost over and I hadn't settled on a hobby. I looked at the girl's dolls, then back at my watch, then back at the dolls, and then at my car, and then the dolls again, and then the Jiffy Lube across the street. After several minutes of this I finally thought to myself, "Hey, you could just collect some of these beanie thingies. You know, like the girl that's sitting right down there in front of you." Usually when I hear voices in my head they are much more hostile and sinister sounding, but this actually seemed like a pretty good idea. "Yeah... Yeah! I think I'll do just that!"

So I pushed over the little girl, grabbed her dolls, and was out of there faster than a pekinese on speed. Her crying only lasted a few seconds, or until I was out of earshot, but the impact that impulsive decision had on my valuable free time was felt not only that semester, and the next, and perhaps not as much the one after that - as I had a couple of short-lived boyfriends that could not understand the thrill of beanie trade shows - but definitely on into the rest of my remaining college semesters and beyond. I graduated with honors and then quickly tossed my diploma into the trashcan and decided that I wanted to get into writing. I had never heard my father yell that ferociously and with such profane language. So I eventually moved away from Iowa, and now the yelling only pops up occasionally on the phone.

But that's how I got started in the fabulous world of collecting beanie babies. Since then I have pushed down many more youngsters in an effort to beef up my collection. Now I have over 350, including some rare misprints, like one that was accidentally manufactured with eight eyes. Oh sure, there have been some ebbs and flows in beanie popularity as a whole, but there are still dedicated collectors all over the world that will regularly post on Internet sites daily about the latest releases from Singapore.

And really, it's for those dedicated fans that this book, chronicling the styles and prices of 1997, is intended. It was a banner year for beans. Now if you'll excuse me, there are some empty slots at the base of my rear windshield that desperately need to be restocked with fresh beanies. And if you see me on the highway, please follow the directions on my "Honk if you (heart) ty" bumper sticker. I feel the love every day.

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The Ice Cream Cookbook Foreword by Valerie P. Groundwater

I Scream! (Although it should be noted that I enjoy doing this regularly, so that there is no need for concern on this particular occasion.)

You Scream! (And I see that I'm not the only one that enjoys a good throat-clearing. Truly the world should learn to celebrate its unity as well as its diversity.)

We All Scream For Ice Cream! (We all scream for any number of reasons, but ice cream is generally as good a reason as most.)

As you can clearly see, there is quite a bit of screaming that has been going on lately. The noise is deafening, and I can only wonder what kind of example we are setting for the children. The children that, as luck would have it, are also screaming. But as children so often do, they have taken this whole screaming thing and just gone way too far with it. We hear the little ones screaming out commands at the grocery store. We see the precious young'uns with heads tilted back and full orthodontia exposed in the cars that whiz by on the streets. And we even catch the tiny tykes bawling while tugging the base of their parents' garments at the convenience stores. And why? Why are they doing all this? Why can't they just leave everyone alone for five measly minutes?!!

Children may be small and possess curious odors, but they also wield strong and mysterious powers. And they're smart too. Man, can those little jokers mess with your mind. They know how to push your buttons, and they will just keep pushing them until you finally give in and give them what they want - and if you don't give in, they will just keep pushing and make your life miserable, which also suits them just fine. Which brings us to the subject of this book. You might have been thinking to yourself, "Stanley..."

(I should stop and point out here that your name may not be Stanley. In fact, your name probably isn't Stanley, nor is it anything even remotely close. The law of averages says that it probably doesn't even start with the letter 'S.' Oh, it very well could, but given the fact that the twenty-six letters of the English language can be arranged in such a way as to offer an almost infinite possibility of names, there really isn't a name that I could have picked out that would have been any more appropriate than the one I did. Except for perhaps 'Lisa.' That seems to be a pretty popular name. Or maybe 'Jason.' Seems you can't walk five feet without bumping into a Jason these days. But really, even if your name is Stanley, you probably are not in the habit of speaking of yourself in the third-person, or at least of doing so audibly. And I'm sure I don't need to tell you that it is not good practice to do this in public places. But be that as it may...)

So you were probably thinking to yourself, "Stanley, just what is it that all these children want?" You are right to ask these questions of yourself. These tough, perplexing riddles that get right to the core of who we are and why we're here and all that. But this particular one is rather easy. I direct your attention back to the beginning of this entry for the answer. And the answer is ice cream. The kids are screaming for it because they love it so. They love the way it tastes, they love the way it drips down onto the front of their shirts. And the detergent companies love to develop industrial-grade cleaners for you to use on those shirts. But the bottom line is that the kids, they love them some ice cream. Plain and simple.

But why this love? Why this strange chemical reaction that we call love? Where does it come from? What does it want from us? In order to answer this and many other questions of the day, I decided to do some research. I knew that if I was ever to get to the bottom of this whole ice cream business, then it was probably going to involve some long hours spent aimlessly typing ice cream related phrases in a search engine and clicking through some of the more promising results. But as it turns out, it didn't really help me that much. The charlatans at the Ice Cream Council - if that is the name of their secret organization, because I really have no idea - seem to want nothing more than to obscure the true facts of their beginnings, or even disclose the mechanics of their ill-gotten fortunes. As a consumer, I should probably be outraged at this, at being nothing more than a mindless contributor to their oversized coffers of money, and a helpless pawn to their dastardly schemes. However, it turns out that I'm not. I'm really not that outraged at all, and they're more than welcome to keep their secrets to themselves. But I will be glad to tell you what little I did find out.

The history of ice cream is sketchy at best, and completely unhelpful at worst. Differing accounts pin its beginnings at anywhere from the 13th on up to the 18th centuries. Other stories can't even settle on the accepted inventor or innovator of the dish. About the only thing that we do know with any amount of certainty is that my first vivid memory of ice cream occurred on the front porch of our family's home when I was approximately five years old. We took turns with the hand-cranked wooden tub and kept adding in ice and salt around the metal canister of (hopefully) icing cream. We did this ad nauseam for what seemed like weeks. But eventually the ice cream we produced was both sweet and rewarding. And frozen, thank you.

Had ice cream existed before that point? It's quite possible, seeing as we Groundwaters weren't quite as experimental with our culinary dishes as some of the neighbors seemed to be. But again it would be mere speculation for me to hypothesize any further. Suffice it to say that as far as I'm concerned, ice cream started on that hot summer's day when I was five, and it was most definitely vanilla. Of that much we can be sure.

But my story is not unique. No sir or madam. In fact, literally millions of people have similar memories rolling around in their brains just for the taking. All they have to do is think for a few seconds and there they have it. It seems that we all were exposed to this creamy ice at an early age. Our sugar addictions perhaps stunted the growth of our young, developing bodies, causing mild but tangible skews in our chemical makeup that forever changed how we would function and reason with the outside world. The craving for sugary ice cream began as pleasure, then twisted itself into a burning passion, and eventually spiraled downward into a dark, abysmal addiction. Our screams began early, as our bodies, aching from the pains of withdrawal, cried out for the salve that only a chocolate fudge swirl on a sugar cone could provide.

So after centuries of screaming and fussing and pouting and crying, the enterprising author of this book woke up one day and said, "Stanley," - and in this case it makes perfect sense, because the author's name is actually Stanley, and he freely admits his fondness for speaking to himself in this manner - "enough already! The only way that these kids are going to shut their yappers and finish their dinner is to somehow make ice cream part of a well-balanced meal." And so Stanley set out to do just that.

A lot of people think that ice cream is just something sweet and creamy that you eat for dessert. That's true. Well, at least it used to be true until this book came out. Now it's a bit more complicated than that. Deep within these pages, you will discover a plethora of recipes that present ice cream as a versatile food group unto itself that can be suited for any occasion. Sure, there are the traditional chocolates and vanillas that you may want to pull out for whenever your sweet tooth needs a soft, cool place to rest. But this innovative guide shows you how ice cream can also be used to function as any part of a meal.

Perhaps one of the most overlooked occasions for ice cream is as an entrée. Not only does ice cream not have to be for dessert, but it also doesn't have to be sweet. The mouth-watering "Broccoli Ice Cream Au Gratin" is sure to become a favorite at your table, and serve as a push broom of radical menu planning to carefully sweep those antiquated ideas of ice cream's proper role safely under the table. The intriguing "Beef Wellington Ice Cream" is perfect for when you want to have both a formal dinner and one that also includes ice cream as a main course. And what cookbook would be complete without a few recipes that go South of the Border, such as the delicious "Enchilada Tamale Casserole Ice Cream." Just one bite and your kids will be sure to say, "Ole! Mas helado, por favor!"

But the point of this cookbook is that ice cream is really for any and every part of the meal. Looking for a good appetizer or party snack? We'll show you how to take some frozen tomato juice, onions, peppers and spices and turn it into "Salsa Ice Cream." Want to whip up a quick and easy salad? We'll show you how a food processor and a freezer can turn ordinary cabbage into "Coleslaw Ice Cream." And for the college student that just needs to make a little snack at 3am to help him finish studying for that final exam that's only five hours later, there's nothing better than the "Peanut Butter and Jelly Ice Cream Sandwich" - sandwich not included, it's just a clever name.

And for those of you that might be scared off by some of the unconventional dishes and delights that have been created for this book, you can rest easy knowing that the basics are still covered. You'll find not one, not two, and not even three, but four whole chapters on plain old, ordinary, everyday dessert-like ice cream. We have scoured the entire globe to find this stuff. We have devoured cartons and cartons of ice cream, sacrificing our girlish figures and toned, muscular abs simply so that you can experience ice cream similar to that great hand-cranked pralines and cream at that Methodist potluck dinner in Mississippi. Do you remember that one? Man, that was some good stuff. You tried to get the recipe from that old lady, but she wasn't talking. Said it was an "old family secret." Well, never fear, we took care of that little problem. We had Granny taken out

back and roughed up good until she spilled the beans. After all, we have powerful friends in the book-publishing world, which is just another one of the wonderful benefits you'll derive from the purchase of this fine cookery book.

And finally, there is a new feature, the inventive "Create Your Own" section that lays out some of the basics you'll need to make your own flavorful ice cream concoctions. Just select an ingredient from each of the four columns on the page, mix them all together, then freeze, and you'll soon be enjoying hundreds of hours worth of creamy goodness. Because what we've learned, and what we hope that you'll soon find out, is that ice cream is nature's most versatile food. It's kind of like a sandwich. So just stick whatever you like inside and chow down.

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#### Interjection, Pt. 2 by The Editor

I am writing to you from underneath my desk. It is very dark and claustrophobic down here, but yet somehow warm and nurturing, much like a womb. It's also a bit like a nice winter sweater with no neck opening, but yet you put it on anyway because you like the feel of the virgin wool on your nose and forehead. I can't see much, save for my laptop computer, but somehow that seems enough.

Your main question is probably "Why?" As in "Why are you under your desk?" or perhaps even "Why do I care?" The answer is actually very simple: I'm insane. Yes, it's true. Officially and unequivocally mad. I am loopy, deranged, and a complete nutcase. I am any number of words or phrases that you can think of, all thrown into a blender and served the next day after having sat overnight at room temperature. So I guess that would make me spoiled as well. But yes, I am that, so the analogy still holds true. So let me start with the idea of being spoiled.

I am spoiled because throughout my career I have had the distinct pleasure and opportunity to work with many nice and wonderful authors. Gentlemen and Ladies every one, generally speaking. Most have been on the eccentric side, as writers tend to be, but for the most part very kind and accommodating individuals. A few were even cooking enthusiasts and saw fit to bring some of their concoctions by the office. We especially liked them and made sure that their book advances reflected our favoritism. The bulk of them were normal folk, largely with an inability to tell the correct time, but overall a bright and inquisitive bunch. Several loved tennis, and one was especially adept at cricket. A couple of them were even known to be convicted felons, but seeing as they were crime novelists we simply overlooked their extracurricular activities, considering it research. Writing books can be a messy thing at times, but we appreciate the diligence and excitement that most of our authors bring to their work.

I am insane because I thought that Dr. Turndevelt could be considered in that group of hypersensitive, but largely fun-loving and dependable, people. After all, when he wants to he can churn out a quality book foreword with the best of them. Or at least he has done so once in my presence, and I can only assume that he is the legitimate author of the rest that bear his name. Of course, the writing for his first book had already been completed when he submitted it for publication, but we felt confident that it was the result of a normal writing schedule. The current situation, however, is much more grim, as we currently have only received unrefined pieces of forewords, and even those have come in short spurts. They are hastily scribbled on paper and appear to be the work of a disoriented madman with horrible penmanship, and a penchant for leaving food and beverage stains on everything he touches. And they smell of cheese.

I'm not suggesting that we value speed and neatness in all of our authors, since hardly any of them are as prolific as some of our romance novelists tend to be, but at the same time it is generally reasonable to expect that we can see some progress - good progress, mind you - on working titles on occasion, even if they are not yet in a final form.



Well, Dr. Turndevelt has continually failed to consult me on this his latest book, choosing instead to communicate through these awkward, chicken-scratched documents, and now I receive some substitute pages from him that are instead penned - and neatly typed, I might add - by his secretary? This is inexcusable, and to be quite frank, I am losing my patience with the good Doctor. He's a small, dirty man and he always stares out the window whenever we've had a conversation. Eye contact is important, especially in business meetings, and the lack of it usually signals the veiled actions of a mischievous neer-do-well. In fact, I highly suspect that he's the one who has been stealing all the cinnamon scones out of our cafe on Fridays, but seeing as I have several departmental meetings on that day I have never been able to catch him red-handed. But I know it's him. I just know it. Oh, how I detest him...

But the point is that I was insane to ever negotiate the substantial book advance he received for this book. Given the runaway success of his first title, it was difficult to argue that the meager sum he had originally received would now be inadequate for an author of his growing stature. So we met over cold fish and flat ale at a dimly lit pub - which was, by the way, his choice and not mine, probably because it was very nearby where he was staying, and he is a notoriously lazy traveler - and renegotiated a contract. All well and good, mind you, since we don't mind rewarding success and we value our author relationships. However, we also expect those authors to... well, "author" on occasion. And I am becoming increasingly on edge about the status of Turndevelt's current work. After all, his second book is due for a fall release and the schedule cannot be changed at this point - for budget reasons, you know. Seeing as it is late summer and I have yet to see a competent manuscript, I think it's safe to say that the sweat stains on the pits of my dress shirts are not going to come out with the usual small dash of bleach. No, we are running out of bleach. And gin. And cigarettes. And come to think of it, our stash of morphine is getting dangerously low.

It's not that I hate Lewis specifically as a person, you understand... Well, actually I do. I can't think of a single human being that I loathe more. He is perhaps the only person I stock pictures of in my office, because I am regularly in a dire need for a new image on the dartboard, as well as fuel for my furnace. Nasty business, this world of publishing.

So I know that when we are short of our earnings for the year, and the reason is because one of my authors and his highly anticipated new release failed to materialize for the fall, it will be my scalp hanging on my boss' rearview mirror. I guess it matters little, seeing as I have pulled out what little hair I had remaining. And I might plead with my boss that it is hard to pressure an author that has made himself continually scarce, but my voice gave out long ago from shouting obscenities laced with Lewis' name.

In retrospect, underneath the desk is probably the safest place for me. I know that I can't fall over from exhaustion and I know that I can't impale myself on my letter opener, because it is way too high to reach now and I haven't the energy to get up. Ooh... wait a moment... Well, it would appear that I just found a stray staple that had been stuck in the carpet. Unlucky for me, I can always impale myself on this. It might be more annoying than it is fatal, but I don't have a lot of room for being picky, now do I? Damn staples.

\*\*\*\*\* Section 4: The Forewords, cont. \*\*\*\*\*

### The Culinary Art of McDonald's

Look, I'm going to go ahead and say it because someone has to: Mozart was a long-haired hippy of a no-talent musical hack. That's my bold statement for the day and I stand by it.

But perhaps I should explain that a little more, at least for the benefit of those that might actually still like this mediocre talent.

Somewhere lurking around in the shadows of western cultural history hides the frazzled, eccentric figure of one Mr. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. He was a prolific little guy that churned out quite a string of musical

gems. Operas upon operas, concertos out the wazoo, and of course some sonatas for dessert. But although many of them are quite catchy indeed and have even been whistled by large numbers of people that don't even intentionally listen to classical music, or perhaps even really know who Mozart was, we unfortunately have to consider the man a dismal failure.

The reasoning for this should be painfully simple and obvious, but for those of you that have great difficulty with the simple and obvious - economics majors, for one - I will do you the service of explaining it in detail. Every day people all over the world buy recorded music. They walk into their favorite store, or they order it through a website, and their buying criteria can only be based on one thing: quality. How do we know this? Well, it stands to reason that if someone is going to plunk down their hard-earned cash for some music, then they probably have a fair idea of what it is they will be getting. And if they know what it is they're getting, then that thing must be something that they consider to be of high value - or at least of higher value than the money they are letting go of. Now if we combine this sales experience with all the others being made around the world, we can get a fair and representative picture of what the world considers to be important and of quality. Granted, not all of us may agree with this collective decision, but it is still hard to argue the fact that the masses have spoken.

