FLAK

A Universal History of Chewing Gum:

The Decline, Fall and Utter Collapse of American Culture As Seen Through a Bright Pink Bubble

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With! Stone-Cold Cartoon Commandos

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INTRODUCTION

A tree died to bring you these words.

We have every reason to believe the tree had it coming. The tree was linked — *by analysts* — to Al Qaeda.

Thus, this jolly collection of essays, cartoons and satirical walkabouts is the legacy of The Tree That Hated America.

And yet — we can't help but wonder why it's still necessary, at the midmorning of the Information Age, to lay waste to vast stands of politically suspect timber in order to deliver our words to you.

Still, better them than us, right?

— James Norton, September 2003

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THE CANDY ECONOMY

BY MATT RAND

Walking into Economy Candy is a shock for first-timers. The store isn't big when compared to, say, a supermarket or a basketball court, but it somehow has room for every candy you can imagine. From the store's floor to its unreachable ceiling, shelves are piled with brightly colored wrappers; bins overflow with hard candies, chocolates, nuts and dried fruits.

Economy Candy has been open on Manhattan's Lower East Side since 1937. Owner Jerry Cohen is the son of the founder, and his wife, Ilene, and son, Mitchell, are now part of the tradition. On Sundays, all three work in the store. While Ilene worked the cash register, Jerry and Mitchell took some time to speak with Flak Magazine.

Flak Magazine: What kinds of candy have you been getting in lately?

Mitchell Cohen: Everybody likes the chocolate-covered pretzels and the chocolate-covered Oreos. We're getting in mini-pretzels. We try to find the older nostalgic candies also. We can go out and find the old Charms Fruit Squares or the Pop Rocks. People will ask for stuff. If they can't find it, we have a better chance of finding it.

Flak: How about trends? You said that there is a lot of nostalgia for candy.

MC: There's a lot of younger people coming to the Lower East Side. And kids that come in, say they're 21, 22, we have the candy from their childhood, and they remember the candy that their parents used to give them from their parents' childhood. When you see something that you had when you were a kid, it doesn't matter what it costs, you want it.

Jerry Cohen: Everyone wants to go back to their childhood. We get questions, "Do you have this? Do you have that?" and it's all related to going back. Not that they could eat it anymore, because their caps and their fillings would come out if they do. But they just want to know that it's still around.

Flak: What are some trends in gum?

JC: Well, everybody still wants to go back. Maybe they just don't make them like the old BlackJack or Clove, or the Teaberry gum. You know, we don't sell gum. We got away from it.

Flak: Why was that?

JC: There's no profit in it, and it's a loss leader for the drug stores and the supermarkets. They put it up for below cost, and so I can't sell it. Someone would come in and say "Oh, I could get that in a supermarket for 25 cents," and I'd say, "But it would cost me 40 cents to buy." I'd look like a crook. All we really sell is the gumballs, but that's because we sell the machines, the old-fashioned machines.

Flak: Are there new candies that are coming out? Or is nostalgia pretty much holding the market?

JC: Well, going back to when we grew up, with Willy Wonka and things like that, the kids find that exciting. Some of the old candy coming back, they call it Fun Dip, they used to call it Lik-m-aid when I was growing up. Everything is changing its name trying to go for the new market, the new generation. But it still comes back to the old stuff, the Mary Janes, Tootsie Rolls, the old candies like this are still fashionable.

MC: A lot of times they're basing their stuff on old things that were discontinued. Like there was an old candy lipstick, and now there's a new candy lipstick. And they try to expand on things that have already existed, because it's hard for them to come up with something totally new and totally different.

Flak: Why did they discontinue the candies the first time?

MC: The older companies are based on a different mold, and it's harder for them to turn a profit. Because most of these small companies only made that one product, and if you're only going to be able to sell that one product to maybe a thousand smaller stores in the country, you're not going to be able to run a business. So a bigger company like Hershey will go out and buy that smaller company and start producing their items.

ONLINE

Biography: Matt Rand
mattrand.com

Economy Candy
economycandy.com

Flak: Do they use the same formula?

MC: When they purchase the rights, they usually purchase the formulas and the equipment and everything.

Flak: So it tastes the same?

MC: It's never as good. You always think it was better. But it's actually usually the same thing.

Flak: What makes it memorable? What makes a good candy?

JC: What makes a good candy? The sweetness, who knows? The gooiness…. Whatever made the parents say "Ech, don't eat that." That makes a good candy.

THE CHEWABLE PLAGUE

BY DAN NORTON

There are fragments of childhood that crystallized. I can recall certain carpeting, pranks pulled on preschoolers, a rocking horse and other shreds of what was a normal upbringing. I can recall a vivid dream in which I could float down the steep black stairs of the attic of my house, and I remember the intense frustration of being unable to say the word "plant" without making it sound like "planet." I was teased about it by my own mother, and I hated it.

At one point in my development, although I can't say when, I decided to buy a lot of gum.

This must have been around grade school, because I was old enough to carry and use currency. Bazooka bubble gum was a nickel a piece, and I had a dollar.

Along with some change for tax, this came out to 20 hard, pink pieces. I don't remember buying them, but I do remember pouring them onto the living room floor, as if they were a Halloween stash, and proceeding to eat all 20 pieces of gum, in a row. I must have looked like I was in a trance, staring forward, ignoring the pointless comics, ingesting piece after piece. Bazooka gum starts out so hard that you could cut glass with it, so I must have chewed it, but honestly, that's not part of the recollection.

Afterward, someone, I imagine my brother, informed me that

you are not supposed to swallow gum. That in fact, if you swallow gum, it will stay in your stomach for years and years, and you will die.

Pure terror.

ONLINE

Biography: Dan Norton
flakmag.com/misc/dan.html

Homepage
dannorton.com

I don't recall the resolution at all. I have no idea how I actually dealt with the crisis. I can only summon up a faint sensation of dread, that I had created a solid pink blob of death in my own stomach, and that I was going to die. I was going to die, and it was my fault.

I didn't die, and I still swallow gum. Perhaps I know something my revolted friends don't, and the gum passes harmlessly through me. Perhaps it doesn't, and it has stayed all these years in my system. Perhaps it has fused into my consciousness, compelling me to increase its grip on me with more gum, extending its pink strands throughout my internal organs, like a sugary spider web, a living neural net of sucrose that expands and contracts with my every breath. Perhaps it won't be long, now.

I kind of hope so.

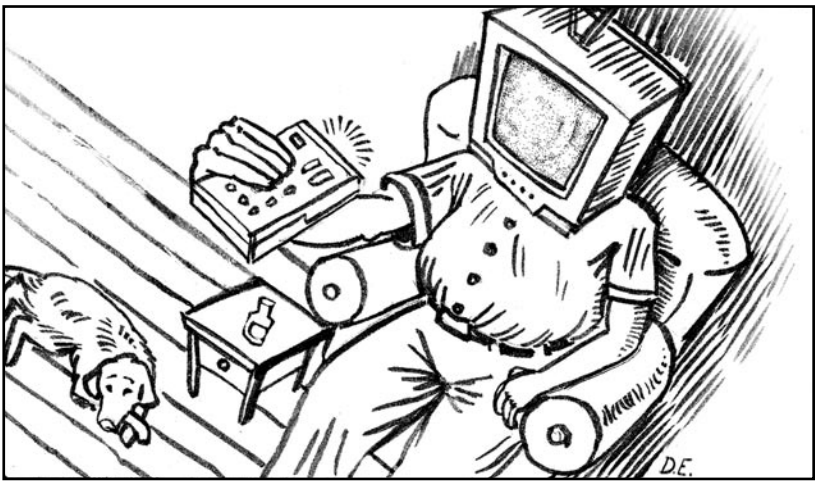
BAZOOKA JOSEF

#1 of 7

FORTUNE: WHOEVER SAID 'WORDS CANNOT HURT ME' NEVER WENT THROUGH A SENATE JUDICIARY HEARING!