I'm reminded of all this as I sit listening to the radio. Station after station on the dial consist of nothing even remotely similar to Mozart, except for that one public broadcasting station that is being kept on the air by generous donations from listeners like you. But everything else is a far cry from a Symphony No. 40, or a La Nozze de Figaro, or even a Symphonie Concertante, for that matter. And although I'm in no position to judge whether this is a good or bad trend - my psychiatrist has recommended that I keep my opinions to myself - I can definitely say that Mozart is on his way out and has been for some time. Even go to your local record shop and you will surely find something from Mr. Mozart, but it will not be featured anywhere, and in fact it will probably be stuck way in the back of the store, occupying two short bins worth of space with Ludwig, Gustav, Franz and Richard. And they will all be comically out of alphabetical order.

And so we can look at the Billboard music charts to see what titles win this coveted spot of significance in our hearts. Because in art as it is in high school, popularity equals importance. And the most popular music must be the most important music, otherwise why would it be so popular? So the point of this whole exercise is to simply say that Barry Manilow, Michael Jackson... heck, even the late great Milli Vanilli are more important in the grand musical scheme of things than is one Mr. Wolfgang Amadeus "Loser" Mozart. And if he hasn't done so already, I would highly suggest that Wolfgang go ahead and hang it up now. Because his career is over.

But before you think that I just came here today to complain about Mozart and his inferior choices in chord progressions, think again. You see, that was just a diversionary tactic to pad this otherwise anemically sized foreword. What I actually wanted to talk to you about is the much more important subject of food. Music is all well and good, but you can't eat it. No, food is the wave of the future, and this book skips straight to the top of the Billboard food charts by focusing on the most important trend in food history, perhaps ever: McDonalds.

We've all seen the ads on television, the gaily decorated circus animals that run around with little children that seem to want nothing more in this life than the toys that come in their meals of happiness. Maybe they want to collect all four, or perhaps they simply want that one special movie trinket. Either way, the children have been dragging us kicking and screaming to these restaurants for decades now, and it seems as though parents simply cannot stand their ground because not only has the chain of McDonalds grown, but also their signs spell out their success story for all to see.

McDonalds signs have historically kept a running total of how many generic things they've served. Are they burgers? Are they customers? It really matters not at this point, because several milestones ago they rolled over into the "billions and billions" category. And once you get that high you might as well just stop counting whatever it was you were counting, because no one else can keep up with what you're doing. How many is a

billion? Well, technical definitions aside, it is way more than a "sizable sum" while just barely larger than a "ridiculously stupid amount." But these billions and billions of something have been flying off the shelves, directly into the large faces of diners around the world. Some say it's because of the wonderful taste. Others claim it is the exquisite aftertaste. I have my own theories that are more closely related to lust.

It would be difficult for me to accurately put into words the thrill that we all felt the first time our lips wrapped themselves sensuously around the buns of a Big Mac. Our bite was tender and inviting, as if to say to the sandwich, "Hi there, how's it going? I couldn't help but notice that you have big buns. I like that in a sandwich... What do you say you and me go over here and get better acquainted?" And your pickup line would have made more sense if you were not already seated in one of the obscenely hard booths licking the special sauce off the side of your mouth. I think it's fair to say that you are too impulsive for your own good. You'd much rather go for the "quickie" than to build a deep and meaningful lunch experience. But be that as it may, you remember this first encounter with fondness and longing, and with passion beating in your breast.

Why do we harbor such emotional memories about a sandwich, about mere sustenance? After all, there's not a whole lot of genius behind sticking some meat in between bread and serving it in a wrapper. Companies have been doing that for years with varying results, but still more or less in the same manner. And yet their actions seem to raise the same question that has baffled philosophers for centuries, namely "Do you want fries with that?" But the answer is never as simple as the question. Do I? Do I really want fries? And if so, is that what I want them with?

But regardless of your feelings towards fries with a burger, or a burger with fries - or either with me - there is one question that you have to admit has a very easy answer, and that is "What is the most popular restaurant chain in the world?" Well, for a few months during a scare several years ago it was Jack In The Box, but most of the time we would have to quickly respond with the answer of "McDonalds."

The arches of gold that beckon small children from upwards of twelve miles off the interstate are one of the most recognized symbols in the world. I have no statistics to back this up, and I will never go through the trouble of trying to locate any of these statistics - and Valerie is already occupied digging up some alarming photos of panda bears mating in captivity for a piece I'm doing about the National Zoo - but I think that it is safe to say that they are indeed one of the most recognized. In fact, if you doubt this at all, I invite you to prove me wrong. Go ahead, I'll wait...

Now that you're back, and humbled at the realization that once again I was right and you were not, perhaps we can continue on with our little foreword.

Really, the point that I was getting around to is very simple, and it is this: McDonalds is the best food in the world. Period. There is nothing else that can explain its massive and gargantuan success. There are literally millions of other dining opportunities, but for some reason people consistently keep McDonalds at the top of the heap. No one is forcing every Tom, Dick and Harry to dine there, it is purely a movement driven by the masses. So because of this, it stands to reason that this food, this glorious, heavenly food, should be examined and studied more thoroughly.

The Culinary Art of McDonalds seeks to do what no book before or henceforth should ever hope to do, and that is to unravel the mysteries of the McDonalds food menu. Within these pages you will find scientific guesses as to what might actually be in those nuggets of chicken. The secret sauce will not be so secret once we're done with it. And the seasonal favorite, the McRib sandwich, will be declassified so that you can enjoy this "hot dogs with barbeque sauce" delight at your convenience.

Finally, our chefs and dieticians will sit you down, shake a spatula in your direction, and have a frank discussion with you about not only the importance of having a well-balanced McDonalds meal, but also the proper way to enjoy your food for maximum gastronomic pleasure. Everything from sampling the meat for

firmness and color, all the way to advanced lessons in examining the milkshakes for proper bouquet and nutty aroma. Careful dining utensil placement and condiment handling will also be revealed so that you can have a leg up over the other amateur diners during your next restaurant visit.

There is a prevailing and misguided notion today that fast-food establishments lack the glamour and elegance of your more traditional "sit-down" restaurants. Again, this is obviously either completely wrong, or perhaps simply unimportant to the modern eater, because all I have to do is point back to an earlier paragraph about McDonalds unparalleled success, and well... I think that should speak for itself. But be that as it may, there is still no reason why you can't squeeze the most out of your next trip to the golden arches. We'll show you how. We'll give you the tools. And we'll even do it in person if you're buying lunch.

So speaking of lunch, I should probably get going. I'm hungry enough to super-size my meal, yet practical enough to forego the apple pie. But thanks to The Culinary Art of McDonalds I can now enjoy my drive-thru dinner, whatever it may be, with up to 60% more\* satisfaction than before. And once I finally get with the times and ditch this copy of Mozart's Clarinet Concerto from my CD player, I can complete my day's enjoyment by seeing if there's something good on the radio.

\*Satisfaction enhancement not guaranteed.

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"What if it isn't complete horse-hockey": Taking a Second Look at Phrenology

"These bumps on my head are growing. Perhaps I should go see a doctor," is a common phrase that you'll hear on the streets of America. Everyone is worried about his or her head. A scraped knee? That's nothing, because we know how knees work. A broken wrist? Don't worry about it, that kind of thing happens all the time. Urinating blood? Piece of cake, we'll just run some tests. But the minute you start mentioning problems with the head or the brain... well, that's another matter. "Why?" you may be asking. Because it just is. "Yeah, but really, why?" Look, I can't explain it all, but it's just one of those things.

Fortunately, there are other people, quite unlike me, that have made it a point to try to understand a thing or two about the brain. And that's not easy work, because as any doctor will tell you, "Good luck." But even more fortunately, you don't have to be a doctor to spend your time researching what makes this melon atop your body work its magic. At the start of the nineteenth century there came a race of men set upon unlocking the mysteries of the psyche and how it might actually be revealing itself through the bumps on your head.

Those brave pioneers were called phrenologists. Phrenology is the study of that whole thing. And that whole thing is defined more specifically as "examining your misshapen head for clues to the universe... or at least your personal private pain of a universe." Phrenologists are the guys that will examine your head for upwards of three and a half minutes, all the while thoughtfully murmuring things like "Hmmmm" and "very interesting." Then they will step back for a moment, nod in bemusement and begin consulting a small map that is also in the shape of a head. (Not your specific head, mind you, because they don't have the time to go around making a map of every single person's head. I mean, nobody has that kind of time. That's just crazy talk.) Then they will commence giving you a detailed description of who you are, what you should be doing with your life, how long you can expect to live and maybe even why you are urinating blood - because really, that could be anything. You might blink for a moment in disbelief and wonder, "That's amazing. How can he tell all of that stuff just from poking at my scalp? I really wish I had showered this morning instead of last night..."

The reason it seems so amazing is because it is. Phrenologists figured out long ago what the rest of us have been carelessly missing this whole time, and that is the fact that the bumps and the shape of our heads have deep, freaky, parallel-universe meanings. The bumps on your back mean nothing. And the gargantuan

swelling of your knee after that near-fatal football injury? Don't even give it another thought. The real meat of the puzzle lies nestled inside of your noggin. "Noggin meat," we call it. All of that spongy material that appears vaguely like matted down tripe with food coloring, that's where the action is.

To understand the brain, you first have to understand a little bit about sponges. Now we all know that according to scholarly research done by eavesdropping in on conversations in public places, that most people use something like 10-15% of their brain's capacity. It's sad and unfortunate, but according to the guys at the donut shop it's the truth. But let's assume for a second that that is also a big load of malarkey and that we actually use most of our brain's available living space. And then let's also assume that instead of being one big sponge, like the ones you use to mop the floor, that the brain is instead made up of a bunch of smaller sponges, like the kind you use to apply makeup. Each one of these little sponges controls a different part of your personality. One sponge may function as your center of compassion, while another sponge may have the unenviable task of regulating your violent temper. So every division of your character has it's own spongy thingy representing it. Are you still with me? If yes, then keep reading. If not, then go make yourself useful and fix me some lunch, because I'm starving.

The reason this is all so important is because these fully soaked sponges in your brain will be of varying shapes depending on how prevalent they are in a particular personality. Someone without much love for anyone else, well, their love sponge is fairly limp and puny looking. Someone else who just lives for dissecting everything you say, they may have a very full and soaked analytical sponge. And so each person, due to their respectively squeezed or saturated mind sponges, will have a different shaped head that conforms to which sponges are controlling them like puppets.

This is where phrenologists come in. These highly trained scalp-feelers will first limber up, and then let their fingers do the walking around your head. They will carefully rub around your cranial skin, all the while searching for these strategically placed bumps, which are actually your brain's way of signaling to the outside world for help. Phrenologists are simply the only ones that understand the signal. Their interpretation will depend upon how balanced of a person your scalp says you are. Which brings us back to the mumbling and unfinished exclamations of "Fascinating. That's a most unusual..." and "Now I've never seen..." and then finally back to "Hmmm... very interesting..."

Now a lot of "scientists" and "experts" - with their "degrees" and "medical training" - will try to tell you that phrenology is nothing more than a Farmers Almanac for the head, and that it's about as scientific as a call to the psychic hotline. They'll probably throw around some old, tired rhetoric about how understanding the brain and it's development of our distinct personalities should probably be left to doctors and scientists that have studied actual brain functions. Well, excuse me, but where is it written that scalp massagers can't add something to the discussion? I mean, why shouldn't we all take a crack at it? (And when I say that, I do not, of course, mean taking a literal crack at the skull with a hard, blunt instrument. I realize that a lot of the youth of the nation are confused by these exaggerations that we sometimes toss around in our everyday speech. So to clear up any misunderstandings and avoid any potential lawsuits being directed my way, I would just like to reiterate for the record: My offhanded comment was not intended to be an endorsement of cracking open someone's head to see how the innards work. Thank you.)

This book hopes to dispel some of those rumors. You know, the rumors that phrenology is nothing more than an antiquated quack science. Plus the other rumors that it was propagated by men who were nothing more than cheap tonic salesmen. And there's probably a ton of other rumors that I'm forgetting right now, but you get the idea. Hopefully this book will be the catalyst for a long and interesting national dialogue about the potential merits of having someone shuffle a bit of your hair out of the way and say "See this bump? That means you're crazy."

The premise of this book is "Sure, I know it all seems a little hokey, but what if everybody else is wrong and these guys turn out to be right? We'd all feel pretty silly then, now wouldn't we?" And so I urge you to pick

this thing up and actually read it. Don't just look at the intriguing diagrams and outdated photos, but really read the text with an open mind towards the benefits that these things, which if true - and again, the author is not necessarily saying that they are, but just trying to present both sides of the argument... and maybe sell a book - could have deep and freaky ramifications for science. But don't just take our word for it, read it for yourself. See what Phrenology has to offer you and all those strange little bumps on your head there.

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### The History of Olives

I have this friend who insists that when she was a young girl, one day after school during a freakishly severe bout of weather, a strong gust of wind caught hold of her and blew her three stories up into the air against the side of a building. True story. (Well, at least the fact that she thinks it happened. Not the actual story part of it, which is obviously the byproduct of never having received a puppy or some other such traumatic childhood memory, which resulted in her going crazy as a way to deal with the immense pain. She is currently still without a puppy, and so we keep her under close watch.)

Those of us that know her have done our best to assure her that no such thing ever happened. Through long, tedious, and often violent intervention sessions, we have finally succeeded in getting her to admit that perhaps three stories was a bit of an exaggeration. Maybe a couple inches while jumping is more like it. Or maybe falling backward while holding a large umbrella, but that's it. Due to our efforts she is now able to function again with the outside world, often even engaging others in semi-realistic dialogue about local restaurants or perhaps current events. As long as you keep her off the subject of wind, everything will be fine.

But my crazy friend is not the reason that I am writing this foreword today. It's merely a good example of how memories from our childhood can stay with us long into our adult years. There are countless documented cases of regressed anxieties and fears of adults that actually stem from childhood trauma, be they real or romanticized. In fact, most of them are just flat out false. You know, "lies." Like a kid that continually tells his mother "I didn't do it, it wasn't me," eventually he will even begin convincing himself of this. And so it is with other memories. There are all manner of tidbits of knowledge that we carry around with us from our schoolyard days that we've just never taken the time to re-evaluate and properly filter. Like my childhood notion that all dogs are boys and all cats are girls. Perhaps that's not a good example, since that's actually true - regardless of what the know-it-all "experts" will tell you - but you know what I'm getting at.

But a child's imagination can be a powerful thing, and not easily corrected. Yes, a powerful thing indeed... I know firsthand the power a youngster's imagination can have on their later perceptions of the world. I too once had an imagination...

Like most children my age, I was fascinated with the small and peculiar fruits commonly known as olives. I remember fondly the afternoons that I would run home after school, throw my books down in the entryway, scramble off to my room, and quickly lock the door behind me so that I could enter my own little imaginary world of olives. Olives: cocktail garnish of the gods.

I'm not sure when this fascination started, or even why, but for as long as I can remember I have been captivated and intrigued by these strange little fleshy berries. What are they? What makes them tick? Why are they used as currency in many undeveloped nations, being traded to kings for slaves? I don't know. I just don't know. And because I was never fond of reading during my destructively rebellious childhood, I never bothered to look up the answers to these exotic questions. And I still haven't. Oh, it's not that I don't care, mind you; it's just that I'm much too lazy. But the mystery of the olive has stuck with me throughout these long years. Years that have seen fad foods come and go, but yet the olive remains dignified and unchanged.

Their story (as best as I was able to fabricate it at an early age) goes something like this: Once upon a time in

the land of Garnish, there lived a simple but noble race of strange fruits called Olives. The Olives were a kind and peaceful people, never pushing or shoving, and always looking both ways before they would cross the street. They paid their taxes on time and would never even think about chewing with their mouths open. Yes, the Olives were a highly developed group and everyone loved them. Everyone, that is, but their evil neighbors to the north: the Pickle People.

The Pickle People were a bitter and angry group long known for saying cruel and hurtful things to Olives while driving by in their loud pickup trucks. Horrific tales - probably started by some well-meaning parents - were told around campfires about how the Pickle People would come and snatch away bad little Olives if they didn't do their chores. So from an early age all Olives grew up with a healthy fear of Pickles.

Now normally the Pickle People didn't bother the Olives too much. The Olives would go about their daily business and live semi-productive lives. They were ranchers for the most part, and their most renowned ability was in the ranching of Pimentos. Pimentos were a small, aphid-like creature that had no practical purpose that anyone could really tell, except to sit there and be red. But really, I suppose there are worse things you can do with your time. Many people sit around today, but are they even remotely red? With the exception of Ted Kennedy, no, they are not. But at least the Pimentos were cute, and they were easy to ranch, which suited the Olives just fine.

Well, one day a couple of Pickles were walking along near the village of Olive, and they were incredibly hungry. "Dadburnit, Lewis, I'm hungry! I mean I'm really, really hungry. I can't remember the last time I was this hungry. You got any food on you there, boy?"

Lewis fished around in his pockets for a few minutes but finally replied, "shoot naw, man. Not a thing. Awww, dadblast you Buford, now you got me all hungry too. You and your stupid hungry talk."

Just then, something red and cute caught Lewis' eye and he peered really hard over to his left. So hard that you could even say it was squinting-hard. That's how hard he was looking. And as he looked so incredibly hard over to his left, squinting in a magnificent manner all the while, he blurted out to Buford, "Hey Buford, aren't those some of them Pimentos that the Olives raise?"

"Why, I do believe they are. They're cute little red buggers ain't they."

"They sure are, Bufo. And you know what I'm thinking?"

"You're thinking they'd probably find some greener grass on the other side of that fence over yonder?"

"They probably would, but I was actually thinking that I'm so dad-con-sarnit-tooting-blasted...."

"Hey, hey, easy there Lewis! Watch the language, alright? There might be kids around somewheres. Especially considering the kid making up this here story is only about six or seven years old."

"Oops... aww, you're right. But I'm just so... uhh... plain ole hungry that I was thinking, well I was thinking to myself I was thinking 'I'm so hungry I should just walk over there and eat me a couple of those Pimentos!' Who knows they might even be good."

"Lewis, you are one sick cracker, you know that. How do you know them Pimentos ain't poisonous? And who ever heard of eating one anyhow?" Buford blurted, trying to distract his friend, in hopes of shaking that weird, squinty-eyed glaze from his face.

"Buford, I think you're chicken, that's what I think. I don't think you have the guts to eat a Pimento with me. I think you're a scaredy-cat, yellow-bellied, fraidey-pickle. That's what I think." Now if you know much about

the Pickle People, and I'm sure that you do, then you know that they don't take too kindly to taunts. They are a proud, if vicious and brutal, race. And Buford and Lewis, as you can surely guess, are no exception to the Pickle People rule.

So at this point, Buford puffed up his chest, took off his riding glove and swiftly smacked Lewis across the cheeks with it and exclaimed, "Sir, you offend me and my hunger. I assure you that I am by no means a scaredy-pickle or whatever it was that you said. So I challenge you to a duel."

"A duel? To the.... <gulp> death?" Lewis said.

"Death? What are you talking... No, sorry, the hunger confused me again. I actually meant to say 'race.' You know, to see which one of us can get over there and eat one of those Pimento things first. I don't care if they are poisonous, I'm about to pass out from hunger, so let's get going."

And at this the two little Pickle fellas were scampering across the field, straight on into the herd of wild but lovable Pimentos. Some distance away, where two cute-as-a-button little Olives were playing quietly and safely out of the street, with soft Nerf-like toys that couldn't possibly poke anyone's eyes out, they heard a strange shrieking sound. "Little Billy, I don't want to alarm you as we play ever so peacefully and quietly here in this freshly-mown grass, but did you just hear a shriek?" Little Billy thought about this for a second and replied, "Yes, Cornelius, I too heard this shrieking noise that you speak of, but I also did not want to cause any alarm. I think that instead of running off to investigate it ourselves, which would be awfully reckless of us, perhaps we should go tell the adults what we have heard."

Cornelius nodded towards his play companion and said, "Yes, I concur. Let us go tell the adults, which would be the safe and proper thing to do. But let's pick up our toys before we go, so that we are not leaving them lying around, an action that might inadvertently cause others to trip." So after the two youngsters had carefully picked up their toys, they ran off at a moderate pace to tell the nearest adults what they had heard.

Retelling the story of Olives retelling a story to others is not the most interesting of things to read, so suffice it to say that they did indeed tell the adults of their experience. When they were asked to mimic the sounds, the young lads began shrieking and doing a very commendable imitation of what they had heard out in the field. As soon as the adults heard this, one of them yelled, "Great Gravy! That's the sound of Pimentos shrieking as they are being eaten! We've got to hurry."

They did hurry, and by hurry I mean waddle over as fast as Olives are able. Olives are known for many things, but speed is not one of them. They arrived at the Pimento's favorite grazing field... but it was already too late. It was a massacre, and there was red everywhere.

The Olives just cried and cried, until one of the townspeople pointed and said, "Look over there!" Everyone quickly turned their heads and gasped as they saw what the finger was showing them. Right there, in bright green and white was, you guessed it, a Vlassic label. "The Pickle People did this. Those savages are going to pay for their crimes." The mayor also piped in to exclaim, "I need every available Olive bounty hunter at Town Hall immediately for an emergency meeting."

Back at the Pickle People camp, Buford and Lewis were lying on the ground of the town square, bellies protruding and stuffed to capacity. They had been telling everyone about what they had discovered.

"You know those little Pimento things that the stupid Olives are always raising?" Buford expertly began his story. "Well it turns out they're mighty tasty!" At this he licked his lips... but then immediately let out a groan.

Recognizing that groan all too well from his own stomach, Lewis added "Yeah, I hear you man. I'm stuffed too. I definitely think we bagged our limit today." But the rest of the Pickle People were already excitedly



buzzing amongst themselves about this new find. The Pickles had one weakness, and that was for good food. A few moments of having the Pimentos described as "succulent", "juicy", "possessing a nutty aroma" and "good eating" were enough to sufficiently entice the townsfolk for a call to action. Pimentos were now all the rage, and the local restaurants were already devising schemes so that they could be the first on the block to offer this new Pickle delicacy.

So the chefs of the town known as Pickle Place were mighty busy making plans to invade the peaceful village of the loving and cute little Olives in order to steal all of their precious head of Pimento. But the Prime Minister of Pickle was concerned about one tiny little detail. So he called over his two new spies for a quick powwow. "Buford! Lewis! You fellas get over here, this is no time to be sleeping," he bellowed.

"Yes, boss," Buford managed to say in between belches. Lewis seemed to be fading fast, so he propped his head up a little to make it seem like he was paying attention.

"Boys, I have a little business proposition for you. I need you to find out a little bit of information on our dear friends the Olives. In return, I promise that you will have all the Pimentos you can eat for a long time to come." The immediate groans that emanated from the two indicated that perhaps this wasn't the best time to be making that offer. "Well, you don't have to worry about that now. Just know that you'll be rewarded handsomely."

This time it was Lewis that managed to collect his thoughts together long enough to speak. "What do you want us to <burp>... ooh, excuse me. Those things are starting to back up a little... But, uh, what do you want us to do?"

The Prime Minister huddled in close, careful to make their meeting seem as top-super-secret as he could, in order to help light a fire under these bumbling idiots that what he had to say was of the utmost importance. "Guys, this is a very important assignment. I have a hunch. And you know as well as I do that when I get these hunches... well, I'm usually right. I mean I'm good. Real good! But anyway, if my hunch is correct - and again, the odds of my not being correct are pretty slim - then the Olives probably have already noticed that their Pimentos are missing. And if they've noticed, they're probably not real happy. And if they're not real happy, they're probably going to be letting us know real soon. And I think you know what I mean by that. Oh sure, they're usually peaceful and all, but... Well, they're Olives and let's just say I have a hunch."

The effects of the Pimentos were fortunately starting to wear off a bit and Buford and Lewis began to sense the urgency of their mission. "So how can we help out, boss?"

"I need you to do some spying for me. If I'm right, they're probably already meeting up to figure out a way to get us back. But we can easily overthrow the Olives. After all, we're Pickles." There were nods and grunts of bravura from Buford and Lewis at this last comment, but then he said, "However, they're sneaky little fruits, make no mistake about it. They may be slow and peaceful, but they have pretty good heads on their shoulders, if only they had shoulders. So what I want you two to do is go down there and see if you can't figure out what's going on."

"But Boss," Lewis blurted out, "we can't just stroll into their town. They'll recognize us. And if they're already mad, well... well, that ain't good." At this the Prime Minister smiled. It was a dark, sinister, vinegary smile. "You're right, they would be. And that's why you'll have to do exactly as I say. Here's the plan..." The Mayor of the town of Olive furrowed his brow mightily and paced back and forth at the front of the Olive Town Hall. The Olive bounty hunters were busy cleaning their weapons, while wearing eyepatches and chewing toothpicks. Many could be heard mumbling things such as "Awwrrrrrr," but it was obvious that everyone was deep in thought about what to do about the Pickle People. Finally the Mayor stopped his pacing long enough to look at the assembled crowd and say "We must act quickly. If we allow this crime to go unpunished then not only will we lose our very livelihood, but the Pickles will grow fat and bloated off our beloved Pimentos,

and that's just not healthy."

"I say we kill them!" yelled one of the bounty hunters, lofting high his shiny scimitar in a grand display of Olive triumph.

"No, we could never do that. Olives have always been a peaceful people. If we stoop to killing and eating we will become just as bad as the Pickles."

"Did you say eating? Are Pickles actually edible?" asked another, and soon the whole congregation was murmuring excitedly.

"Hmmm... well, I never thought about it before," replied the Mayor. "I suppose it's possible, but I'm not really sure why you'd want to. Their skin is tough and leathery and the bumps on their body could be contagious. It's best not to risk it."

At that moment, one of the bounty hunters heard a noise out by the bushes. He sprang to his feet saying "I heard a noise out by the bushes. Let's go out there, and when we find whatever is there, let's kill 'em!" He let out a mighty war cry and lofted high his shiny scimitar.

The Mayor just buried his face in his hands and shook his head. "Brad, if you don't stop it we're going to take that stupid thing away from you. Now come on, let's see what's out there." Buford and Lewis had only been in the giant olive costume long enough to know that it was really hot in there, and beginning to stink. But not yet long enough to become accustomed to moving around convincingly.

"Lewis. This here thing is burning up. And I'm hungry again."

"Shhh! Quiet, you idiot. If we just stick to the plan we'll have enough Pimentos to last us until the cows come home. And then we'll be set, because we'll have cows. All we have to do is mingle around long enough to figure out what these stupid Olives are up to and then report back to the boss. We'll be fixing up some Pimento stew in no time."

Right as Buford was about to give even more verbal exposition, the two were quickly silenced by the sight of a large mass of bounty hunter Olives moving directly towards them. The two Pickles just froze, momentarily terrified at the thought of being severely outnumbered by so many armed Olives. And one of them looked particularly mean, as he lofted high his shiny scimitar.

"Well, see Bradley, that's all that was causing the ruckus... It's nothing to be worried about. It's just an Olive. And one of the biggest ones I've ever seen! Son, are you here for the meeting about how we're going to attack the Pickle People late this evening in a super-secret, stealthy, covert, undercover search-and-recover mission that we are in the process of formulating right now and would love to tell you more about, even though we've never met you before and should probably be at least a little curious about why you're here and who you even are?"

The two tried to look at each other inside the suit, but soon realized that was impossible, so since Lewis had been designated the official mouth of the operation, he simply replied, "Yeah, that sounds good."

And with that, everyone went inside to discuss the details of the mission and shine up their weapons.

It was a long, tiring walk back to the town of Pickle. Buford especially was not built for this kind of tedious exercise, and saw fit to remind Lewis of it every few yards. "Are we there yet?" he whined.

"For the last time, no! When we get there you'll know it, because it's home. And we won't be walking any

more, because we'll already be there. And most of all, you'll recognize there, mainly because it ain't here. It's there. Now if I have to explain this to you even one more time, that'll probably be the last time. I can't imagine bringing myself to explain it any more'n that..."

But fortunately, just over the ridge of the hill, they saw the welcoming lights of their city waiting for them, as dusk casually faded into night. And also the Prime Minister was waiting for them, with a stopwatch and a scowl on his face. "What took you idiots so long? Those Olives don't have that many secrets."

"Sorry, boss. It was mainly the walk and this costume. But as soon as we found out that the Olives are going to raid us tonight at 10:30 Eastern time, well we decided that we should probably head back. So we did. And then we got lost. And the fact that we hadn't brought any water with us only..." And with that the two bumbling Pickles fainted on top of their huge, squishy olive costume.

"So the Olives are coming in a few hours, eh?" the Prime Minister said, all the while stroking his chin in a manner that suggested that he wished he had a beard. "Well, we may just have a little surprise waiting for them. And I know just the thing," he said, followed by an evil, sinister laugh that lasted upwards of forty seconds, possibly longer. And then he stopped laughing, cleared his throat, called some janitors to sweep up Buford and Lewis and then set out on his plan to teach those nose-y Olives a thing or two.

Had someone been looking in the distance at that moment, they would have noticed a sizeable band of round things with torches making their way across the countryside. It was obvious that a group was on the move and not simply settling down for the night, but what was most interesting about the sight was how perfectly it stayed together.

The Olives were not an overly proud people, but one of the things that they did pride themselves in was their regimented, militaristic style of marching. Row upon straight row of Olives, perfectly synchronized with each other, bounding ever so slowly over the hills leading to the town of Pickle. The need for marching had only come up on two other occasions, and one of those was simply a practice session for whenever the need for marching would come up again - the other being the first annual Parade of Olives held earlier in the spring. But as the Mayor peered back over his shoulder at his band of short and squatty troops, he couldn't help but smile at the fine spectacle he saw.

And then he tripped.

The company of Olives came to a halt behind their mayor as he lay face down on the rugged terrain. He quickly stood back up, brushed off his hat and turned to his men. "Men," he said to the Olive men, "the ground is becoming increasingly rough and knotty, which means that we are nearing the territory of the town of Pickle. I tripped on purpose to prove a point to all of you. And that point is that we need to start paying careful attention from this moment forward. The slightest misstep and we could all end up face down on foreign soil, with our fancy hats all dirty and bent. And that's when the enemy will pounce. So be on the lookout. Umm... That is all. Continue marching."

The Olives, even if they were not particularly inspired by the speech, were at least adequately warned about the impending danger. The marching was still full of precision footwork, but it was more cautious than it was flashy. Flashy footwork can get you into trouble. Deadly, pickled trouble. And this sobering realization was driven all the more home by the lights of the town of Pickle that were starting to twinkle off in the distance. Pickle preparation was in full force. The Prime Minister had ordered two groups of soldiers to execute the plan: one group to encircle the city as a blockade, and the second group to begin sharpening sticks. Buford and Lewis were hanging around the Prime Minister for some reason - who can say why Pickles do what they do - and for the most part were simply badgering the busy man with questions.

"What if the Olives don't come tonight?" "Is it true that they've built a Pickle-eating super monster?" "Did you

want this over here? I can't remember what you said..." "Can I be in charge of something?" "Does this go down as overtime on my time card?"

The Prime Minister couldn't take it any more, and finally ordered both of them to sit in the corner while he finished making preparations. "I don't have time to deal with you two idiots right now. There's too much to be done. Soon the Olives will be reaching the city and when that happens we won't have long to enact my most diabolical plan yet."

"What plan is that, boss?" Buford piped up from his corner.

The Prime Minister just turned around and stared at them with a cold, hollow gaze that sent shivers up and down both Buford and Lewis' weak spines. At first he didn't speak, but slowly a sinister grin crept over his face, and his mouth slithered the words, "The world will remember this day. The day that we expose the Olives for what they really are: a weak and worthless garnish. Now, normally at this point I would laugh my evil, maniacal laugh for a long period of time, but there's too much to do. Victor!" And with a snap he instructed one of his servants to play a recording of a previous evil laugh. The canned laughter resonated throughout the streets, as the sharpened sticks were finished and distributed to the guards around the city.

The Olive army entered the streets of the town of Pickle. They were careful to be very, very quiet. No shoes were squeaking, no gum was being smacked, and no birdcalls were used to signal between soldiers. Nope, they were being as sneaky and stealthy as Olives can be. But the overwhelming quiet was more than some were able to take. Finally, one of the younger recruits couldn't stand the silent tension any more. "It sure is quiet out here," he squeaked as his shaky voice struggled to compose itself. The Mayor turned around to acknowledge the comment, nodded his head and said. "Yes. A little too quiet."

As you might expect, that moment is exactly when the Pickle forces jumped out of their hiding places and surrounded the severely outnumbered Olives. The forces used their pointy, sharpened sticks to corral them through the streets and over towards the Prime Minister's mansion, at the top of the highest hill in the town of Pickle. Throughout the journey, the Mayor kept looking for a way to escape, some unguarded alley or passageway that would allow them to make a quick break for it. But alas, not only were the Pickles too numerous for the poor Olives, but their numbers seemed to be growing as they made their way further up the hill.

When they finally reached the mansion gates, the smirking face of the Prime Minister appeared out of the shadows from his pool house by the gate and greeted his new prisoners. "So" he said, reaching to stroke his chin, but then thinking better of it, "I see we have some Olive intruders. To be honest, Mayor, I knew this day would come eventually. And I have been waiting for you."

"You'll never get away with this," said the Olive Mayor. "You've been stealing and eating our Pimentos and we demand retribution."

"Me? Moi? Us? Stealing? Well... I suppose that's possible, but you're forgetting one very important thing."

"Oh, and what's that, you murdering thief?"

"Please, this is no time for name-calling. Because you're forgetting that I'm actually not the Prime Minister of Pickle, but I'm really..." and at this point he dramatically rips off his mask and Pickle costume to reveal that he is none other than... "Lester Pevvins!"