REALITY TV: A PROSPECTUS

BY ROB WALKER



DEREK EVERNDEN

It's possible that the reality-TV boom has peaked. When the big networks announced their new fall lineups, the Los Angeles Times noted that a vast majority of the shows were scripted comedies and dramas, and it pronounced the genre in "temporary retreat." Something called Bolt Inc., which I'd never heard of but which describes itself as "a leading media company focused on 13-24 year olds," declared in a survey of this coveted demographic that 68 percent are "getting tired" of reality shows. While there are supposedly plans afoot to start an all-reality cable channel, there are also reports that advertisers are wary. "Anything that ends up in a hot tub, you don't want to be around," one ad executive commented.

Perhaps. I'll go along with the idea that there are too many reality shows, and actually watching them can be tedious. But I'm not ready for the trend to die. In fact, I welcome the glut, and I would be happy to see it get gluttier. The more reality shows there are, the more bizarre and unlikely and disturbing the premises get, and that's what I like. In the high art world, the most "subversive" thing going is Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* series. I've seen one of the films. It was dull. And as far as I can tell, even people who think Barney is a genius don't have the slightest idea what the hell the "cycle" is about. Reality shows, on the other hand, critique all aspects of the "American idea" in a manner both crystal-clear and consistently devastating. The fact that they do so in prime time, rather than at the Guggenheim, only

makes them more subversive — and certainly more subversive than Barney. If I were in charge of the next Whitney Biennial, I'd devote at least one gallery to reality shows.

Of course, as is so often the case when you're talking about the avant garde, the delightfully perverse concepts are often more interesting than the actual end results, which tend to feel perfunctory. Thus, I prefer to think of the genre as "conceptual TV," in which simply hearing the ideas trumps the "reality" of sitting through the shows. Consider "Mr. Personality." The premise was fantastic: Twenty interchangeable schmoes, competing for the heart of a dimwitted Southern belle, aim to reveal to her their true selves by *wearing masks*. One of the leading candidates was an alleged motivational speaker who spends his free time studying hypnosis and "mind-control techniques." But the show's producers must have sensed that this was not enough, so they added Monica Lewinsky, for no particular reason. Her role pure throwaway, she was just occasionally *there,* as if some overheated media-culture computer had spat her, randomly, into this incongruous tableau. In reality, the narrative fizzled out, mostly because the hypnotist lost. But conceptually it was solid gold.

And even more so because, like a rap "answer" song, an ABC show called "Extreme Makeover" appeared, challenging the notion that physical appearance is a cosmic distraction. Its premise went like this: Various unattractive Americans apply via weepy videotapes to have the network bankroll a round of intense cosmetic surgery and other "treatments" that will bring them up to snuff, looks-wise. Here, then, the true nature of the self is not revealed by hiding in a mask, but rather by having one's actual face re-carved, once and for all. At the end of each show, the makeoverees, post-surgery and "real," are reintroduced to friends and loved ones; the children in the crowd always weep with joy. It's chilling, and a more shattering commentary on human obsession with surface appearance than you actually will see at the next Biennial.

These two shows also bring up a crucial related pleasure of conceptual TV, which is that it practically begs you, the home viewer, to play entertainment executive. It's hard to watch, or even hear about, these shows without dreaming up your own alternatives. My girlfriend, for example, suggested "Extreme Personality Makeover." We honed the idea and

ONLINE

Homepage
robwalker.net

Slate Magazine
slate.com

decided that after feats of strength and skill, a winner would get to select one personal enemy who would be brainwashed, removing or instilling personality traits at the winner's pleasure. Got an asshole boss? Prevail on "Extreme Personality Makeover" and America's finest experts will transform him into a twitchy pushover.

This game is only fun because the concepts that really *do* get the green light become progressively more absurd. Sending Paris Hilton to live with rural Arkansans? Actual show. Has-been celebrities competing for a pathetic second chance at fame? Actual show. Of the latter concept, Fox's Mike Darnell, the Picasso of the conceptual TV form, commented to the New York Times, "I think it could be fascinating to take C-level celebrities and let them try to reinvent themselves." Yeah, me too. But Darnell can *actually make this happen*. On the other hand, CBS Chairman Les Moonves seems to be quietly vying for the role of Duchampian prankster with the alleged reality version of "The Beverly Hillbillies." It's been rumored, protested, even denounced from the floor of the Senate, but as far as I can tell it shows no signs of actually existing.

All of this is a big improvement over "Survivor," but there is no guarantee the concepts will continue to get more bizarre (and thus interesting). The current situation is a bit like what existed in the movie industry in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the studios were so desperate and confused that they gave the green light to a whole range of unlikely films, from *Bonnie & Clyde* to *Midnight Cowboy*. Eventually the studios reined things in again and stopped taking chances, and as the television business settles into some new version of the prime-time paradigm, that will probably happen here, too.

After all, this remarkable flowering of creativity is only made possible by the support of generous corporate sponsors. If it is true that they are growing weary and leery, then soon the genre is bound to sink to the blandness of fictional TV. We will lose the awful mirror that harsh and challenging art can hold up to its audience, asking the questions we fear to answer — such as, in this case, can it really be true that millions of us are watching this? Perhaps it's the case that advertisers will lose the nerve to be associated with such endeavors. But they'll only follow this course if that's what viewers really want them to do. Of course we, as a culture, will do the right thing.

THE BOYS NEXT DOOR

BY ROHIT GUPTA AND REHAN ANSARI

Where does hatred for your neighboring country begin? Where does it end? How far does it go? Rehan Ansari, a Pakistani, and Rohit Gupta, an Indian, hail from neighboring states of the erstwhile British Raj. They talk about their early lives to try to find some answers.

Rohit Gupta: I was born in Jaipur, Rajasthan. However, I spent my early childhood in Gangapur City, a minuscule town three hours by road from Jaipur. The earliest memory I have of a reference to Pakistan is with going to the loo. A frequent euphemism within my family for the chore was "going to Pakistan." Seeing me headed to the toilet, my uncles would announce this excursion and snigger for some reason that escaped me then. In case someone waited outside for me to finish (many people shared one loo), they would extend the metaphor to what was called "bombarding," which is self-explanatory.

Rehan Ansari: I wondered if your question is easier to ask over a computer screen than face-to-face. Are you asking if the Indo/Pak issue has something to do with my toilet training?

Rohit: My intention in bringing up the toilet training story was only to show how basic, even biological, the things that shaped my perception of Pakistan were while I was growing up. There was no question. I am just exploring the earliest influences I can remember.

Rehan: In my growing up in Karachi in the '70s through the late '80s India did not matter. Karachi looked to London and New York, or more specifically, "England" in the '70s and "America" in the '80s.

By the late '70s, my adolescent years, ABBA mattered — so did The Bee Gees, *Saturday Night Fever* and John Travolta. Whoever was wearing Adidas at the school sports day mattered.

I remember standing before a wall map in my room, probably when I was 9, asking my father where our family was from and his finger went unexpectedly east, to Sahranpur north of Delhi. Until then I assumed my family was from Lahore [Pakistan], since my only living grandparents (on the maternal side) lived in Lahore.