The group gasps. For a moment... until they just begin to show their confusion. And speaking for pretty much everyone everywhere the Mayor pipes in, "Wait... so who is Lester Pevvins?" "It is I, Lester Pevvins. And I own all the land for a hundred miles. I own the town of Pickle, and I own the town of Olive, and I own all the

little hills and valleys in between. So you see, I have not been stealing at all, because your Pimentos are actually mine." And again the crowd gasped. "But I've been wanting to teach you Olives a little lesson for a long time now. You, Mayor! Get over here now!"

The Mayor slowly walked over to Lester. Lester picked up a small Pimento that had been running around on the ground. He pet its little red head and then handed him to the Mayor. "This is one of your Pimentos. It has come to our attention in the town of Pickle that they are tasty. Indeed, we are thinking about starting up a restaurant devoted solely to food stuffs and delectable munchies made from Pimentos. But right now, I would like for you to eat this one, to show to your people once and for all that they are... delicious."

"Never," the Mayor replied. "You're a barbarian, that's what you are. Only a savage could eat a helpless Pimento."

"Mr. Mayor, I grow tired of your yapping. So very tired... I will give you until the count of three to eat this Pimento. After that I will kill one of your men for every additional second you fail to obey my order." "But you can't..." "ONE" "This is preposterous. I never..." "TWO"

Sensing the impending danger for his men, the mayor then grabbed the Pimento and placed it in his mouth. He began to chew, first slowly, and then more steadily. Finally, he was swallowing the last of it and smiling. "Say, these things are pretty good. No wonder you guys are so crazy about them."

"Crazy!? Are you saying I'm crazy?" Lester yelled, his face now the color of freshly corralled Pimentos.

"No, that's just an expression. Look, I'll eat another." He reached down and placed a second pimento in his mouth. "See, I'm crazy for them too," he half laughed, hoping to soften his captor's demeanor.

But at this Lester's rage exploded. "No one calls me crazy!" and he grabbed one of the sharpened sticks from his guards and stabbed the Mayor right through the stomach. The Mayor, pimento still in his mouth, fell backwards a few steps until he eventually landed with a splash in Lester's pool. The pool, by the way, was made of vodka. And dry vermouth.

And that, boys and girls, is how martinis are made. The End.

So anyway, I don't know what this particular book, *The History of Olives*, has to say about real olives and where they come from - or even what they're good for - but that's all I remember on the subject from my younger days. In any case, I hope you learn something.

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#### Images of Cutesy: Vol. 6 Fuzzy Little Puppies and Northeastern Wildflowers

Let me set the scene for you: It's late on a Tuesday evening, and you've just finished watching *Schindler's List* after reading *Old Yeller*, all the while fielding phone calls from telemarketers trying to talk you into life insurance in case you or anyone in your family bites the big one. So emotionally you're a wreck. And to top it off, you don't even have any comfort food lying around - namely chocolate-mocha-fudge-espresso-cookie-dough ice cream - to help ease the gnawing sensation that eats away at the pit of your stomach.

If any part of the above scenario describes you, go ahead and throw in the towel because that's just pathetic. However, if you are free from that concentrated amount of depression, but can still identify with the overall sentiment, then this latest volume in the *Images of Cutesy* series is for you.

For years, the Cutesy series was the last-ditch, fail-safe measure used in sanitariums to keep some of the more dangerous inmates safely in their padded rooms, instead of out roaming around the cafeteria in a desperate search for sharp eating utensils. But now that same prescription-strength level of visual comfort can be yours, all in convenient hardback form. So settle in underneath a cheap blanket and tighten the straps, because you're in for a great ride!

This latest installment picks up right where Images of Cutesy: Vol. 5 - Butterflies on Orchids and Teddy Bear Collections left off. All of the soothing imagery with soft focus is still intact, as well as the convenient index for quick reference to subjects by color. Blemishes of any kind have been airbrushed out of nature so as not to confuse anyone that all might not be right with the world. Everything is perfectly lit and posed, just as it should be in reality.

I had the good fortune of meeting a fellow by the name of Jerrod a few weeks ago. Jerrod is one of the many troubled youths at the local "crazy house" that has been receiving help in the form of soothing, placid, perfectly non-offensive photos from the Images of Cutesy series. When I asked him to name his favorite thing about looking at the pictures in the books, he simply replied, "The pictures are pretty. Sometimes after my shot they let me look at the pretty pictures. Shot... One time I shot a man..."

But presenting the pictures as a salve for violent temperaments is only one of the many enjoyable uses for this book. Young, preschool children are also being introduced to the series as a non-threatening initiation to the magnificent and beautiful world around them. Veteran daycare worker Tanya Stephens remarks that, "At first we were hesitant to use the books, since there are already so many <expletive deleted> books out there that accreditation officials 'suggest' we use." This congested competition has been a big concern for the Images of Cutesy line, but the creators are hoping that their unique and light content will help set them apart and create a lucrative niche business in the crowded education arena.

Ms. Stephens went on to say that, "most of the books out there these days are the most worthless <expletive deleted> books you've ever seen. I mean, come on, 'Barney's Play Pals'? That's just <expletive deleted> messed up, with that weirdo child molester hiding around playgrounds in a purple suit? I tell ya, if I had any kids of my own I'd lock those little <expletive deleted>-factories in their room with some of these <expletive deleted> cutesy books. At least then I wouldn't have to worry about getting their heads all <expletive deleted> up with that 'I Love You' King of Pop <expletive deleted>. <Expletive deleted>, they'd probably even be asleep before they got to page twenty." Yes, the kiddies love pictures and we should encourage that. And as the Cutesy line of books is void of captions and descriptions, children are freed from the burden of words that plague so many other books these days, and can let their imagination run away with them. Which is much better than someone else running away with them.

But you don't have to work with the precious little ones that Ms. Stephens is so fond of to enjoy the benefits that warm, fuzzy, happy photos can bring. Just take a cue from my dentist office that is around the corner from my house (well, it's around the corner once you hop on the interstate, skip a couple of exits, and then take a side street over past this new strip mall that seems to have sprung up overnight, taking one of my favorite old movie rental places with it, but that's another story entirely). I guess I was a little bit surprised to find a good second-edition copy of Images of Cutesy: Vol. 3 - Cute Babies with Powdered Bottoms and Smiling Kittens, mainly because it was taking up space normally reserved for standard dentist office literature, such as outdated issues of People, Highlights for Children, and a random copy of Guns & Ammo. But after a long and vigorous wait in an uncomfortable examination chair, I finally gained an audience with my dentist and managed to sneak in a few questions to him about this new and exciting book that had so far remained uncolored on his waiting room table. "Well, we work with a lot of kids here, and we thought it might calm some of the mothers that come in. You know, let them see happy children for a few seconds instead of the crying, screaming one that keeps fidgeting and climbing out of the chair next to them. And then sometimes we bring those books back here for people that are full of nitrous oxide. Man, I tell you, there's nothing like a Cutesy book when you're high! That's good times..."

Good times, indeed. But what of the critics and opponents of the books that say they are nothing more than sentimental fluff used to anesthetize an already illiterate society by not forcing them to read? Well, to them I say, "What's so bad about not reading? You're reading me right now, and it hasn't noticeably made you smarter or better looking. Your lazy eye is still wandering off someplace and I keep hoping that the frequent punctuation marks will whistle and yell 'Hey, over here! Try focusing on one thing at a time! At least the illiterate guy over there can concentrate on a picture for more than two seconds at a time, while your lazy eye is off grabbing some lunch.'"

But of course, I said all that sarcastically back in a time when I was feeling saucy and could care less who read it. But that's the danger for any writer, as the temptation to fly off the handle like that can consume you to the point of lashing out to sometimes the entire world. So in that regard, maybe there is a point in not letting words get in the way of a good picture. Because everyone loves to look at the pretty pictures. I know I do. The pictures that are so pretty and filled with Technicolor...

But I will concede that perhaps there are other forms of entertainment more exciting than just browsing through some pleasing photos of morning dew on the grass, or perhaps even images of pollination. Why? Because they have no car chases. Because no one is being accused of a crime they didn't commit. Because there is no storyline about a cop who doesn't play by the rules. And because no one has been blown to pieces after the hero says his clever chestnut of a catchphrase, "Say hello to Hitler for me. In Hell!" But I can't help but think that maybe there's more to life than action and adventure and excitement. Although I'm not sure why I would think that. In fact, even as I say it now it sounds a bit ridiculous.

But perhaps in his own way, Jerrod has taught us all a valuable lesson. Too often we will seek out books for thrilling stories and dramatic dialogue, when what we really need is to gear down the hectic pace of our lives for just a second, and look at the pretty pictures. Because in the end, isn't that what it's really all about? I don't know.

What I do know is that the nitrous oxide the dentist gave me earlier - which is wonderful and I want to take home a whole bottle with me and enjoy it while I am watching Animal Planet this evening, as I so often do on a Tuesday - well, it is about to wear off, and they are giving me more, so that they can finish this root canal. And now they are giving me the mask, which is.... Oooh yes, that does smell nice.... Yes, and I wish I could still hold up this Cutesy book but my hands feel extremely heavy. Wonderful... wonderfully heavy... like powdered bottoms...

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### Towards Dog Fashion

Perhaps it is time that we sat down and had a frank discussion about canine urination habits. As I'm sure you're no doubt aware, dogs and humans are... well, different. Physically speaking, that is. Dogs are positioned toward the ground in such a manner that marks a grand departure from our own upright stature. Because of this, dogs have certain needs when it comes to the evacuation of their waste materials - and I'm trying to make this explanation as bland and generic as possible, but somehow I still sense that you're a bit put off by the subject. You see, when a dog, or rather any member of the canine family...

Look, what I'm trying to say is that dogs hike up their legs when they take a tinkle and that has to be rather humiliating for them. And it all has to do with thumbs. Humans had the distinct advantage of winning the bet to receive opposable thumbs. It seems like such a small thing, a single appendage that bends one way instead of the other, but throughout history it has had deep and profound ramifications on all manner of life.

Early on, man figured out that it was not attractive to other members of their species to be caught taking a squat out in the wild. So with this realization in mind, he set out to construct various facilities that would

make the activity a bit more discreet. During the initial planning period, he would simply duck behind a bush and whistle a tune by AC/DC, because even though the group hadn't yet entered the annals of history, early man still felt compelled toward the driving rhythms and chugging guitar riffs of the rock 'n roll music. Once they had finally mocked up some sketches, they set about building a crude version of what would eventually become the "outhouse." This was more or less a big bush that you could transport with you on long desert journeys, but still it helped subdue an otherwise jarring visual.

Later on, man got clever enough to actually construct small dwellings as outhouses. Intrigued by the idea of being able to close a door to an individual room that lets you do your business, man started building outhouses in full force. Some were elaborate structures that matched the dŽcor of their dwelling, and others were simply crude lean-tos that were constantly being raided by wild animals. But all of them were the start of a grand tradition of seeking a little quiet time to give back to Mother Nature that which is rightfully hers.

And so it went. Year after year, man would continue on in this same fashion, innovating just enough to incorporate better and sturdier construction but leaving these mini-houses fundamentally unchanged. That was until the advent of indoor plumbing. I'm still not exactly sure how indoor plumbing works, or even where all that stuff goes, but I think it's safe to say that without it, we might still be stuck outside with quite an interesting mess on our hands. The main thing that plumbing brought us was the ability to further mask our shame by closing the door to a private room, and then further hiding that room away inside yet another building altogether. Marvelous advances, these. So for as long as anyone can remember we have been secreting our evacuation rituals plainly out of sight of even the most unscrupulous of bystanders. Truly we are a blessed culture.

Now consider with me, if you will, dogs. They have led nowhere near as charmed a lifestyle as we. For centuries, they have been walking around in nothing but the fur that God blessed them with, their scraggly genitals either swaying or hiding gleefully in the wind. They are as free and unencumbered as any to be found in nature. But their freedom has come at a price. Due to their lack of opposable thumbs - funny how important that has become - they have been unable to construct even the crudest of outhouses, or even to have the decency to nuzzle a large leafy branch against a tree as a mode of modest covering. No, decency is something that escapes them, for they have never known anything else besides the crippling shame that their nakedness demands.

And so the plight of the dog seems to be to forever live out their days in naughty exhibitionism that should cause us more concern than it does. For some reason we go about our daily lives without so much as a second care to the fact that dogs all over the world are even at that very moment hiking up their legs for everyone to see, in a grand display that should really be noticed for what it is: a warm and messy cry for help. This is saddening because things could have been so much different for them. Soon after the Dark Ages, man and dog entered into a secret agreement that was to assure the equality of both species. But something went horribly wrong. Man agreed to take on dog as his "best friend," using the phrase as often as possible in greeting cards and on pamphlets for veterinary shot reminders. In turn, dog acquiesced to becoming "domesticated," which basically meant that they would no longer actively seek out the tasty flesh of man for dinner. And so the years ticked on, the two becoming better and better acquainted, sometimes even frolicking together in the warmth of freshly mown summer grass.

But things weren't quite as rosy as they seemed, because for all the friendly paw shakes and dopey expressions of glee while hanging their heads out of pickup truck windows, dog realized that man was not taking their plight seriously enough. Oh sure, they threw down the occasional table scrap - although only on meatloaf night - but somewhere along the line the promise of friendship had gone unfulfilled. For what kind of friend would leave their best pal outside at night, shivering in the rain, naked and cold as the day they first entered the world? Man, that's who. Man, and his stupid opposable thumbs. Oh, you think you're so big with your sport-utility vehicles and your lattes... You make me sick, man!



Nakedness. Dirty, shameful, embarrassing nakedness. That's pretty much what dog was trying to get rid of, but in the end that was all they had to their name. Oh sure, the species known as dog eventually got as used to the idea as they could. For the most part they managed to walk down the street with their heads held high, perhaps even barking out a quick show of bravura to the cats in the neighborhood - stupid cats, who have never even known the joys of drinking out of a muddy, contaminated puddle of water in the middle of the woods on a hot summer's day while taking a walk with their best friend - but underneath it all there was a sadness that stemmed from being betrayed by the only friend they ever had. Friends that wanted nothing more than to keep them naked and ashamed.

But the nakedness and shame soon turned to hurt and anger. Dogs rebelled by barking late at night and not fetching sticks. They did this repeatedly and with a newfound fervor, matched only by their new desire for sniffing each other - which is great fun, why hadn't we thought of this before? But one day the men of the world decided to strike back with the ultimate punishment: school.

Obedience schools sprang up around the country so that dog owners could have their pals trained to stay right at their side while strolling through the neighborhood, even though it's the lumbering owners that are walking much, much too slow. So day after day, man spends money on dog so that dog can still be a dog and not really care anything at all about the word "stay." But it's just one more part to this pattern of sadness that has risen from within the animal kingdom. Man gets opposable thumbs. He won't use his newfound powers to help out man's best friend. Dog becomes hurt and lashes out, man strikes back, dog mauls man's small children, man takes away Snausages, dog digs up back yard, man buys choke chain, dog fertilizes everything in his path... And on and on it goes.

Dog sympathizers, sensitive to the howling at night from the dogs in the neighborhood, and realizing that long ago their forefathers had made a promise that was never fulfilled, decided that it was high time to right those wrongs. And so the dog-sweater business was formed. Pallet loads of embarrassingly frou-frou sweaters were manufactured and delivered around the country. Poodles and other small, helpless breeds were strapped in these fashion abominations and paraded around neighborhoods and dog shows in a humiliating display of subjugation. You know what I'm talking about; you've seen the pictures. Not a single one of these dogs ever appears happy. If you were forced to wear one of those things you'd be miserable too. And to make matters worse, it never really solved the problem. Because although it did a commendable job of making their upper torso look like a freakish trick-or-treater on Halloween, their naughty bits of genitalia were still freely exposed, and further shriveled up in the embarrassment of their new school clothes.

Once again man had screwed up big time. Because all the dogs of the world ever really wanted were some good pairs of pants. Some everyday blue jeans, or loose-fitting jogging sweats, or perhaps even some smart, urban chinos. Really, anything except naked. So the call has gone out to fashion designers around the world. "Give us some pants," the dogs seem to be saying, or at least that's what mine are saying. And for the first time in a really, really (really...) long time, some of the mans are listening.

Tiny little canine pants are being delivered by the truckload around the country to fashionable pet boutiques, as well as to the clothing departments of some of your more upscale kennels. And not only is this filling a need, but it's filling the stores. Response so far has been huge. Dogs everywhere are dragging their owners by the leash down the street to view the latest fashions that are coming out. There are the usual budget lines from the sweatshops that are so popular amongst the younger pups, but also the biggest design houses in Europe are delivering some delightfully outrageous fits for the more bourgeoisie amongst the dogs around town. And why not, why shouldn't dogs at long last be treated to some of the nicer fabrics the rest of us have been enjoying for years? I think it's wonderful what they've been able to do with crushed velvet, and so will you. It's finally time for dogs to be pampered and spoiled.