A more emotional, less intellectual memory I have is from around the same time. My mother liked to see films at the Drive-In in Karachi, in what was then considered North Karachi (quite a few miles from the city proper). I didn't like the soft-focus, close-up, giggly, romantic films starring Nadeem and Shabnam, Waheed Murad and Zaiba, which made such a mountain out of class issues, and then had the hero and heroine cavorting down that one mountainside in the Swat Valley. I will grant that the occasional Urdu song was immensely hummable (like "Co-Co Cortina" and "Akelay na Jaana"). I did like the long drive to the Drive-In, when for once the desert of Sind was really obvious to Karachiwallas used to a city of so much steaming tarmac.

I liked the jungle gym at the drive-in: the swings, especially when the upswing brought me close to the stars. Sliding out of the tunnel of the covered slides brought me, it seemed, to the foot of the big glowing white screen of the Drive-In.

Once in the lobby of the take-out snack bar I saw a poster of Amar Akbar Anthony. The Hindu Muslim and Christian bhai bhai of the title did not register, nor even the very tall actor in a top hat that dominated the poster. I don't know what it was, but, for many more times than I would have otherwise, I went expectantly to the Drive-In. That film never came.

I remember the feeling of not understanding why it never played.

I wonder who was the evil person who put that poster there. Probably the same bastard controls the visas between India and Pak. The last time that I went to the Drive-

In, I turned my back on the images on the screen, slipped into the dark of the slide and midway in the tunnel my hand brushed something organic.

Rohit: I think I lost you somewhere in the middle there. But going back to the ’80s, Gangapur City was a town where everyone knew each other. At one point, my father was one of the handful of qualified physicians there. I did not know New York and London existed until very late. My sources of entertainment, which also shaped my later mindset, were very few.

In fact, I think “Star Trek” was the first Western show I ever saw on TV. Even before I knew of America, I was looking at outer space. However, there was Pakistan bubbling somewhere in my subconscious.

In the early days of rental video, we had these tapes of Omar Sharif’s hilarious and ribald play, “Baqra Qishton Pay.” I still wish I could see him. He was mad as a teapot. Then my mom brought in that precursor to modern Indian soaps — “Dhoop Kinare,” I think. The female protagonist is still one of the strongest ones I have ever seen. I think I might have had a thing for her — with the short hair and everything.

I used to rent out Hindi comics from a small lending library at a pace that alarmed my parents. Imagine being slumped on the sofa, eating Maggi [noodles] and reading 10 to 30 comics a day! The crimebusting Hindu-Muslim duo Ram & Rahim is worth a mention. They usually kicked the butt of insurgents from “neighboring” countries.

INSURANCE by James Stegall DAY ONE OF FOURTEEN

“Watch out, it hurts,” says the guy leaving the medic’s office. Prepared for it to hurt, now expecting it to hurt. The “shot” is a needle dipped in the vaccine and jabbed three times into a bicep. Chose the one without a tattoo.

Completely painless. The medic puts a plastic bandage over the spot and says, “There you go.”

After two days nothing is changed. Replacing the bandage religiously. On the fourth day, the skin grows milky and a blister begins to separate.

And then there was cricket on the terrace with “RK Uncle,” a friend of my father’s who worked in insurance, and was probably the liveliest human being I’ve met. He would divide the teams into, naturally, India and

Pakistan — and for some reason, no one wanted to land in Pakistan. Teams were always decided by some kind of luck game.

Rehan: The first birthday party I ever went to, at age 3 ½, was of a boy in my class named Keshav Jiwani. My mother took me to his house, exactly in the same way as I was to be taken to the houses of birthday boys and girls over the next few years. The traumatic thing that first time occurred when my mother dropped me off and then left. The tragedy of her absence lasted — oh — probably five minutes.

This is how I remember the '71 war, at age 2 ½; at night: Everything was in blackout so I remember an unsettling feeling from looking out at the neighborhood buildings not having any lights. When the sirens sounded, the occupants of our apartment complex would cuddle up with pillows and blankets and dry fruit under the main stairs. My father would take me out for a walk, and I loved to see the searchlights probing the sky. I remember no other sense of war other than that my father thought it was like children playing. I could feel that through his hand that held mine.

Rohit: Well, I was born much later than that. Just about the time that patriotic movies based on the war had started coming out. I do remember Kargil, though. A friend of mine was then a major in the army who would tell me disenchanted tales from the frontlines:

Do you know what it's like out there freezing in the cold? You're not thinking that I am Indian and he is Pakistani then, man! You don't have that kind of time. The only thing that crosses your mind is that if I don't shoot the head off that guy on the hill, he will shoot mine.

He's now some kind of marketing honcho.

BOYS OR GIRLS:
WOMEN'S BASKETBALL'S GENDER IDENTITY CRISIS
BY ANDY BEHRENS

It's June, and I'm watching the NBA Finals with my friend Brian. We're drinking, grazing on snack chips and generally behaving like the feckless stooges glorified in beer commercials. Except there are no jiggly-breasted vixens here, just Bugles, beer and the elliptic oral stylings of Bill Walton.

The Spurs and Nets are stuck in a regrettable game. They're flat-footed and mechanized, arrhythmic, missing open shots and firing passes into spectators' laps. The grotty details of the game have taken the edge off the ritualized experience of TV sports viewing.

"This sucks," Brian says.

In a less shitfaced moment I could argue that the game is an articulate kind of social commentary, a robotic manifesto on human isolation. The players are disconnected, the spaces between them describing American separateness, maybe, our fat, gassy solipsism.

Instead, I say, "Dude, this *totally* sucks."

But we keep watching. Excitement is forthcoming. Watching NBA basketball is like chewing Fruit Stripe: short bursts of flavor followed by protracted periods of bland, phlegmy nothing, with vaguely menacing mascots at the periphery.

During the telecast, intermittent WNBA ads feature sexed-up versions of point guards and power forwards. The athletes repeat versions of the league's promotional mantra — "This is who I am" — while lolling around in tight clothes. For the first time I feel like the WNBA's target demographic.

Women's pro basketball has, to date, failed to connect at the communal and personal levels of the men's game despite the localized success of collegiate programs. The sports in which women achieve the widest audiences — tennis, figure skating, gymnastics — are those dominated by individual personalities and underwritten by overt sexuality. Basketball is new to this approach. But the approach doesn't work because it doesn't address the essential reason Brian and I consume sports: We spend our time and money

on jerseys, tickets, fantasy teams and the misery of Spurs vs. Nets because we wish we were them.

Like Robert Coover protagonists, we have elaborate, private fictions cooking in our heads in which we star, and these secret (yet common) inventions — adolescent wish-projections for ourselves — are built around the mythology of sport. But Brian and I don't talk about this.

"Sue Bird's hot," he says. "Need another beer."

Four months prior, on a cold Chicago Sunday, I sat in the DePaul Athletic Center watching a basketball game. The Chicago Blaze and Springfield Spirit of the National Women's Basketball League were warming up minutes before tip-off. The NWBL operates during the WNBA off-season, attracting top-tier female players to a 10-week schedule. Springfield forward Rebecca Lobo, a former Olympic gold medalist and WNBA all-star, was shooting free throws. Lobo's teammate Swin Cash, a former collegiate all-American and rising WNBA star, drained a series of perimeter jumpers as she scanned the crowd.

More accurately, she scanned the wooden bleachers where, normally, one might expect a crowd.

There were 98 fans in the gym. It was such an absurdly small number that I counted heads — twice, just to fix the figure. Ninety-eight. In a metropolitan area of 8 million people, in a gym that seats 3,000, there were 98 fans.

The game itself was fluid and physical, essentially the same as a men's pro game minus the vertical dimension. Lobo and Cash were generally brilliant, doing what smart and talented players do: moving the ball, finding open space and defending. But it wasn't nearly enough. The Blaze shot implausibly well, scoring from the lane and the perimeter, and finishing crazy, syncopated fast-breaks with twisting layups. And 98 of us enjoyed it. In the expansive and largely empty gym, the game was reminiscent of some pioneering, black-and-white 1940s barnstorming event; it was easy to think of women's pro hoops as an early iteration of something fairly exciting.

Afterward, interviewing Lobo, I completely failed to discuss the game, instead focusing on the lack of a crowd. "We are more surprised when we have smaller

crowds at home [in Massachusetts]," she said. "We understand that women's basketball isn't the phenomenon in other places, like it is in Connecticut." Lobo starred at the University of Connecticut in the mid-1990s, playing for a team that received rock star treatment from local fans.

I described the dearth of local Blaze advertising, primarily as a way to couch my community embarrassment, and Lobo responded diplomatically: "There aren't the same marketing dollars in the NWBL as there are in the WNBA. My fiancé has family in Chicago and they don't see anything about the Blaze. And they are sports fans who are tuned into the women's game. We need to let fans know that games are being played.

"I really believe that if people come to our games, they will appreciate the basketball and have a great time and want to come back."

"Women's basketball sucks."

ESPN.com writer Stacey Pressman offered this in an April 8 piece published by the Weekly Standard's website. She continued: "I have nothing but respect for women's basketball players. They're talented athletes and fierce competitors. But watching 40 minutes of underhanded layups just isn't exciting."

This isn't a new argument exactly, but it's a dicey one for a female sportswriter and it's predicated on a satisfying idea about why we watch sports, whoever we are. We watch sports ostensibly for the snapshots of athletic mega-brilliance, moments without antecedent that provoke awe, reverence and maybe civic glee. Pressman elaborated during a phone interview: "Sports is about entertainment. And people want to see a high level of entertainment. We want to see those amazing moments of physical feats. That's what we remember. Kareem's skyhook, Jordan's kiss-the-rim dunk."

She was unapologetic discussing what she considers the excessive coverage accorded women's basketball. "Should it be promoted in the same way as the men? Absolutely not. Who knows if there's a feminist mafia talking to ESPN? Sixty-three [women's college] games on ESPN? I shouldn't have to suffer watching this stuff."

Describing the pro game's recent saucy marketing, she said, "The WNBA

is resorting to pimping and prostitution." Yet she recognizes that a certain metaphorical pimping might be necessary to capture a larger, or more masculine, audience.

"I believe men will only watch women's sports where the women are hot," she said. "The sexual persona is more important than athletic ability. I was writing about women's college basketball during the NCAA tournament, and I was asking people around ESPN about the game. They'd say, 'We're rooting for Tennessee because Brittany Jackson's hot.' I think that men — I'm not a sociologist, of course — but I think that men respond to hot women. And successful women are sexualized first before you can get to the important subject of the day."

It's the morning after the Spurs-Nets game and I'm ill. I shouldn't lose so much sleep — and suffer crippling hangovers — just to participate in the mechanical routine of watching whatever sporting event I'm socially conditioned to watch. The WNBA might offer a path out of hell. They seem to play at sensible hours. They comport themselves respectably. They seem at odds with vice. But that's not enough. If it were, I'd go to church, join a Bunco club and that would satisfy the sports-socialization-escapist urge. I hit the Web looking for an accredited sociologist.

Dr. Alan Bairner, a professor of sports studies at the University of Ulster, has written extensively on the sports-modern society dynamic. He'll do. We exchange e-mail.

He writes, "I think the sports arena and the nature of spectatorship allows us to behave in ways that are less likely to be sanctioned in other spheres of our existence. We can shout loudly, curse, cry, hug complete strangers, fight other strangers, etc. Figurational sociologists have referred to this as 'the quest for excitement' in an increasingly civilized and thereby mundane world. More frivolously, in the case of Americans in particular, sport also provides great opportunities to engage in the national pastime — eating."

Smug European jerk, I'm thinking, licking Ruffles grease from my fingertips while ESPN2 drones in the background.

"We [especially men] are also told to watch sport," he writes. "It's the manly

thing to do. Furthermore the media-sport complex is such that the message is also getting through to more and more women as well as to men. Sport is cool. Sport is fashionable. Ultimately economics drive this process. How much should we pay for that ticket that everyone wants/needs in order to be part of an 'unmissable' spectacle?"

Dr. Bairner describes the humbling fact that drives sports fanaticism, but is often talked around: "One of the main reasons that men [and women] like to watch sport is so that they can act out fantasies through the actions of their heroes. These fantasies may be largely personal (the hard tackle, the fast sprint, the great goal, all of which we would like to have done ourselves) although they can also have a more collective aspect — the fantasies that relate to the triumphs of nation, the ideology, the race."

This is the ludicrous challenge for a women's league attempting to engage a male audience. As spectators, millions of us are simultaneously projecting ourselves into the event, imagining a personal role in the outcome. It's silly, it's false, and it's essential to obsessive fandom. It's also extremely difficult to achieve psychologically when Rebecca Lobo is on the court instead of, say, Jason Kidd. Not because Lobo's game is slow or terrestrial, but because she's a she and there are limits — gender limits — on our imaginings. WNBA players are saying "This is who I am," looking pretty and acting seductive, but they're reminding us of who we aren't.

Months earlier, describing the faces she'd like to see in the NWBL or WNBA crowd, Lobo suggested, "The average male sports fan demographic is desired, [but] we still need to focus on our core audience: families with kids and young girls." And this seems reasonable if a bit evil. The cruel, dark side of gender equity in America is that the game's success demands the transformation of our daughters into drunken, daydreaming fans, gorging themselves in front of televisions in a learned, liturgic way. This is who I am.

ONLINE

WBNA
wnba.com

NWBL
nwbl.com

Gender, fashion and soccer
media-culture.org.au/reviews/sections.php?op=viewarticle&artid=150

Stacey Pressman on EPSN.com
espn.go.com/page2/s/pressman/0731.html


5¢
GUM
BY SHANNON WHEELER
BEEP!
GULP!
THE SEVEN YEARS THING APPEARS TO BE SOMETHING OF AN URBAN LEGEND

FIRST, KILL ALL ORTHODONTISTS
BY WILL LEITCH

At the beginning of Kenneth Lonergan's wonderful film *You Can Count on Me,* a married couple drives through a stormy night. The wife turns to the husband and says, "Why do they put braces on teenage girls at the exact time they are most self-conscious about their appearance?" Seconds later, she and her husband are killed in a car crash.

So I approach her question with considerable trepidation; despite self-destructive tendencies, I nevertheless feel I am too young to die. But the question must be asked: Why *do* they do that?

We are a nation of complainers, whether it's about the weather, rising cigarette taxes, Clay losing on American Idol or that Friday used be Hawaiian shirt day until that jerk Harvey was hired. We have the temerity to look back on our youth *fondly.* More likely, it was simply so painful we have the worst of it out of our minds. Why is everyone so unhappy? Not terrorism, not the economy… *braces.*

Grownups have it easy. We know who we are, what we like, how we come across to people. Uncertainty and insecurity for adults are more economic conditions than social ones. We might be a little bored; sure, we might be falling into a rut that will last the rest of our lives, but at least when we wake up in the morning, the odds that someone will stick a booger in our hair, put a "FAG" sign on our back or stick our head in a toilet are, all things considered, rather low.