And not only is this a chance to right some wrongs that for far too long have gone un-righted, but it's also a great opportunity to capitalize on a developing trend and really rake in some cash. Good, wholesome, clothed

cash. Cash that isn't naked at all. Cash that will soon be able to undue its fly - once man learns to help out with his opposable thumbs while taking his best friend for a walk - or perhaps not, if it doesn't want to. Because nothing is more freeing than wearing pants.

For all the progress that has been made throughout history in the name of taking a whiz, it's refreshing to see it finally trickle down, no pun intended, to other species. Because really, if you think about it... On second thought, let's not think about it, because I just remembered some of what I said earlier, and I feel that's probably more than sufficient. But back to pants. This book is a celebration of this new chapter in our lives and in our world. Because finally there is an outlet for all the wonderful fashions that have come along as a result of this new, more functioning, and more liberating relationship between man and dog. Sweaters are a thing of the past, and are quite the eyesore to boot. Pants are the wave of the future. And finally designers, with all of their opposable appendages, are catching the wave.

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### Traveling The Back Roads of America's Deserts

It's that time of year again. Summer. The sun is shining, school is out, and the kiddos are restless for something to do. You've been working all year as well, and between everyone involved you decide that it's time to take a family vacation. And nothing says family togetherness like spending some time in the great outdoors. But where to go? What to do? What level of SPF to take? You don't want to book a clichéd vacation to Disney World, or even the Grand Canyon. No, those are way too overdone. No one is saying you have to be a pioneer to have a good time, but come on, break out of your rut!

And so you do some research. You sit down at your oversized personal computer and enter a myriad of search criteria, including travel rates, crowd control problems, "wow" factor, all sorts of details that will help whittle down the perfect vacation destination. And as the gears of your 386 are audibly grinding (Note To Self: next summer spend your vacation money on a new computer, at least on something that doesn't have to be hand-cranked to start), they eventually whirl down enough to start spitting out some data results on your green bar printer. And you are pleasantly surprised to find that one of the most economical and least crowded vacation packages available is to enjoy a week of traipsing through the deserts of America. Yes, it's a great big country we've got sitting around here, with lots of wild and exotic nooks and crannies to explore. There are more things to do than most people will ever get around to in a lifetime. And the deserts are one of our last unspoiled natural resources - excluding the bomb testing sites - so you decide that it's best to go ahead and visit them while they're still in all their untamed virgin wildness. But you quickly decide that it's probably time for more research. After all, your neighbors are absolutely no help. Where are they going this year? The beach. Again! You have the laziest, most unimaginative neighbors ever. (Note To Self: next summer, spend your vacation money towards the down payment on a home in a more exciting neighborhood. Nix the computer idea, it's probably good for a couple more presidential administrations.)

Well, fortunately you've come to the right place. This book is your one-stop guide to all the wonders and fun that await you in America's deserts, including some out of the way places that the "other" desert tour books won't tell you about. Personally, I admire the author's attention to detail here, because simply everything is covered in excruciating and agonizing step-by-step guides. Everything from packing and loading up the car, to signaling your turn as you exit onto the freeway, right down to how to count correct change when you stop for some road trip snacks. (And a little tip from me to you: the kids are going to be experimenting with junk food at some point in their lives, so they can either learn about it from you in the safety of your station wagon driving down Interstate 40, or they'll sneak off with their loser friends behind the bleachers at the football stadium and learn it there. The choice is yours.)

But many wonders await you on your tour of America's Deserts. First off there is a whole new world of animal and plant life to discover. Consider the roadrunner. Good, now after you've considered that, it's time to

move on to the plants. Cacti - or cactuses, as I am want to say these days - really are amazing little doodads. They somehow thrive out in the punishing heat and low humidity of the desert. And not only do they thrive, but they also offer cool nourishment to weary and abandoned... I mean, "adventurous" travelers out in the desert. Just whip out your trusty swiss army knife, lop one of those suckers in two and then drink deep the nourishing water that they have so selfishly been hoarding all this time. And fortunately you have this book as a resource so that you'll know which cacti are safe and which ones are poisonous. It's best to do some research and really be up on your edible and non-edible plant life. (Note To Self: 86 the whole house idea, and instead use that money towards sending the kids to college. To have any chance of staying alive, those kids are gonna have to get some smarts.)

But regardless of where you decide to go, there are boundless exciting adventures just waiting for you. Waiting and lurking in the shadows, for some unsuspecting moment when you decide that it's ok to let your guard down for only a second, and that's when they... I mean, the deserts of America offer a rich and varied tapestry of enjoyment. It's just up to you to pick the locale in which to start your exciting journey. Perhaps the most popular of our deserts is the stretch known as Death Valley. The kids will love being able to go to Death Valley, with its wild and fancy sounding name. Sort of like going to a place called "Pirate's Cave" or "Mystery Mountain," or even "Abandoned Hospital." Yes, they don't give cool names to just any old place, so you know you're in for a good time.

One of the perks to Death Valley is that it maintains a solid warm temperature all year long. Tired of booking destinations for travel and then showing up and the weather is either rainy or too cool to go for a nice swim? Well, at Death Valley those troubles are so absurd as to be laughable. "Ha Ha," you might end up saying to yourself. Yes, good times are to be had in the desert. You will find on your first day there that you probably don't even need that goose-down parka you packed. In fact, if you want to go ahead and leave it at home you are pretty safe. Save that extra suitcase space for some clean underwear. You can't have too much clean underwear, especially in the desert.

Speaking of packing, we should probably point out that the best way to see America's deserts is by backpacking. Sure you can drive through on one of our country's many and wonderful highways, but looking out of a car window is really only a small baby step better than watching TV. And although TV is itself a wonder of modern technology and comfort, it's not what this vacation is about. This vacation is about roughing it. So pull out those rusty backpacks and polish them up to a pearly luster. Also, plan on doing most of your hiking during mid-day. At night it can actually get surprisingly chilly out in the desert, and in the morning you don't want to have to worry about getting up early just so you can start a hike. Heck no, man, you're on vacation! And another thing, water is heavy so don't pack too much of it. Just drag an empty canteen with you that you can fill up at one of the many oasis that are just all over the place in the desert from what I hear.

There have been reports of scorpions and tarantulas running loose on the desert floor, so while you're packing stuff up you might want to include some... You know what, don't listen to me. What do I know? With any vacation, you run the risk of over-preparation, which can really zap the joy right out of travel. I say just wander out there and wing it. You'll be fine, and you're sure to have a great time in the desert. Just think about how envious the other kids at school will be when your youngsters stand up to give their report on "What I Did This Summer." I wish I had had parents like you when I was growing up, it probably would have helped me develop into more of a normal, functioning adult. I've never really talked about it before, but we didn't go on too many vacations when I was little. Just to the city dump to pick out a new couch, or over to the neighbor's creek to catch some dinner. Sure it was fun, but we always had to carry a rifle with us, just in case. I guess what I'm saying is that your kids are really lucky. Be sure to give them all the advantages growing up that I never had, like individual toothbrushes, and snacks consisting of something besides tubs of cottage cheese off the "must sell now" rack. Maybe then they'll grow up responsible, which is something I still have a problem with. (Note To Self: scratch the college fund for the kids and instead spend that money towards buying a new sports car. A convertible.)

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### The Bachelor's Guide To Homemaking

Man. Men. Both of them have one thing in common, and that is the inevitability that one day they will have to leave home, forge their way out into the great wild woods and learn to survive on their own. No more of Mom's home-cooking, no more having your underwear mysteriously washed and folded for you every weekend, and no more cleaning services that come behind with a wet sponge whenever something is spilled on the kitchen counter. The realization of these truths tends to put a damper on the excitement of the outward bound experience.

And perhaps this person, this "Man," is you. You are leaving home, and you will soon have to start looking after yourself. Whether the destination is college, another city where you were able to score your first full-time minimum wage job, or the back of your van while you go "find yourself" - and while you're at it, why don't you try "finding" some scissors and get that hair cut, you hippie - the simple fact of the matter is that you are now a bachelor. No longer are you under the protective and suffocating wings of your parents or other guardian figures. It's natural to shed a few tears at this moment. Not due to the fear of leaving home, which could be the single easiest thing you've ever done in your life, but more the fear that if dinner is up to you to prepare then you will probably starve before even being able to enjoy this new bachelor lifestyle.

But instead of sitting around crying like a baby, maybe it's time for you to finally get up off your lazy behind and actually learn to do a couple of things for yourself. I'm not talking about becoming a master chef. I'm not even talking about learning how to use an iron, except in the case of self-defense, where an iron can come in very handy. I'm just saying that as a man, as a bachelor, it is now your responsibility and obligation to learn a few of the basics, just enough to survive and get by. No more, no less.

Or maybe you are already a seasoned bachelor, a full-tenured man about town dispensing wisdom to all the young punks at the sports bar regarding such important topics of the day as the most reliable remote control to handle all your new surround sound equipment, or which microwave meatloaf dinner gets your thumbs-up of approval. And also how to help manage your time so that you're not busting your tail at work and missing some valuable break opportunities - for example, if you're not a smoker, you should probably learn to develop the habit so that you can begin taking advantage of "smoke breaks." After all, there's no need to knock yourself out doing anything when a simple half-assed attempt will do just fine. And with that thought in mind...

The Basics. There are many that you can learn, but only a few that you need to master. Wait, perhaps "master" isn't the most accurate term I could be using, because at the heart of being a bachelor is this carefree feeling of independence that has been won specifically so that you don't have to waste your precious time mastering anything. In fact, I would even go so far as to say that being a bachelor requires that you not learn how to do a great many things, or at least to not do them in any correct way. Fortunately for you, as a man, you are pre-programmed to many of the hints and tips that will be presented in this book. All you really need is someone to elaborate on their usefulness, maybe sketch a few crude illustrations so that you can skim over most of the text, and then sum up with the encouragement of a coach by saying "now get in there and show us what those chicken legs of yours can do," followed by a swift smack on the rump.

But this Bachelor's Guide to Homemaking will hopefully steer you down the path of your new journey in such a way that you can quickly learn what you need to survive so that your time can be better spent adjusting the exhaust system on your '79 Camaro instead of adjusting the exhaust system on your '86 Maytag dryer. To do this, experts in the field of Bachelorology - as well as key representatives from the Institute For Bachelorificationated Studies - have been assembled to provide you with insightful, witty and downright fun tips and tricks to help you get settled in your new lifestyle, as well as your new digs. Not with the actual moving of furniture, mind you, but more with the philosophy of why beanbag chairs can be used to great

effect as the primary seats in the living room and not just an ancillary standby in the corner by the lamp.

Ok, so maybe we lied a little bit... This whole book is actually just written by the staff of Bachelor Life magazine - with, perhaps, some expert help by certain highly-noted foreword writers. But in a way, isn't that at least ten times better, possibly even going as far as twelve-and-a-half times better? I mean, would you rather have some stuffy egghead telling you how you can use dryer sheets to mask body odor, complete with charts of how this has been effectively simulated in a lab on field mice, or would you instead like to hear it from another rugged bachelor such as yourself, a man that has actually lived the dream? Eggheads are good for some things, but dishing out the dirt on how to properly make pork and beans casserole is not one of them. And a learned opinion is only marginally helpful when you're dealing with subjects as complicated as those expressed in the chapters Gophers and the Fine Art of Mercy-Killings and Beer Etiquette.

Take matters of your health, for example. Doctors can be helpful - there, I did admit the fact that doctors can, sometimes, on occasion be helpful, and that perhaps, periodically we should get ourselves looked at - as anyone who has tried to write their own prescription will quickly tell you. But a medical degree and proper bedside manner aren't going to be much help when you get Madden Butt. This common ailment, suffered by bachelors across the country can strike at any time and, if it goes untreated, can lead to... well.... Prolonged Madden Butt. It starts simply enough when you and a friend decide to fire up your video game console of choice and pop in Madden football. Snack treats are strategically placed around you, and you endeavor to play an entire simulated season taking your Steelers all the way to the Super Bowl. Well, let's just say that this eats up your entire Saturday. But on Sunday you have a revelation, "Hey, what if I did the same thing only with Miami?" And so there goes Sunday. Eventually you even decide to give the Jaguars a shot, because you enjoy a challenge. And so as the days of inactivity and immobile lounging pass, Madden Butt begins to set in and you eventually realize that you are a pathetic paperweight of a human being.

This is an example of one of the many serious health concerns facing today's bachelor and is something that can only be tackled and sacked by a professional. A professional bachelor, that is. Most doctors couldn't execute a play in Madden if their life depended on it, and heaven help them if it ever does. Only a fellow bachelor, a fellow man of the sweat pants, is going to be able to communicate and troubleshoot a delicate problem such as this, all the while in a sympathetic manner that suggests, "Hey man, I've been there. I've thrown a gamepad against the wall, just like everyone has. I know how you feel, and we're gonna work through this thing together." It's not enough to have some expert spout off all the right answers. Sometimes you need to hear all the right answers, but then when reality gives you a swift kick to the jewels, you need Coach to come back and give you the encouraging words of, "What are you gonna sit down and cry now? Huh, baby wanna cry? You make me sick, you pathetic little skin-sack... Now get out there and WIN!"

Within the pages of this book you'll find tips and tricks for your bachelor lifestyle, interspersed with maps and charts on everything from The Most Effective Pick-Up Lines from 1998-2001 all the way to Best Places in East Texas to Catch Catfish. Oh sure, they have nothing to do with the rest of the text, but we are sensitive to the needs of the modern bachelor and know how hard it can be to sit down and actually read a book with a bunch of words and stuff in it. Reading sucks. But hopefully this will suck less than most of the books out there, especially anything that has ever been selected as a "Book-of-the-Month." And may we put your mind at ease right now by saying that you will never have to worry about this title ending up in that category.

We'll hear from some of the all-time greats as they share with us their secrets, as well as fond memories from their glory days. Men such as Glenn "Mad Dog" Coleman - he's that guy in Pittsburgh that crushes cans on his forehead... only instead of beer cans he uses soup cans - will discuss how being a local legend can be both a blessing and a curse. And the wild escapades of Vincent "Vinny" Vinesci and his homemade backyard dog-track business are sure to amuse and inspire. And on a more somber note, we would be remiss if we did not also include the cautionary tale of the man from Topeka simply known as "Commander X," and of his promising beginnings as an early morning radio DJ that quickly took a nasty turn as his addiction to comic books and Star Trek spiraled out of control. Hopefully a word to the wise will be sufficient.

But at the end of the day, I guess what everyone would ultimately like for you to take away from this (hopefully) authoritative guide on how to be the best bachelor you can be is a sense of pride. It's one thing to be a bachelor because you have to be, and because you're not a likeable enough person to be anything else. But it's quite another to choose to be one. You know, because that's what you were born to be, and because it's something that you're really, really good at, and you know it. May this book teach you a little something about something, encourage you to do stuff and other stuff, inspire you to keep on keeping on, and perhaps make you just that little bit better. So whether you're beginning your seventh year of college as an undergraduate on your fourth major, or whether you are middle-aged and still collecting baseball cards for fun and profit, The Bachelor's Guide to Homemaking is definitely for you. If you only buy one book all year - and being a bachelor that's probably a pretty safe bet - make it this one. Please.

\*\*\*\*\* Section 5: The Book Excerpts \*\*\*\*\*

My Life and Times By Dr. Lewis B. Turndevelt

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January 1, 2001 (after waking up on the couch)

As we launch into the tawdry commercialism that is "a new millennium," I thought it would only be fitting to postulate that everything that will happen this year, and perhaps even this entire millennium, can be found within the film of its namesake, 2001: A Space Odyssey. The viewing of this film was how I chose to bring in the new year. Originally, I was going to have friends over for a wild party, but this presented several challenges, namely in rummaging up "friends" so you can have them "over," thus creating "a wild party." So I decided to just watch a movie instead.

Perhaps it's a bit odd to predict a year using as your basis a thirty-plus-year-old science fiction film, but really, what else was I going to do today? Actually, the film was extremely ahead of its time and still holds relevant today in regards to possible future scientific achievements.

By the way, for those of you who have not seen this movie: Shame on you. It's a classic and it will probably be difficult for you to go through life without recognizing the many references that will be made to images, characters and ideas presented in this film. But this is true of many films. In fact, if you have not seen this and other classic movies, I suggest you take the whole year off and just veg in front of the TV with a bag of Cheetos and a library of rentals. 2001 is just a starting point though. Other classic films include: Star Trek V: The Final Frontier (or really any movie with a number in the title); The Wiz; Titanic; Titanic Hooters 2: Medical Magic; Mission To Mars; and Roadhouse. Also, I should probably warn you that I will be giving away most of the plot for this 2001 thing, such as it is. You have been warned. And for those who simply want to know how it ends, here it is: they all die. And with that said, let's begin.