Nothing is worse than being 13. "Awkward" doesn't even begin to describe it. The age of 13 is proof that God has a vengeful side. Your hair is standing up and jutting out at improbable angles, your older brother takes glee in twisting your nipples until your chest turns black, and your newfound interest in the opposite sex is rivaled only by your complete, paralyzing fear of them. And that's not even accounting for the zits and the peach fuzz around your top lip, or, if you're a girl, stupid boys who snap your bra when you're not looking. That's not even accounting for algebra. (And if you're Jewish, bar or bat mitzvah lessons.)

You can't just go and play hide-and-seek with the neighbors or jump (jump! jump! whee!) around the yard like a guileless child anymore; you're too old for that. But neither does anyone take you seriously or trust you to make

ONLINE

The Black Table
blacktable.com

your own decisions. Everything that really matters (sex, parties, driving a car) isn't quite on the horizon yet, but you're old enough to know it's out there.

And if this all weren't enough, before you've even had a chance to collect on some of the Tooth Fairy's outstanding debts, some seemingly gentle guy with a name like Dr. Dettro makes you sit in a chair for two hours. When you get up, you look in the mirror, and your face is covered in metal.

Think about that for a second: Your Face Is Covered In Metal. They really do this to you. Bill Cosby, in "Bill Cosby: Himself," had a riff about dentists, pointing out that, "Dentists are strange people. They tell you never to pick your teeth with any sharp metal object. Then you sit in their chair, and the first thing they grab is an iron hook, and they start to pick in the place that you came to get fixed." Dentists at least eventually take the metal hooks out; orthodontists establish a more or less permanent presence.

The American Dental Association says the average age for an American child to get braces in 2002 was 11, a figure that an ADA spokesperson — an otherwise nice man named Craig who admits he never had braces as a child, but says, smugly, "It's not that bad, is it?" — says has decreased in the last decade. No kidding. Hey, Craig, want a test case?

I am a braces survivor. Dr. Hastings was the guy who got me.

I was 13 when Dr. Hastings, who had unfortunately hairy fingers, clamped braces to my face. I wore them for nearly 2 ½ years. I had hideous braces, too: I have naturally small teeth, and the brackets themselves were unwieldy and bulky and almost larger than my teeth. The brackets were connected with a wire, which was thicker — because of my cursed tiny teeth — than the average wire and required tightening every three months.

Originally, I was only supposed to wear them for a year, 18 months tops; problem was, every time I left the office with my mom, Dr. Hastings was telling her that my teeth weren't "progressing" as quickly as he'd like, and to come back in three months. That went on for almost two years.

As if this weren't enough, for the final year, when I went to bed, I was supposed to attach little rubber bands to the back four teeth, which were

equipped with little hooks. My father used to come into my room and eat popcorn in front of me right as I was about to fall asleep. "Want some? Oh… heh, sorry there."

I was intensely self-conscious about my braces. It is impossible to be taken seriously while wearing braces; my heart is full of deep pity for those sorry souls who have braces put on as adults. (I mean, could you take your boss seriously if he had tin teeth?) I felt like a complete goon every time I opened my mouth, and like some sort of leper any time I would deign to smile.

So I stopped.

An open-mouthed smile became something of the past. My smiles were cropped, pursed-lipped, pained exercises in restraint; you could have tickled me for hours, and my lips would have remained tucked neatly behind my teeth. That's 2 ½ years. One-tenth of my life. Without smiling. That's time I'll never get back.

Psychiatrists spend all this time trying to open patients' repressed memories of torment, or abuse, or extreme duress… but have they even *considered* the effect of braces? A child, during the most precocious years of his life, being *afraid to smile* ? That has to do something to a kid; orthodontists might very well be responsible for the decline of Western civilization. What do they have to say for themselves?

Well, I am sad to report that Dr. Hastings has passed on to that great swivel chair in the sky, where I'm sure he's trading tips with Torquemada. So I can't go after the source. But there are millions of Dr. Hastings out there, and schools that produce more ever year.

His name is Ravindra Nanda. He is a professor and head of the department of orthodontics at the University of Connecticut,. He has the kindly, tender nature of a man who deals with children for a living, and he is patient, informative without being condescending and, of course, totally fucking evil.

I ask him the million-dollar question: Why did Dr. Hastings put braces on me when they were destined to cause me emotional calamity? Was he a

psychopath from birth, or did they teach him that?

"Traditionally, we put them on children between the ages of 10 and 12, when they're transitioning from baby teeth to permanent teeth," Nanda said. "Often, when we put them on earlier, a 10-year-old kid will cry when we take them off because he thinks they're cool. But by the time they're 13, 14, 15, they just want them off. It has a lot to do with puberty, I think."

Fine, doctor, but I had those bastards until I was 15. Fifteen!

"If a child is going to have them on for more than 2, 3 years, there have to be very mitigating circumstances," Nanda said. "Perhaps you were just slow to develop."

Are you saying I'm some sort of genetic freak, a little boy who was late to puberty?

"Yes, that's what I'm saying."

Nanda remains calm and relaxed throughout our interview/therapy session. I am unable to claim the same. We go off the rails when he mentions that sometimes, braces don't work, and adults who had braces as children must have braces reapplied.

"We tell patients it's part of the aging process," Nanda said, presumably sneering like a villain in a 1930s film. "If you go to a plastic surgeon and get a little nip and tuck, that doesn't mean you won't get wrinkles."

I stopped him right there. He had to be kidding. I went through that hell, and I might have to go through it *again* ?

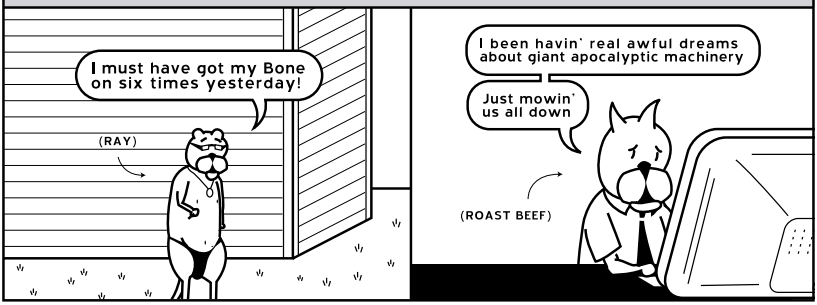
"It is possible," he said. "I would have to take a look at your teeth to know for sure."

The message was clear. At this exact second, millions of children are being terrorized by this man and his ilk. When will we stand up? When will we do something? If not for ourselves, for the children. Think about the children!

"HOW I MADE IT IN WEB COMICS"

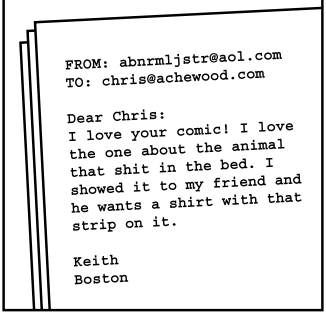
CHRIS ONSTAD
ACHEWOOD.COM

First, I made up some characters. Here are two of them.



Then I had them go on some adventures.

Because I ran the strip every day, readership grew steadily.



FROM: abnrmljstr@aol.com
TO: chris@achewood.com

Dear Chris:
I love your comic! I love the one about the animal that shit in the bed. I showed it to my friend and he wants a shirt with that strip on it.

Keith
Boston

Based on reader demand, I started offering strip-based apparel. To my surprise, it really took off.

I tried branching out into other types of writing and humor, but sales dried up. Although I no longer enjoyed writing or producing it, I was forced to revert to the original style.

SEARCHING FOR A SIGN
BY BOB COOK

In 1983, I purchased, out of the cutout bin at the Camelot Records Castleton Square Mall outlet in Indianapolis, a two-record set called *Urgh! A Music War.* The album is the soundtrack to a movie put together mostly by Miles Copeland, then head of IRS Records, to showcase the live performances of some of the New wave era's biggest names (the Police, the Go-Gos), biggest late-Cold-War-era fist-thrusters (Gang of Four) and biggest novelties (Klaus Nomi, Wall of Voodoo).

But one act stood out as the oddest of oddballs, the weirdest of weirdos, the strangest of strangers. It played the last song of the last side (side four). The act was Skafish, and the song was "Sign of the Cross." I had never heard of Skafish — how do you pronounce that, anyway? In the previous 20 songs, there'd been plenty of stuff like Devo singing about the joys of jerking themselves off in "Uncontrollable Urge," the Au Pairs singing about faking orgasm in "Come Again" and Pere Ubu singing in falsetto about God-knows-what in "Birdies." So I hadn't expected anything more shocking than what had already appeared.

"Sign of the Cross" begins with an ominous synthesizer, replicating a church organ. The singer comes in, speaking as deliberately as a Sunday sermon: "Do you want to go to HEAVEN? Do you want to GO TO HEAVEN? Then first you must do this dance! It is called the SIGN OF THE CROSS!"

What followed were the four most sacrilegious minutes ever, a level of anti-religious bile even death metal can't touch, underscored with punked-out, jerky guitars and frenetic drumming, with emphasis on the rolls. The dance, such as it was, seemed to use Linda Blair's crucifix masturbation scene in *The Exorcist* as a jumping-off point. "You do a genuflection/you might get a big erection/from the sign of the croooosssssss."

When I taped the album, the second album was too long for a 45-minute cassette side, so "Sign of the Cross" got cut off about mid-song. I could have taken another song off to keep "Sign of the Cross" in its entirety, but I felt like I would go to hell just for listening to it. I was 13 and still going to church. This album was getting me into weirder music, but I figured God had His limits.

For much of 2002, I was circulating through my teenage-era cassettes, just to see what was in there. In the course of my research, I found Skafish again.

It started with another listen to that half-track version of "Sign of the Cross" on my *Urgh! A Music War* tape, which I hadn't pulled out since 1991. I didn't feel like I was going to hell for listening to it — I don't go to church much anymore — but it still held up as pretty damn spooky. I had to find out what the heck a Skafish was. I looked at a few music sites around the Web, but there wasn't much on Skafish — pronounced SKAY-fish. The band, taking its name from lead singer Jim Skafish, put out its self-titled IRS debut in 1980, to some critical acclaim, and followed-up in 1983 with the universally reviled *Conversation.* And then, nothing. The first two albums have never even made it to CD.

This sounded intriguing enough, but when I read Skafish was from my home state of Indiana, I had to find out more.

Thankfully, there was skafish.com.

When you enter skafish.com, you're met with a splash page of what appears to be a chalk drawing of a man's head, with a huge honker and a pageboy haircut, impaled on a cross. Given the screeds against his Catholic school upbringing on the site, the drawing is hit-you-on-the-face-with-a-two-by-four subtle. "Skafish (Jim Skafish), is immediately regarded as 'weird' in kindergarten. He attends grade school at St. Mary's in East Chicago, Indiana, and high school at Bishop Noll Institute in Hammond, Indiana. He is persecuted and brutalized daily by neighborhood kids and in Catholic school for 12 years by students, priests, nuns and teachers — once a teacher locks Skafish in a tiny broom closet and leaves him there after school is dismissed, while another teacher chokes him on a school related trip. These and other abuses he experiences in school would be considered prosecutable by future standards."

That explains "Sign of the Cross."

As for the rest of the site:

Whoever put this together has what might be described as an enthusiastic view of Jim Skafish. The word "genius" is invoked considerably. The short story is that the classically trained Skafish put together a band in 1976 that ripped open a stultified rock scene in Chicago, mixing rock, jazz and classical

sounds with direct, brutally honest lyrics. (He's got a case there. Cheap Trick was coming up during that time, but the locals that dominated were Styx and REO Speedwagon. That's still true today. Tortoise and friends aside, Chicago is a classic-rock town at heart.) If fans didn't scream with joy/terror at his tall, squishy body, augmented with outfits like a babushka with a two-piece bathing suit, or a Catholic priest get-up, they'd do the same at intricately played, intense songs drawn from Skafish's gruesome childhood experiences. The case for Skafish is backed by various articles quoted on the site.

Skafish was discovered by IRS Records, the same label that eventually signed R.E.M., and Skafish and his band toured the United States and Europe, all the while garnering praise from musicians and thrown beer cans from music fans. According to the site, Skafish couldn't take the stage at a large London festival because their gear hadn't arrived, and the members of Squeeze wouldn't let the band borrow theirs for fear an unruly crowd would destroy it.

There are a million stories like this on the site, and they grow funnier and sadder as, quickly, IRS drops Skafish after rejecting his second album, then releasing it in a mutated form. Life imitates *This Is Spinal Tap*: Skafish, getting gigs where he could, played such venues as his old Catholic school and a Park Forest, Ill., Jaycees event, at which he entertained a crowd of merry mothers and their children by having simulated sex with a blow-up doll. The Jaycees unplugged him.

But how does his story end? The site appeared not to have been updated since 2001. Where is Skafish now? I still hadn't heard any song past "Sign of the Cross." Searches for a cassette or CD version of his two IRS albums came up empty. Even vinyl is almost impossible to find. I never found any version of the first album available.

ONLINE

Biography: Bob Cook
flakmag.com/misc/bob.html

Bob Cook's Weekly Sports Column
flakmag.com/sports/cook_archives.html

Jim Skafish
skafish.com

To find out what he's doing, and where to get his music, I called Skafish. His number is listed.

Skafish, 46, lives in East Chicago, in the only house he's ever resided in. He lives there

with his wife, Glinda Harrison, whom he married in December, 2002. Skafish says they've been companions for many, many years. Harrison is credited for "psychic assistance and predictions" on Skafish's 1980 album.

INSURANCE by James Stegall **DAY TWO**

The nurse administering the smallpox vaccine explains the shot will create an open wound on the shoulder for approximately 14 days. First a blister will form, then break. The released fluid contains active virus.

If the fluid comes into contact with other parts of the body it will effectively create another inoculation site, which can result in scarring or other complications. On the big screen behind her is a picture of a woman with a pink sack for a left eye.

During the 14-day incubation period couples can share the same bed although it's discouraged. Sex is strongly discouraged. No kissing.

Small children should not be handled. The bandage must be changed daily, placed in a plastic bag and separated from the rest of the family trash. After showers, pat the site dry. Separate towels.

Hand-washing is vital, before and after using the toilet. "You don't want your genitals inoculated," the nurse says. A groan crosses the audience. A hand in the audience verifies that contact will vaccinate another location… the nurse heads them off with, "Trust me, you don't want to be sharing it with the rest of the family."

Skafish seems pleasantly surprised by my call. Everything on the website is true, he says. He fills in a few holes in his biography: His father, a choir director, musician, gas station owner and assistant mayor of East Chicago, died when Skafish was a teenager. His mother was an opera singer and died in January 2002 (Skafish sang at her funeral). He has a sister, 12 years older, who has a beauty shop in the area, and a brother, 10 years older, who is a physician in Zionsville, Ind. He is the cousin of Bobby Skafish, a well-known Chicago rock DJ. He was noted as a musical prodigy by age 6.