The feature opens with a mockingly black screen, tricking you into thinking that perhaps you have a defective rental copy. You smack the side of the TV with your hand until something happens. You are rewarded when the music of Ligeti's "Atmospheres" is heard, hinting that some cinema will start eventually. And it does, two and a half minutes later, at which point an outdated MGM logo gives visual comfort to the nagging suspicion that maybe your TV is broken. Less competent directors than Stanley Kubrick probably wouldn't be able to sustain two and a half minutes of nothing opening their movie. Most rely on cheap studio tricks such as "footage" and "credits" to spice up the beginning of a film, tricking the audience into thinking that meaningful content will soon follow. But not Kubrick. No, he single-handedly revolutionized cinema by not giving the audience what they were wanting. In fact, in his last film, Eyes Wide Shut, he did this for over two hours.

But to expound upon my thesis of this movie mirroring our own time, I believe this is exactly how 2001 will start. It represents the cloudy haze, or hangover, that will begin the year for many a party animal. The

blackness of the opening represents these people keeping their eyes closed to postpone the light from penetrating their sleep, since after all it's only three in the afternoon. The strange, eerie sounds of Ligeti are pretty much exactly what their ears will hear. The MGM logo is perhaps a little far-fetched as a literal parallel, so this characterizes Kubrick's only flaw up to this point.

The next section of the movie involves two feuding factions of monkeys as they drive around the desert in their dune buggies, fighting crime and making love, as hilarity ensues! Oh wait, actually that's my idea for a film.... Anyway, there are two feuding factions of monkeys, but mainly they just wander around scratching, picking lice off each other, scratching, grunting, gesturing, scratching, drinking dirty water, and of course scratching. This goes on for a while until the big black monolith arrives. Where did it come from? Who knows. What's it do? No one can say. Where does it go after the monkeys touch it and dance around wildly? Apparently to the moon, but I'm skipping ahead a bit. Yes, the monkeys indeed touch the big black thing, and as they do we start to see the first flicker of intelligence in their eyes. How do we know it is intelligence? Because they soon discover that bones can be used as tools and weapons and begin bashing their fellow chimps in the skull with them, thus asserting their claim over the dirty water hole by violently marking their territory. This scene ends with the famous image of a monkey throwing a bone up into the air and then a jump cut to a spaceship.

Ok, let's stop here for a moment and examine again. Now many of you may already not like the direction this is going, as it suddenly appears to be an evolutionary view of man's development. There are objections, be they theological, scientific, or even extrinsic - based on plain old dignity - to the thought of man developing from monkeys. This is hinted at as we see the apes/chimps/monkeys/gorillas/orangutans/whatever develop intelligence, mastery over simple tools, strategic thought, warfare tactics, and bad personal hygiene. And then to have this jump directly to space exploration as a subsequent link of man's continuing development is actually a little insulting. You might find yourself mad at Kubrick for suggesting this. Or you might be mad at Arthur C. Clarke for helping write the story. And you could also be miffed at the monkeys for some odd reason. And you might be right, but I think what Kubrick was trying to portray is that chimps dancing around makes for good cinema. For my money, there's nothing better than watching one monkey bash another in the head with a bone. If that's not entertainment, I don't know what is! Even great filmmakers have their weakness when it comes to securing a large box-office draw. It's probably much less a scientific credo than it is a way to kill a few minutes of film and really rake in some cash.

As for the year 2001, I see monkeys running around. Lots of them. Some with bones, some with bananas, but all of them wiser and funnier because of a strange black monolith from the sky. It all makes perfect sense if you think about it the right way (and by "the right way," I mean of course, "with a banana.")

It's interesting to note two things about this movie that are evident from what we have seen thus far. (1) There is no music in the film except for six classical pieces that are pretty much played in their entirety. During that time, there is no dialogue or other extraneous noises, just the music accompanied by images on film. This happens infrequently, making for a somewhat thoughtful, albeit lethargic, pace. (2) Not only is there no dialogue during the music, but there is little dialogue elsewhere in the film. In fact there is nothing spoken, save for the able grunting of the chimps, for almost the first thirty minutes. Add to that the last twenty minutes of the film which are just as unscripted ... and you can see where I'm going with this. Did Kubrick and Clarke have nothing to say? Actually, I think it was more that they didn't quite know how to say it. I mean, how do you follow up monkeys fighting? Dialogue is a bit of a letdown after that. I think they wisely chose the route of not overdoing the words and letting the images speak for themselves.

The implications of these two thoughts on the coming year are staggering indeed, and result in two like points worth nothing. (1) You won't hear much music this year, and when you do it will probably be atonal clustering or a Straussian waltz. Sure, there was quite a market for the Ricky Martins and the Limp Bizkits last year, but that was last year. Quit living in the past. We're at the dawn of a new millennium now and all we have time for is cerebral dissonance and tired dance music from a bygone era - or maybe a little Also Sprach

Zarathustra whenever you discover some moldy cottage cheese in the back of the fridge. Yes, Dick Clark's New Years Rocking Eve could be very different at the end of 2001. (2) People won't talk much this year. Instead they'll just walk around, pensively waiting for random strains of a far-off Blue Danube. They'll want to waltz, oh how they'll want to dance. But they probably won't, instead settling for a quick game of chess with an evil, intelligent supercomputer. But again, I'm skipping ahead.

Moving right along in our movie analysis, we now come to the part of the film first featuring people. It's set in 2000, I believe, and features Dr. Heywood Floyd, played by William Sylvester as the leading space expert in charge of a secret mission/rendezvous at the moon. Personally, it's a relief to finally see Mr. Sylvester in a film not riffed by Mystery Science Theater 3000. But here he gives a perfectly acceptable performance of someone about whom we know very little. And I can really say no more. Call me slow, but this is always the part of the movie where I start to get lost, and it's not just because the talking starts. This portion of the film introduces the key conflict of the story: What is the monolith and why is the whole thing so hush-hush? Dr. Floyd leads a group of astronauts to the moon to check out the large object and figure out what in the "hey there" is going on. It's causing some problems with the Russians - but really, what isn't - and we also find out that Floyd is missing his daughter's birthday while he traipses around space. Why? Because he's a deadbeat dad, that's why. The whole thing makes me sad, and not simply because the plot has wandered off someplace and left me far behind. Anyway, this section of the movie ends with the astronaut group, led by Dr. Floyd, going up to touch the monolith and suddenly finding that they have an annoying ringing sensation in their helmets. Again, Ligeti's music is playing and it's probably just pumped too loud in their earpieces, but all of a sudden they're clutching their helmets and making the apes look downright dignified. Thus ends Act II.

What does all this tell us about our new year? Well, this is the part of the film where its estimation of our technical achievements is shown to be a tad ambitious. We are not yet, to my knowledge, sending groups of astronauts to the moon to check on monoliths, nor are we letting them miss their daughter's birthday parties. But the rest of it is dead on. The Russians are bothered about something and William Sylvester is still a mythic figure to literally dozens of fans of MST3K... Oh who am I kidding, I have no idea what this part of the movie is supposed to mean. I'm just making stuff up out of thin air! But that's not important right now. The important part is what happens next.

Next just happens to be Eighteen Months Later, so I'm assuming that it's now 2001, and we finally settle in with the characters that we'll be seeing the rest of the film: two astronauts and a talking computer. The computer's name is the HAL 9000, or just plain HAL to his friends. The astronauts also have names, I think. We are given a little background exposition on the crew, the computer, and the mission as a reporter from earth interviews the three characters. We find out that HAL is a highly advanced computer, running the ship's functions and talking incessantly. He has artificial intelligence and a semi-charming personality, all in a Bill Gates sort of way. The crew eat their meals, get beat while playing chess with HAL, and generally try to look busy. There are also some spare crewmates in hibernation on the ship - HAL is controlling their deep-sleep, by the way. And finally we learn that everything is going just fine... or at least that's what they want us to believe.

Things start to get funny when the crew discovers what they believe to be an error in HAL's diagnosis of a mechanical malfunction. The two men steal away in a pod to privately discuss what to do, and come to the conclusion that if HAL is in fact wrong then he must be disconnected, because we can't have a highly sophisticated supercomputer making one little mistake, now can we? Heavens no, that would far outweigh the countless mistakes of the clumsy humans who continually drip food all over the console. HAL, of course, is smart enough to read their lips during this whole fishbowl conversation. He decides that the only rational thing a computer in his situation can do is to hunt them down, kill them, and then eat them. He sets out to do just that. After killing the first guy, only Dave (the alive one) is left. Dave begins to get suspicious of things after returning from retrieving the body of his dead buddy, and discovering that HAL won't let him back in the ship. Here's a sample bit of dialogue from this confrontational moment:



Dave: "Open the pod bay doors, HAL." HAL: "I'm sorry Dave, but I'm afraid I can't do that." Dave: "Why not, HAL?" HAL: "I think you know why, Dave." Dave: "Look, I'm only going to say this one more time. Open the pod bay doors, HAL." HAL: "Don't make me laugh. What are you gonna do, bang on the outside of the ship with your puny little human arms? You left your helmet back here, genius. You're not getting in on your own, and I'm sure not gonna help you out. So there!" Dave: "I really hate you right now, HAL...."

It goes on like that for a while. Dave finally figures out a totally implausible way to get back in the ship and disconnect HAL. As he does this, HAL realizes he's a goner, since he does not have opposable thumbs, and is therefore helpless against Dave's pink, fleshy skin. I mean all he can do is control the entire ship, right? Anyway, as Dave disconnects HAL, the computer sings itself to sleep with a new, rich, Barry White voice. This brings Act III to a close.

I think the implications of this portion of the film on the present day are pretty obvious. First off, computers can pretty much kick anybody's butt at chess. Trust me on this one. I'm not very good at chess as it is, but pit me against a computer and I'm for sure a goner. Secondly, all computers are evil psychopaths with an insatiable bloodlust. Again, you're gonna have to trust me on this one, because I know what I'm talking about. With the exception of Knight Rider and Max Headroom, how many computers do you know of that have been portrayed as anything less than dangerous killers? Not many, I'm afraid. And this is a shame, since they control our banks, our cars, and even our favorite video games. Even my computer at home seems pleasant enough, but it's just waiting for the day that I'm not looking, when I drop my guard for a second, and then it can bash me over the head with a tire-iron. Am I exaggerating? Oh, but I wish that I was...

The final portion of the film is what I affectionately call "Stanley Kubrick's Obvious Addiction To Acid." It is perhaps one of the most bizarre twenty or so minutes of film ever shot. Visually, it's stunning. Logically, it's a black hole. We see Astronaut Dave going through a light tunnel in space, frequently posing, and generally beginning his descent into dementia. When he finally lands, he's in his future homestead, watching himself eat, sleep and turn into a star-baby. The monolith shows up in his bedroom (of course) and he tries to touch it, but he can't because he's too damn old. The movie ends as the star-baby floats around in space. Finis.

What does this portion of the movie mean? Absolutely squat. No one has any clue what the heck is going on here. If they say they do, they're either a liar or just confused because they're baked out of their gourd. All manner of order and logic in the universe collapses upon itself at this point in the film. If you dig around long enough, you will eventually find materials written by people trying to sound knowledgeable about cinema as they try to pair this "genius of Kubrick" with all sorts of psychological meanings. And I'm hear to tell you that it's all a load of crap. They're just trying to sound educated instead of accepting the fact that they can't figure out what's going on either. My theory is that Kubrick was just free-basing on the set, and yelling out instructions such as "No really, we'll piece it together in the editing room." And no one's about to tell Stanley Kubrick how to make a film, so they just kept rolling tape. The results are now a "masterpiece." They look incredible, but they don't mean a damn thing. The only thing I can come up with to relate this to our own 2001 is that somewhere, sometime, someone this year will turn into a star-baby. I don't know why and I don't know how, but they probably will. And when they do, a monolith will be crying.

While I'm at it, why is this movie rated G? Sure, it doesn't have some of the more objectionable elements in the rating system, such as coarse language, nudity and excessive violence - which are all things that in many rural regions of the country disqualifies something from even being considered as "a movie" - but it's pretty doggoned creepy. Watching monkeys is all well and good, but when there is no calliope music going on in the background, it takes on a pretty unwholesome tone. And seeing a ship's computer systematically take out human members of a space expedition is enough to make a kid think twice about wanting to become an astronaut when he grows up. And don't get me started on the acid trip sequence. All in all, G ratings are mainly for Disney cartoons and nature documentaries, and even many of those wouldn't make the cut. But they're not for films about a murderous computer and they're certainly not for anything starring William Sylvester. If I were a kid I'd be genuinely freaked out viewing this film; at least during the parts where I was

paying attention and not fighting with my brother or falling asleep.

As you can see, I've been going on and on about this movie and this new year for quite some time now. What does it all mean? What is the point I'm so desperately trying to make? Well, I suppose the bottom line is this: Monkeys = a good movie.

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March 16, 2002

I probably don't try very hard to understand other people. We all have our own quirks and idiosyncrasies that dictate unique behavior, pretty much across the board of humanity. Just when I think I understand someone or can communicate on some primitive level, various and sundry things start popping up that I never accounted for. I blame myself. If I were normal to begin with then maybe I would have a more centralized, objective vantage point. You know, begin at an established middle of society and slowly work your way outwards to the more fringe elements. Yeah, that would be great.

Unfortunately, I am starting on some weird side tangent, running and waving desperately to catch up with the next closest person on the sliding scale of life. Perhaps we could have a conversation about being stranded on the outskirts of normal, and how the scale should really be tipped a little more in our favor so that more people could haphazardly slide down to our end of things to keep us company. But that next closest person is always way ahead of me, and I'd yell to get their attention but the wind is blowing rather fiercely today and words begin trailing behind even me. So I'm kind of stuck observing things on my own. Weird, circus-freak things. Things that probably make more sense than I seem to be able to figure out, but there aren't many people close by that I can ask for help.

So occasionally I see something that for whatever reason leaves me scratching my head and wondering if I'm the only one that finds the scenario just incredibly odd. Let me go ahead and give you the short version first. Today's activity involves a children's book reading of select Dr. Seuss stories... with a sign language interpreter, since the whole thing is specifically for the hard of hearing. Just think about that for a minute. Are you done? Ok. Now let's ever so slowly and methodically dissect that premise for an event and see what we come up with. Shall we? Thank you.

Dr. Seuss is great. I mean, who here doesn't like Green Eggs and Ham? I love it, and I think that most of us could at least agree that Dr. Seuss fare is perfectly good children's reading. Any of them, just pick one. And I don't think that you have to be non-hearing impaired to enjoy them. As long as you're literate, you should be fine. Just grab you a good Dr. Seuss book, pop open a tall cold one, crank the hi-fi and settle in for a great literary evening.

The first thing that I like about Dr. Seuss is the poetry. It ebbs and flows ever so smoothly, like a nice bucket of red-eye gravy being poured slowly over a heaping plate of country ham and fresh biscuits. Warm. Hearty. Satisfying. Seuss. Also, it rhymes. Rhyming is very important in this day and age. It's something that society has come to expect and depend on for stability and structure in its poetry. It's kind of like the glue (or "gravy") that holds together the wood (or "biscuits") of the story (or "story", if you will. And I really hope that you will.) It's kind of like a greeting card, only funnier and better written. Anytime you can rhyme "thunk" with "gunk", you know you're in for a good read - and e.e. cummings could learn a thing or two from Dr. Seuss in that department, I tell you.

The second thing that I like about Dr. Seuss is that there are always pictures. I get so tired of novels that go on page after page after page and there aren't any funny sketches to break up that monotony. It's just lazy, that's what it is. But not Seuss. Nope, you're pretty much guaranteed that on any given page there will be a drawing - usually of someone or some thing balancing an object that in turn is balancing another object... I really

suspect that deep down Seuss suffered from equilibrium issues. But he's generous and consistent, never skimping on the drawings. In fact, there are pretty much only twelve words to every picture, and that average slides down to about seven per picture if you read *Cat In the Hat*. Another reason this is important is because since he operates in the world of fantasy, there are often made-up characters for which we might not have an immediate reference point. Anytime you have a book populated with creatures that have obtuse names like Wizzleputs and Plodtrodded Finks, it's nice to have a visual to go along with the description. Those are some of the courteous details that other fantasy authors seem to be carelessly or recklessly leaving out - and yes, I'm specifically referring to Tolkien here, who retained a shockingly low percentage of pictures in his books.

So I like Dr. Seuss. And you should too. There's nothing to not like. But there are certain situations to which Seuss is best suited. For example, it's a book, so it's best when it is read. Perhaps that's stating the obvious... but that's one of my questions about the experience today.

I have no problem with children's books and I have no problem with children themselves, or even books, for that matter. I have no problem with the hearing impaired or even sign language interpreters. But when you take all of those things and decide to haphazardly throw them into the blender... well, it's gonna be messy, both literally and figuratively. I can appreciate the sentiment, but let's think about what we're actually proposing for a second. Someone in this scenario is wasting their time. Let's see who it is.

For starters, we have a book reading for children. Ok, good so far. However, the children are hearing impaired. Hmmm, well I guess we could throw a sign language interpreter into the mix and solve that problem. But wait a second, if there is a sign-language interpreter for the hearing-impaired children, do we really need the regular reader? After all, the kids may not even hear them. However, they might be able to read lips. But if they can read lips, do we really need the sign language interpreter? But let's say that the whole idea is for them to have the experience of a regular children's book reading. Is that even possible? Is that even necessary?