His family didn't heap on the beating he got at school, but Skafish says his parents, creatures of their generation, weren't apt to take his teachers and authority figures to task for the abuse he says they heaped on him. In fact, he remembers being taken to a psychiatrist when he was in the sixth grade. He

wasn't told who he was talking to until after his appointment was over.

The ill feelings Skafish had were put into his music — obssessively so, he recalls.

"It's real apparent to me now, looking in retrospect, that my sensibility is not coming in totality from other influences," he says. "My upbringing was not progressive, not liberal, not open-minded. In other words, it's not like I had anybody encouraging me. It was fueled by an enormous amount of emotion." The experience from sixth grade, for example, turned into the song, "We'll See a Psychiatrist."

That was emotion, he says, for which Chicago was not ready when he began performing live there in 1976. "It's like somebody walked into your house with a machine gun and started machine-gunning," he says. "That was the kind of reaction we were getting. It was like, 'What in the *fuck* is this person *doing*? Who wants to hear about his fucking *childhood*? And what is with this *Je*-sus shit?"

But Skafish picked up some influential fans, like Sting, Muddy Waters, Stan Kenton and members of XTC and Cheap Trick. The first album for IRS doesn't have "Sign of the Cross," but it has other gut-wrenching songs (I haven't heard them, but they sound like they might be gut-wrenching) like "Joan Fan Club," about the relentless teasing of a fat girl.

But when Skafish turned in his second album, he said IRS label head Miles Copeland found it so vile and vicious he wouldn't release it. Skafish then created the critically panned dance album *Conversation*, and that was it for recording for a record label. Skafish continued to write songs and play shows, but the activity declined, and he said that by 1993 he was near homelessness.

He was saved, he says, by LaToya Jackson.

Skafish, on the website, tells how he had shown psychic abilities, so he put them to work getting hired by Jackson's psychic phone line, then on Kenny Kingston's line. Once that work started drying up — "the Miss Cleo fiasco pretty much ended that in perpetuity" — Skafish set up his own private service.

And he kept writing songs. 125 of them, he says. And they're as honest and

out-there as ever. "I still believe we can sell this to the public," he said.
The site, he says, was put up to help get him the respect he believes he deserves. "What's important to me is the truth; in other words, because of the fact I did those things, I receive the credit; it's not arbitrary. I deserve to receive the credit as the innovative artist and pioneer that I am. It's not like anyone is disputing it."

The strange thing is, with all the talk about psychic powers and being a musical genius, Skafish doesn't sound like a nut. He's totally sincere, and it's easy to believe him. Of course, having only heard one song, I can't argue either way. Then again, hearing one song led me on a 20-year road to find Skafish, so there must be something there, right?

BAZOOKA JOSEF

#2 of 7

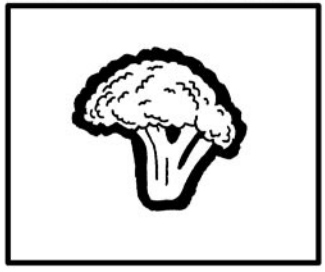
FORTUNE: IGNORE DIGITAL UNDERGROUND JUST THIS ONE TIME — BURGER KING BATHROOMS ARE NOT FOR 'GETTING BUSY' IN.

THE CONSUMER

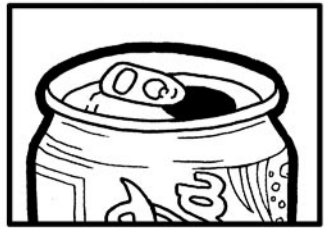
BY ANDY ROSS

I'M GETTING FAT.

TOO FEW VEGETABLES.

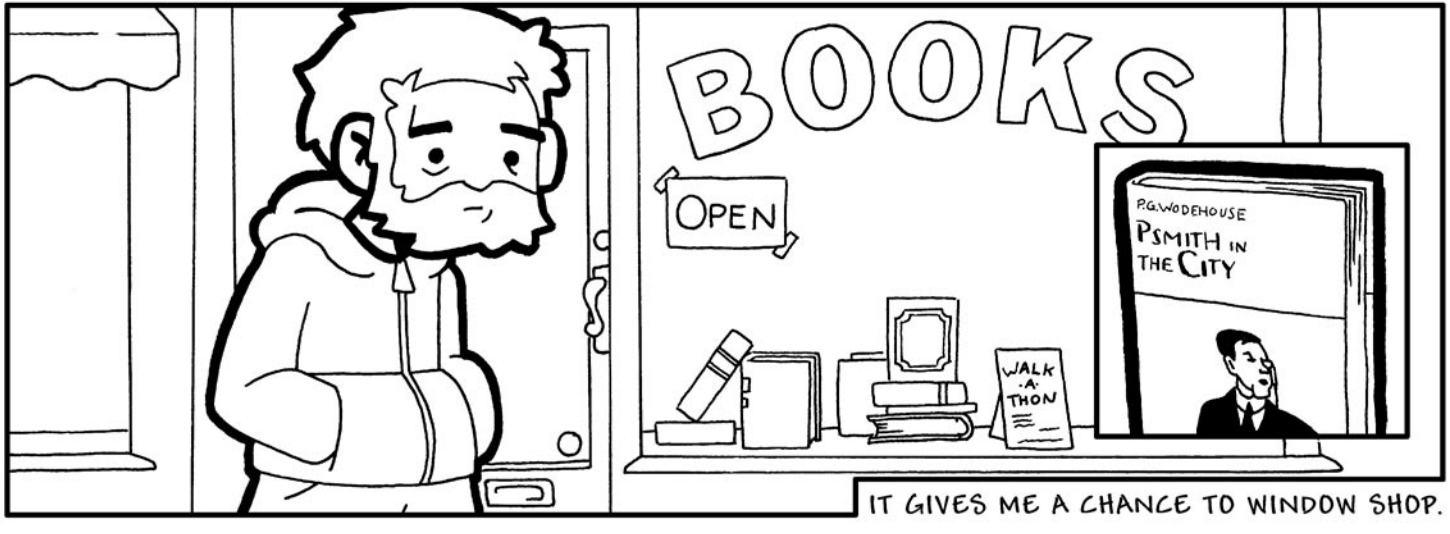


TOO MUCH COKE.



(EMPTY CALORIES.)

SO, I'VE STARTED GOING FOR WALKS IN MY NEW NEIGHBORHOOD.

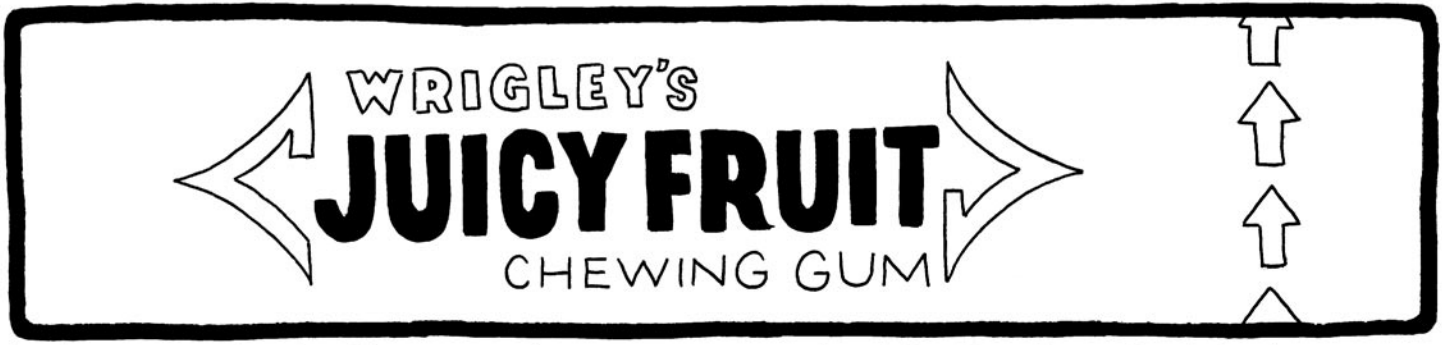


IT GIVES ME A CHANCE TO WINDOW SHOP.