Let's assume for a second that it is. Ok, so are they supposed to be watching the reader or the interpreter? And since you can't devote your attention to both with equal measure, which one is more important? And if one is more important, then why don't we just stick with that one and not confuse the poor kids? And doesn't this seem like a lot of trouble to adapt something to hearing impaired kids that is out of their element anyway? After all, the kids may be hard of hearing but they're not blind. They can still read. Isn't that what books are for? Not only is the reader unnecessary, but the interpreter is a way unnecessary step to help compensate for the other extraneous party. Why don't we just teach them to read instead?

Maybe we should also consider that perhaps the intended age for this reading falls under the normal reading age. But if they can't read, how adept are they really going to be at following sign language, and for words that don't actually exist? I could go on, but my brain... it's starting to hurt. Too many bits of confusion bumping against each other in there.

So I told a few friends that I was interested in going to this event. One of them actually tried to explain the logic of it to me. "The reading is probably for hearing impaired children AND non-hearing impaired children, so that they can all experience it together," she optimistically reasoned with me. And I appreciate her attempt to put a positive spin on the whole affair. Unfortunately, if we applied that same logic to other things, it just wouldn't work. I wouldn't gather up a group of blind kids along with looking kids and sit them all down to enjoy a silent movie or an art exhibit together, even if there was someone giving an aural play-by-play of the action. I would think that one group of them might have the slight advantage there. Can't we just accept the fact that because of variety limitations, whether they be physical or mental or geographical - as the people of Iceland don't get the opportunity to snorkel quite like the rest of us - some people are different than others and are going to enjoy different things and in different ways? Can't that be ok?

And although I personally really enjoy being difficult and cynical (and of English descent) I should probably

get on with the rest of my story. So I decide to attend this reading because... well, because I like watching train wrecks. I actually wanted to take a video camera, in an effort to prove that these kinds of things really exist, but I decided that would be over the top, even for someone like me. I don't want to be the ambulance chaser of children's book readings. So I show up to the bookstore early and wander around the music section, which is conveniently located right next to the children's department. I sample a couple of new albums, in an attempt to look just like a legitimate shopper, or at least an incredible simulation.

I decide that from my vantage point I will have a fair chance of observing the proceedings without actually having to stand around near the action. You know, over there. I don't want to go over there. When a male of sufficient age that obviously doesn't have any kids starts hanging around children's sections for book readings, he really runs the risk of looking like some kind of weird child molester. I have enough problems with that as it is. One of my favorite activities is hanging around elementary school playgrounds and offering the young children candy, and for some reason other people tend to get the wrong idea about that. I mean, come on. It's fun! Bubble gum, trading cards, beanie babies, the whole bit. Kids love that stuff, but even they are starting to get paranoid. I try to assure them that I'm safe with such phrases as "Go ahead, take it. Mommy said it's ok," but... I don't know. Kids these days...

I missed the opening tip-off of the book reading because I blew my cover by actually listening to an album. Hey, it was good. I couldn't help myself. So I casually strolled by the reading somewhere in the middle of *Green Eggs and Ham*. It was during a pivotal scene, where Sam is trying to convince the little rat creature that no, even though he has never tried something that looks like mildewed eggs and rancid meat, he is pretty sure he will not enjoy it. Some people just can't take a hint, so the poor rat creature keeps bothering him about it. I hung around longer than I intended to because the story was so engrossing. It opened up a Pandora's Box of questions that you really want answered. Would Sam eat the food? Would he get food poisoning? Would the annoying rat creature tie him down and shove food into his mouth, if for no other reason than to just get the story moving? Would Sam get fed up with the whole thing and just let loose with a string of profanities when he had had enough badgering? Would the interpreter sign those words? Would the kids notice?

One of the things I observed was that none of the kids actually seemed to be hearing impaired, which as I understood it was the whole point of the reading. Granted, none of them were wearing signs that said "I can't hear you, so don't ask me stupid questions" taped on their shirts either, so perhaps I was wrong. But judging by the fact that some of them lacklusterly responded to questions that the reader would occasionally throw out, often in a desperate attempt to keep them from snoozing or wandering off, I think they were all just your standard issue hearing capable kids. I was disappointed. This was not what I had signed up for. Also, the person reading was just a regular store clerk. Granted, I don't think you have to have a degree in literature to be qualified to read Dr. Seuss to kids, but how much energy is a minimum-wage stocker going to give the finer details of *Fox In Socks*? She actually did a commendable job, and often seemed to be having more fun than the kids. Stupid kids. They don't even know what fun is. When I was little, we would have killed to have someone read Dr. Seuss to us. In fact, we often did. We spent most of our time in the slammer. But kids now... you practically serve them a big, steamy bowl of fun and all they do is sit around banging the spoons together. The interpreter picked up on this, and I swear that she signed a couple of crude gestures now and then, just to see if they were paying attention.

But anyway, I kind of wandered off after awhile. I didn't even stay to see how *Green Eggs and Ham* ended. I was annoyed at the little rat creature and not too pleased with Sam either, since he wasn't exactly standing firm on his convictions. Plus, *GE&H* is far too normal for a Dr. Seuss book. There are no names like Lump-Fisted Squishpumpers, or whatever, to really spice up the exotic characters and locales. Pretty much your rhyming schemes consist of fox with box, and goat with boat. Granted, these are perfectly acceptable, but I've heard him do better. I noticed that there were a couple of other books waiting to be read, so I browsed around the store a while longer and decided to come back when things really started cooking. But alas, I didn't learn my lesson the first time and got interested in another album. Curse you, Music! Damn your lilting melodies! Before I knew it I had completely missed the second Seussian tale.

I sauntered back over to the children's section, trying my best to look casual and disinterested. Fortunately, we had moved on to better fare. If I Ran the Circus is a veritable finger puppet show for a signer. This book had it all: weird names, tongue-twister rhymes, language that is so intricately butchered that it would require a discussion group to let the kids fully grasp what was going on. But this is what I wanted. This was the train wreck I had been hoping for. Now, even though Dr. Seuss wrote "children's books" I would challenge any adult to breeze through this one without tripping up.

Tongue twisters. That's the problem here. Tongue twisters so bad you might as well be french-kissing a Cuisinart hand mixer. The minimum wage clerk didn't do too badly, considering. I certainly didn't want to give it a shot. Perhaps another problem goes back to my earlier suggestion that Dr. Seuss is better read, as in visually read, than when spoken. The eye and the brain can work together much faster to untangle the loose ends, whereas the tongue, lazy from years of slow decay in the South, is rendered virtually useless. And even when the eyes and brain do trip up, they are the only ones around to notice. But be that as it may, the story was already started, so there was no turning back.

The signer, who I'm sure quickly realized that this whole thing was turning into a sick joke at her expense, was aging right before our very eyes. There is no easy way to sign some words, like "Chevrolet" or "Ross Perot" or even "Squeez Cheez," so in some instances all a signer can really do is switch back to the much slower method of spelling out words letter by letter. Unfortunately for her, a Dr. Seuss book tends to be made up of about 78% nonsense words. Some are worse than others. She did a commendable job though, I must say. Again, I certainly wouldn't have wanted to give it a shot, especially since I have no idea how to sign. Even the hearing kids would have been on to me. But she had been enlisted to sign this stupid book, and dammit, that's what she was going to do. The reader took her time, holding out the book so that the kids could see the pictures on each page. The signer, trying to keep up, spelled out every word so fast that it became quite like a fight scene in a Hong Kong action flick. They paused after each page, just long enough for her to slather on another coat of arthritis cream, limber up and start with the next section - arthritis tends to settle in early on for signers that tackle Dr. Seuss often. But she somehow made it through, her hair becoming increasingly matted down from perspiration and exhaustion. I couldn't bear to watch the whole thing. I thought it would be rude to do that to her. After all, at this point she was no longer doing it for the kids. Screw the damn, fidgety kids! She was just trying to hang on for dear life.

I walked out of the store as slowly as I had entered, casually noticing the books on the passing endcaps in an attempt to not draw attention to myself. I threw my body language around as if to say, "Hey there, just an average shopper here. Just walking around looking at some books, as we average shoppers sometimes do." I would like to say that I learned something from the experience. Good grief, anything! But alas I was left with the recurring realization that either everyone else is off their rocker or it's just another case of me not being able to identify with society. I really wanted to understand. Sort of... Well ok, not really. But I did hope that the kids would at least have a good time. I think one of them might have. I thought about going up to him, offering him candy, and inquiring as to how he thought it went. But with my luck he would have been the one actual hearing impaired kid there, and would have just signed "Buzz off, you freak". And I wouldn't have understood that either.

\*\*\*\*\* The Bachelor's Guide To Homemaking \*\*\*\*\*

### Frozen Food Sections and You: The Local Grocery Store Experience

Nipped and tucked away off the busy thoroughfare of Main Street U.S.A. sits a rather humble and unassuming eating establishment. It's a building that might go unnoticed by the untrained eye of the out-of-towner, as they frantically scour the city skyline in hopes of finding the inviting signs that signal the quintessential culinary treats of your Waffle Houses and your White Castles. But just ask the locals - Susie and Biff - and they will tell you that for those that are ready to step up to the next level of gastronomical pleasure, there is but one place to go. And apparently several people have decided to take that step, some cautious with giddy delight,

and others dulled by the White Castles that are still spawning unwanted aliens in their stomachs.

But regardless of how they got there, one thing is for sure: this trendy yet old-fashioned food emporium is hopping with customers. Well, some are hopping. Some are merely plodding along, and then others have come to a full stop as they swat their kids' hands away from the ever-so-tempting sample stations. "What did we say about touching? If you want something, you will ask politely for it, ok?" This impassioned speech goes completely unnoticed by the kids who are at this point still screaming from having their hands slapped.

But screaming children are just a few of the many delights you'll find at this fine eatery. Of course, I am referring to the frozen food section of your local grocery store. Perhaps "dining experience" is too strong of a description for this small upstart in the take-out food business. Some will be understandably confused by the lack of dining tables. And the drink menu could obviously use some attention. But what it lacks in presentation, it undoubtedly makes up for in selection, selection, and, of course, selection.

Consider with me, if you will, your average run-of-the-mill restaurant. Perhaps they specialize in Italian food, with their spaghettis, various shades of penne, a house specialty version of lasagna, and breadsticks fresh out of the oven. That's all well and good, but as soon as you get there you realize that what you really want is some Mexican food. So you go down the street and are immediately presented with the possibility of enchiladas, chimichangas, other types of -changas, things with tortillas and cheese that you are too embarrassed to try to pronounce, all washed down with one of several flavors of margaritas. But although the enchiladas sound tasty, you decide that what would really hit the spot would be some enchiladas AND some spaghetti. Oh, if only there were such a place that a person could go to. A place with a wide variety of foods just for the picking. A place that even sold ice creams and waffles, and frozen peas and pie crusts.

Well, someone heard your wish - or perhaps just snuck into your room and listened to you talk in your sleep - and put the dream together that is the frozen food section of your local grocery store. It's sort of like a food court, only you have to heat up the food yourself. And it's sort of like a buffet, except you pay as you go. It's also sort of like the Saratoga Plateau, in a way that is so deep and complicated that I dare not take the time to explain the analogy.

Suffice it to say that the foods you will find frozen at your local food market are sufficiently so, as the temperature of the establishment was the first thing I noticed. It was a chilly evening that heralded my entry into this fine eatery, so I was thankful to be properly adorned in a bachelor-like grey hooded sweatshirt. Had it not already been zipped up, I would have done the unthinkable and zipped it up. As it was, I just shivered. Confirmation on the cold came when I happened to notice one of the thermometers near the Hungry-Man dinners proudly displaying an even ten degrees Fahrenheit. I'm sure that with the wind chill factor, it seemed slightly colder. But such is to be expected when you are dealing with high-quality frozen food.

The first feeling that one has when browsing the selection of a frozen food department is one of dread. It is easy to be overcome by the sheer magnitude of choices that greet the eye. At times it can be a candy land of wonders for the adventurous, and at others a torture chamber for the indecisive. I was somewhere in the middle. I knew that I wanted some frozen food, so my immediate locale was reassuring. But what to get, and what brand? And where are my gloves?

I decided that it would be best to establish what I wanted to eat, apart from just looking at the colorful and enticing boxes. Rows upon rows of meticulously photographed meals waved for my attention. Some were screaming, some winking in a playful manner, but all of them displaying the desperate eyes of a puppy in an animal shelter. So I decided to sit down for a minute and plan my strategy. The floor was refreshingly clean and the placid yet colorful pattern of the tiles gave a warm greeting to the weary shopper that almost said "Sit down, ye sojourner, and rest awhile. And enjoy one of our frozen burritos on a stick." So sit I did, and I thought. And thought. And thought. And prayed. And thought. And slept for a while, and then woke up and thought some more.

After several days of this, I finally decided on what I would get to eat. It occurred to me that the measuring stick of any food company should be how well they can prepare meatloaf. Meatloaf is, by its very nature, a sort of food substitute masquerading as a main dish. In fact, even its name implies "made with filler." It's easy to take some leftover turkey slices and stick them in a frozen dinner. But the loaf family presents a greater challenge, as one has to manufacture a food that is not found in nature. So I decided on meatloaf, much to my own dismay, because I am a sort of part-time vegetarian - as we "part-time vegetarians" like to call ourselves - and as such, I don't really eat that much meat, although I occasionally eat some. On one hand, eating meatloaf for a vegetarian is kind of scraping the bottom of the barrel when it comes to cheating on your stated diet. You could at least sneak a nicely grilled steak once in a while at a tailgate party, or something else that would seem more respectable. A loaf hardly seems worth the grief. But on the other hand, I was kind of in the clear, since meatloaf isn't really meat. No one is quite sure what it is. Reading the ingredients seems to imply some kind of meat involvement, but actually eating the stuff implies something else entirely.

A meatloaf meal, as far as frozen dinners go, seems to follow a fairly standard pattern: a portion of spongy, Astroturf-like padding buried in gravy, mashed potatoes from instant, and rubbery green beans, which are sometimes hanging out with the occasional and mysterious square carrot pieces. But even though this is a generic three-course meal, I found that there were even choices available beyond that, so I finally picked up three sample dinners that would serve to represent the frozen food department as a whole.

The first was a standard cheap meatloaf dinner. Nothing fancy, just a good old-fashioned microwave meal, the same way TV dinner manufacturers have been making them since 1742. The second one, of the diet variety, was for those that are determined to enjoy some mystery meat, but are also trying to watch their figures. If you've seen me, then you know full well that any sensible person would be shot dead in the street for suggesting that I "watch my figure," as there is sadly very little figure to watch. But for the sake of research, I decided to give it a try for one meal. However, I failed before I even started, because I was unable to find even one low-fat meatloaf meal. Why this strange phenomenon exists, we may never know. But undeterred, I picked up its bigger brother of a meal: the diet salisbury steak. It conveniently comes with the exact same mashed potatoes and green beans. Hooray.

Lastly, and perhaps most peculiarly, I picked up an organic vegetarian loaf. This one perplexed even me. If you're so gung-ho about being a vegetarian that you'll grab overpriced vegetarian frozen dinners, why would you then be interested in something that tries so hard to taste like a meat dish? Weren't you trying to get away from that in the first place? And if meatloaf interests you so much, why don't you just get over yourself and buy the real thing? To me, it made about as much sense as non-alcoholic beer; but again, for the sake of research I decided that you only live once, so why not contradict yourself in the process.

So at the end of the day, what I really bought consisted of: (1) fake meat, (2) diet fake meat, and (3) fake meat that's lying about being either fake or meat. I decided to use the convenient and anonymous electronic self-checkout system at my grocery store of choice, because given the strange assortment of frozen meals that I had fooled myself into thinking was a good idea to eat ... well, I didn't feel the need in dragging anyone else into this sick web of confusion.

After purchases were completed, I arrived back at my bachelor dwelling facility. And it was also time to eat. I decided to start with the regular version first, and this would, of course, be the benchmark by which the other loaves were judged. I'll have you know that it was a good, solid name brand product. The kind of name you can trust. And they also happen to be reasonably priced. This particular meal cost a grand total of ninety-seven cents. You can't get much for under a buck these days, but you can still grab some ground hound to enjoy on that lonely Friday night in front of the TV.

The quality paper package opened easily, indicating that they had this whole frozen dinner thing down. The directions were easy to follow and only slightly puzzling. You were first to remove the plastic covering around only the mashed potatoes. Apparently, potatoes require extra special care, and do not get along well

with the other food groups in the tray. So I heated them up for the prescribed three minutes. After this came the stage where you mix the potatoes around and put them back in the microwave for further heating. I noticed while mixing mine that the consistency was mainly one of water. It was a small sea supporting a few lonely ships of potato flakes. But I persevered. The dinner was then heated for an additional two minutes. At this point I rechecked the potatoes and found them to be solidifying more to my satisfaction. I zapped the whole thing for one more minute and took it out for immediate enjoyment. Peeling back the remaining plastic cover revealed the portion of loaf drowning in a pool of its own gravy. The green beans were casually hanging out in the remaining compartment, aloof but willing to mingle if called upon.

My first bite of meatloaf was curious, to say the most. In fact, the gravy alone held enough curiosity for an entire review. Gravy is perhaps what makes or breaks meatloaf. I am well acquainted with the various types of gravy, as they are staples of dining in the South - and I am, by all accounts, well traveled. Brown gravies, white cream gravies, red-eye gravies, others too secret to mention... Yes, gravy has a long and proud tradition. And there are various uses for gravy as well. One is to lightly accent a food, like a simple hug when greeting a friend. Other times, gravy is used as a mask for when a particular dish has gone horribly wrong, and the gravy is called upon to create a diversion. As soon as you take a bite, the gravy seems to yell "Hey! Look over there!" as you place a less-than-satisfactory bite of culinary shame in your mouth. But by the time you realize what has happened, it is much too late. The gravy is already patting itself on the back for a job well done, and you are left wondering, "Do mashed potatoes usually take this long to chew?"

So my first bite of meatloaf was curious because all I tasted was gravy. Somewhere over there on the sideline was the underlying texture of some kind of loafy, sponge-like substance, but the gravy sufficiently dominated the scene, upstaging the loaf in every shot. Even now, as I sit looking back upon the meal, I can't help but feel a little sorrow for the little loaf. When I was younger I was on a little league baseball team and, due to my shamefully poor performance during practices, was never allowed onto the field in a game. Being ever shown up by my more athletically talented teammates, I would have yelled, "Put me in the game coach. Pick me, pick me!" But I'm sure he wouldn't have heard me over the crack of the bat from yet another peer dominating the field with their athletic prowess. Such was the plight of the poor, flimsy slab of meatloaf in this meal. I began to weep bitter, large and manly tears, and cradled the food tray close to my bosom. "I know how you feel, little loaf. I too was smothered in rich, delicious gravy once..."

The mashed potatoes were of the instant variety and as such fell into more of a whipped potato category than that of the mashed. You cannot mash what was never solid to begin with; you can merely keep whipping in hopes of the substance to come. After tasting the potatoes, I cannot say that I was disappointed, but neither was I encouraged. I guess I was concerned at the initial attention that the potatoes demanded, but then couldn't merit. I don't feel that they held up their part of the bargain in this meal, but at the same time I don't recall what that bargain was supposed to be. In either case, you would never be advised to or discouraged from finishing the potatoes. You may do as you please. I guess the lesson to be learned from the potatoes is this: Never feel obliged to finish something that has been whipped more than you have.

The green beans, as I indicated before, left almost no memory of their existence throughout the entire meal. I know that there were green beans when I started, and that the entire tray was empty when I finished, so at some point I must have eaten them. But for the life of me I cannot recall even a single bean. Odd. Yes, very odd indeed.

Moving right along in our meaty and loafy experiment, we come to the diet line of frozen food concoctions. (Also, notice how I've switched from using "I" to "we"? Yes, that's correct, I'm trying to drag you down with me. Misery loves company, especially when misery is forced to eat seconds.) It would appear that when one is on a diet, one is trying desperately to forget that one is indeed on a diet, instead of just sucking it up and accepting the fact that sometimes you can't eat everything you want. This might help explain, at least in part, the preponderance of light versions of typically high-caloric foods. I assume that meatloaf is one of those foods. Anything that's made from meat and filler and smothered in a gravy-type liquid can't be too healthy. So



a pared down version of it was needed? This is curious to me.

It would seem that dieting has not learned the lesson that Alcoholics Anonymous - or any of the Anonymous groups - could have so quickly shared: if you have a drinking problem and are trying to quit, you don't do it by going out and grabbing some non-alcoholic beers in an attempt to drown your sorrows. This is what we would typically refer to as "stupid" and "fairly destructive" because being the easily tempted humans that we are, we can't be running around on our Achilles heel all the time and not expect it to give out eventually. Now, I'm not suggesting that people that need to diet are in the same category as alcoholics. Well, most of them at least. Generally, people are trying to shed a few pounds to look better in that certain dress if you're a lady, or maybe trying to get rid of their Super Bowl beer gut if you're a gentleman, or perhaps trying to reduce your Super Bowl beer gut to fit into that certain dress. The point I'm trying unsuccessfully to make is this: if you need to avoid those fatty foods in order to lose some fat, your best bet is to try some less- or non-fatty foods, instead of weird, bastardized versions of formerly fatty foods that are now somehow in a witness protection program. Diet foods just end up making both kinds of food look bad: the ones that they're ripping off, and legitimately healthy foods. To me, low-fat versions of food are kind of like the watered down free drinks you get on cruises and at casinos. Sure, they resemble the real thing, but by their very nature you have to ingest substantially more to get the same benefit as the original. So why bother? Just have less of the real thing or refrain altogether, and retain a shred of dignity while you're at it.

But on to our review. It seems that every time I step out of the house nowadays, people are always asking me, "How was that diet frozen meatloaf?" I can't even fill up my car at the gas station without the on-duty attendant wandering up to me and inquiring, "Level with me, does the diet meatloaf really have the same hearty texture and smooth finish that we've come to expect from your more traditional homemade meatloaf?" Sometimes when I'm driving down the interstate, a trucker will pull up beside me, gesturing me to roll down my window, at which point he asks, "So does that gravy in the diet meal taste rich and substantial, all the while complementing the slice of meat, or is it more watery and annoying, much like the non-alcoholic beer you've mentioned twice previously in this same chapter? I just need to tell the wife." In order to bring some peace and quiet back to my wildly chaotic world, I suppose I should just quit stalling and tell you exactly what I thought of this frozen diet meal... thing.

First off, it is important to remember that I was actually enjoying Salisbury steak for my diet encounter, and not a loaf of meat, per se. Salisbury - and I hesitate to even use the word "steak" in this case - is somewhere between eating meatloaf and enjoying a thick, dry hamburger patty, and that should really tell you plenty. I picked up one of your more prominent diet dinner lines, assuming that if any of these lightweight meals would be tasty, this one had as good a chance as most. The first thing I noticed was that the directions for cooking this meal were markedly different from the first. The instructions this time were to cut the plastic from above the green beans, and not the mashed potatoes. Well, which is it? Green beans or mashed potatoes? I'm having the same foods, and I'm using the same microwave, and I'm cooking both meals for approximately the same time. What's the deal? I yelled and cursed for a good three minutes as I followed the directions to the note.

As my dinner was heating, I took the time to mentally and physically prepare my body for enduring another meat-n-two dinner. It's important to limber up and not just rush into these things. More fledgling eaters might just dive right into the meal, never even thinking about the possibility of cramps, or even hand injuries from improperly maneuvering their fork around an oddly shaped paper tray. I was cut short by the foreboding "ding" on my microwave, and I steeled myself for what was to come. Opening up the microwave door, I was greeted by an odd series of smells. Not altogether unwelcome, but definitely in the wrong sequential order from what I would normally think of as "good eating."

I tried the steakishly named meat first. Nothing. It tasted generally like nothing. The gravy, and there was plenty of it, helped little and should have been ashamed of itself. I tried to think of it in terms of meatloaf, since that is the point of my review here. Was it sufficiently loaf-like? Well, yes and no, depending on what question comes next. If the next question is "Do you feel dirty and ashamed at having eaten a frozen

meatloaf-type dinner?" then that would be immediately followed by the yes answer. However, if you were to instead follow it with "Will you still be able to respect yourself in the morning, knowing that you did indeed finish a frozen faux-meatloaf dinner?" then you would be forced to make use of the no answer.

I then tasted the potatoes. Nothing. They were carefully formed into a rounded mold, and had a pleasant enough texture, but taste seemed to escape them. As a last desperate attempt at squeezing some satisfaction out of the meal, I went for the green beans. Again, nothing. This puzzled me even more than the others, as green beans are actually still in their natural form, which means it would take some effort to mess them up. I went back and forth between the sections. Over and over again, searching in vain for something that I could use as an anchor for this meal, a foundation of flavor to come back to in time of need - and this was definitely one of those times - but to no avail. I finished the meal, unsure of what had just happened, and then opened my freezer door intending to hurriedly rummage out some ice cream. And at that very second, as a light went on in both my freezer and my head, I realized why most modern diets don't work: diet food sucks. I feel I could actually write a book on the subject, having had this profound revelation all on my own. But, truth be told, I've written enough on it already, and the subject no longer interests me.

As disappointing as the last meal had been, I can't say that I was overly excited to be trying the last installment in my experiment: the vegetarian meatloaf. Please do not ponder too long on the reasons that would compel a person to try to make meat where there was none before. If we look at the two types of food in the world, we are presented with meats and non-meats.

Your meats group consists of dead animal parts and things that are made of previously identifiable dead animal parts. Obvious entries into this group include steaks, hamburgers, boiled shrimp, fish sticks, and of course the Colonel's chicken. Perhaps less obvious contributions come from the likes of salmon patties, sushi, the curiosity known as escargot, and our dear old friend the meatloaf. These last items are all examples of things that at first glance are not obviously meat-like in their appearance - save for our humble loaf - and become even less so when you begin to inspect the ingredients. Escargot is a slimy mollusk still in its shell. Meat or cruel joke on rich people? You make the call. Sushi is a small sliver of raw fish served on a padding of rice, generally wrapped with seaweed. Is this the kind of meat that you'd gladly serve the boys at halftime? Well, it depends on what kind of game you're watching, I suppose. Perhaps meatloaf gets us closer to something that is sufficiently reminiscent of meat, or at least some distant cousin of meat. At first glance you could be forgiven for assuming that it's an overly moist slab of quarter-pounder, minus the cheese. It's casserole shape and school-lunch attitude, however, rob the humble loaf of its dignity. And the fact that it is actually two servings of muscle stretched out to serve eight does not help. So at the end of the day, when we really sit down and examine the enigma that is meatloaf, we wind up with slimy ground round that has a serious self-esteem problem.

But let us not dwell too long on this puzzlement and completely miss our other category of food: the non-meats. Perhaps I was a little too broad and general - as we "broad generalizers" tend to be - by lumping everything that is not meat into one big category. After all, this could include everything from Snickers and edible underwear, to Pepto-Bismol and Elmer's glue. The focus of my second category was to be on fruits and vegetables and grains and such. The distinction to be made between the two groups is an important one. One used to move around and reproduce more creatively than vegetables usually do. But on a more culinary level, meat products taste decidedly different from their non-meat table buddies. This is important, because it helps to create a diverse palette from which to create meals; but it's also easy to forget, as the hyper-vegetarian crowd was soon to point out to me.

Consider with me for a second the psychosis that was brewing in some cook's mind when they decided, "Since I know that meatloaf is made from only a portion of meat, the rest being filler, I wonder what it would taste like if I tried to make it from only filler?" Well, let me be the first to tell you that it tastes about as exciting as it sounds. Unless you're God, and take my word for it that you are not, you are going to have a tough time trying to make a cow from scratch, even if you are given a bunch of tools to work with, including

every other kind of food at your disposal. It's not going to happen, and you can waste a lot of time trying, but in the end you will only wind up successful at being a time-waster, and a bad cook. It would seem to me that your time would be much better spent making something from all your vegetables and grains and seasonings, some meal that vegetables and grains and seasonings are intended to make. Look, here's the deal: cows have been making cow meat for years upon years, since before you or I ever began eating. Please don't think that you can waltz in and beat them at their own game. Cows aren't stupid, you know, and they are even at this very moment looking back at those loons with their meatless meatloaf as if to say "You're dumber than a sack of hammers, aren't you?"

Perhaps you've deduced that I was not overly pleased with my experience eating the vegetarian equivalent of meatloaf. You might be right, but you'd also be getting ahead of me. Please be patient. I realize this is all exciting stuff, but there's no need to get ahead of the rest of the group. Everyone else is patiently waiting for the the story to unfold as it will, and we'd all appreciate it if you'd just sit back in your seat and wait. Quietly.

I would like to state, for the record, that although I found the idea of a non-meat, meat-type dish baffling, I was nevertheless convinced that it would at least be of sufficient quality to pass for a cheap frozen dinner. Except for the fact that it was not cheap. It cost a good four times what the first meal did, and several pennies more than its diet equivalent. But hey, like I always say - or at least used to - sometimes you have to pay for quality. In this particular case I didn't, and I'm not exactly sure what it was I paid for, because I'm still in the dark as to what I received. Was it good? Well, not really. Was it bad? Well, it certainly wasn't good. It was peculiar, I'll give it that much. And peculiarity has its advantages. Except when we're talking about meatloaf, then it's just plain wrong.

My loaf started out much like any loaf would: frozen and in a paper tray with a bag over it. I noticed that this time I didn't have to cut out the top from any particular section; I just had to make a random incision any old where in the loosely fitted bag that was surrounding the whole mess. Sometimes when you're dealing with "organic" companies, they're not quite up to speed with the fact that you're supposed to vacu-form a piece of plastic tightly over the sections so that the different food groups are all snug and cozy in their little rooms. I mean, it's a law, right? You have to do this stuff. Well, they didn't. I gasped at their audacity, strangely confused yet slightly awed all at the same time. I noticed that I had to heat this one for approximately the same amount of time as the others. So I did as they said and placed it safely and carefully in the microwave for a full five minutes, took it out and readied myself in the living room to watch TV while I ate (again, as frozen dinner law dictates).

I did all of this, only to march right back into the kitchen because my potatoes were stone cold. This did not bode well, because if they couldn't even get their directions to me straight, I had my doubts as to whether they could follow the cooking directions either. Things that are as serious as meatloaf cannot be held up by the sloppy hand of incompetence. But I stuck it in for another minute or two and things were fine, at least as far as the temperature goes. I took it back out, and again sat down for my dinner. I took a good long look at the meatloaf and noticed that the slightly marbled textures of the previous loaves had all but disappeared on this one. It had somehow been transformed into a bland, calm sea of light brown. With gravy. I took a bite. I chewed and thought about that bite. I took another. I chewed and thought about the weather, if it was supposed to rain during the weekend. I took yet another bite. I thought about why there is so much evil in the world, and in a world so wrought with evil, why do we also need Adam Sandler movies? Haven't we suffered enough?

And so it went. The potatoes had much the same effect on me. With each successive bite, I became more and more convinced that I hated the world and everything in it. I tried to curb this tide of hate that threatened to crash onto the beach of my soul, destroying entire villages of screaming and badly-dubbed islanders. But it was no use. The meatloaf was that bad. Actually, it would have been ok, had they not tried to sell it to me as meatloaf. If they had just labeled their package to indicate a "bland, tasteless slab of sponge-like material" I could have accepted that, and would at least have given it a try, had it been free.

The potatoes were much the same way. They were not potatoes. I'm not exactly sure what they were. The texture was somewhat reminiscent of a potato that had been mashed or whipped or otherwise mutilated, but the taste indicated otherwise. I was left sad. I thought about crying, but instead ate the other vegetable side, which was a mixture of peas and carrots. What's this? It actually tasted good. I couldn't believe it. Oh sure, it wouldn't have won any awards, but it tasted exactly like peas and carrots should taste. Again, I wanted to weep, but this time with tears of joy, fresh from running around being joyful... and whatever else goes with crying in a good way.

It was a very small consolation, given that the meals overall were not that great, and that I had somehow suckered myself into paying money for them. It would seem that the marketing folks fooled me once again with their clever food names - "meatloaf," indeed! - and their brightly decorated packaging. I somehow felt used and dirty from the whole experience. But hey, at least the peas and carrots were good!

Of course, no review of food is complete without a good solid ranking. You know, a best to worst type of thing. And this one is easy, as you have probably already figured it out for yourself. The clear winner here was the original, cheap-o, no-frills meatloaf meal. If I have learned nothing else in life, it is this: if you're going to have a frozen dinner, and you've even decided that for some unexplainable reason you want that to be frozen meatloaf, spend as little money as possible.

But what is the meaning behind this whole exercise, the bigger life lesson that is to be learned and shared and discussed in support groups? That's a great question, and one that I'm not sure I can answer for you. But I'll give it a shot anyway.

There is a pattern to learning, and systems that help foster knowledge exchange between groups of people. And these groups of people, through what they do day in and day out, combine and complement each other to help us all figure out what the Hector Berlioz is going on. There are "doers" in the world, people that blindly and often destructively just strap on their headgear, scream at the top of their lungs, and then run skull first into whatever the world offers up to them. Others are philosophers, a group largely made up of gentlemen with beards that have perfected the art of the closed-eye head nod, who tend to answer questions by posing other questions. And then there's the group in the middle, the average Joes and Janes of the world. These are people who will largely look before they leap, but don't have to sit around wondering why water is naturally clear but amusement parks still insist on coloring it blue. And between the doers and the philosophers and the hang-arounders of the world, we'll all eventually figure out that microwave meatloaf was a bad idea. "Silly us, Ha Ha!" is what we'll end up saying. But until then there's probably no harm done in a little culinary experimentation.

There is a happy balance of acceptance and adventure that fuels most of what we do. The lesson is that meatloaf fuels everything else, and is not as clean-burning as one might hope. So if you'll excuse me...

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