I BUY A LOT OF THINGS. IMPULSE PURCHASES MOSTLY. MEDIA, CLOTHES, TOYS POSING AS POP STATUARY.

BUT, BOUGHT HAPPINESS IS FLEETING. NO MATTER HOW COOL THE THING IS, THE VOID IT FILLED OR THE SADNESS IT HID ALWAYS COMES BACK. SO, I GO AND BUY THE NEXT THING AND ADD IT TO THE SHELF.

IT REMINDS ME OF WHEN I WAS LITTLE, AND I WOULD BUY JUICY FRUIT. OH MAN, I LOVED THE TASTE OF THAT GUM SO MUCH. EVEN THOUGH IT ONLY LASTED LIKE A MINUTE BEFORE TURNING INTO BLAND CUD.

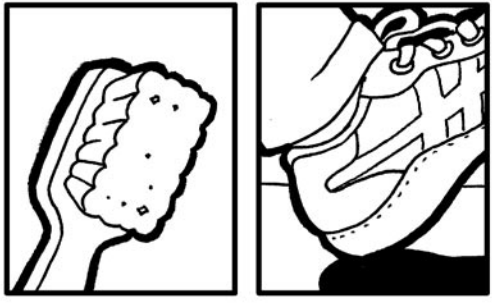


SO, I'D ADD ANOTHER STICK. AND ANOTHER. UNTIL MY MOUTH WAS STUFFED FULL OF A HUGE GOB. AND MY LIPS WERE PUCKERED, AND MY TASTE BUDS WERE RAW. BUT, I STILL BOUGHT JUICY FRUIT EVERY TIME.

YOU CAN BLAME THE POOR JUDGMENT OF YOUTH.

OR, OUR TENDENCY TO SELF-MEDICATE AT ANY AGE.

EITHER WAY, THE POINT IS TO DEAL WITH THE LITTLE CONSEQUENCES.



AND MAKE SURE TO KEEP A CAREFUL BALANCE BETWEEN OVER-INDULGENCE AND HOLY CRAP!

A FULLY POSABLE FOZZIE WITH HIS OWN STAND! AND LOOK, HIS HAT IS MAGNETIC...

THE END

THE RISE OF AMERICAN PRIVACY: POPPING PERSONAL BUBBLES

CAN THE IRONIC GENERATION FIND FRIENDLINESS?

BY JENNIE DORRIS

DEREK EVERNDEN

Buying irony

I stand in line at Safeway, my steak, corn on the cob and charcoal divided from the food around it with plastic sticks.

"That steak looks great! Are you grilling tonight?"

The woman to my right is not trying to hit on me. She is not trying to invite herself over. She is buying her husband cigarettes, and is completely unaware that her question has drawn an invisible line around my personal bubble — it has pointed out that I'd rather stare ahead at the magazines, that I'd rather have my headphones on, that I'd rather be sliding in a 30-second conversation on my cellphone, that I'd rather daydream than have a conversation with this woman I do not know.

But I ask her questions about grilling (she likes her steaks medium also), and we dish on the pros and cons of different cigarette brands. And then her check is written, and it is over, my new friend walking away and me trying to cover my naked friendliness with my normal guard.

It is suffocating to see your own personal bubble and realize that, yes, we are young, and we are unfriendly. We are plugged into the entire world, if we want it, and our social circles are tiny. And I couldn't even see where it had started.

Becoming witty, and not talking to strangers

Until I was 10, I walked looking at the tops of my shoes. The path home from school was my shoelaces. At the mall, my shoelaces. Switching from class to class, my shoelaces. Hanging onto those shoelaces were all of the imaginary friends I had created as I daydreamed my way from place to place. It was easier to converse with people in my head than to overcome my shyness and social confusion and talk to real people. I'll never forget the first day I looked up at a real person as I walked out of elementary school. She smiled at me, and I smiled at her. I started to try to keep my head up. And just as I accepted people and shunned my made-up friends, the "Don't Talk to Strangers" programs started in my school.

A summer ago my roommates and I were talking in our front yard. Two small neighborhood girls begged me to come and play with them. They wanted me to hold their dolls and judge their Britney Spears dance-off. One would sit and sing the song while the other jumped around on the sidewalk. Then they would trade off. I would clap and laugh, and make the dolls give judges' comments.

Their dad came over and rounded the girls up.

"Girls, do you know this young lady's name?"

They shook their heads.

"Then she is a stranger. And we do not talk to strangers." He was looking at me disapprovingly.

"I'm Jennie," I offered meekly.

"OK," he said. "Now you can play with her."

I felt like a child molester. Would these girls have danced and sang for anyone? Would I, at their small size with their tangled hair and confiding, pudgy hands with which they had pushed the dolls into my arms, have talked to someone I didn't know? And what about my first name made me no longer a stranger?

"The problem is that we have grown up learning not to talk to strangers. We

can't even pour a glass of milk without having a missing kid staring back at us. We are being groomed to be frightened of strangers," says Robert Thompson, the past president of the International Popular Culture Association and a professor of media and culture at Syracuse University.

On the front of an early June edition of the Denver Post was the story of a missing 2-week-old. The mother had alerted police immediately, and media sources set themselves on fire to alert the public of the kidnapping. The infant was returned, reflected on the front page of the next day's paper, with implications that it was the breaking news and unrelenting coverage that had brought the infant back.

"When these stories get elevated to high news coverage, we think this behavior is rampant, while there are certainly more stories of strangers helping little kids. But those stories don't make good plot lines of 'CSI'," Thompson says.

And while it may seem Michael Moore of us to blame the media, a 2000 Gallup poll (pollingreport.com/crime.htm) showed that of those polled that thought America had a crime problem, 82 percent attributed it to what they had seen or read in the news, while only 17 percent attributed it to actual experience.

No matter the crime rate, I would tell a person much younger and smaller than me to be careful. But when do we ever tell them it is OK to talk to some strangers? Can we say that some strangers aren't scary?

"We never change the message to kids, and they get very isolated in their peer group," says Tina Tessina, a psychotherapist and author. "This is a mistake teachers make and a mistake parents make."

Blaming teachers and parents seemed like a small answer to a big question. I needed to quit talking and do some field work. I decided to confront my fears of physical contact with strangers. And, to kill two birds with one stone, I would also assess the extent to which the media really made me distrust people.

It's hard to smirk with your thumb out

In middle school we were assigned a project in which each student put things that represented him or her into a shoe box: a little me-diarama. My box was

empty, and I wrapped it tightly with duct tape. I remember walking with my best friend, Christi Flagg, and carrying my box. She looked at me and said, "You know, I really don't know anything about you." I had started looking at people. I had made friends. But I hadn't shared a single thing with them.

Another recent top news story, complete with map and infographic, was the story of a missing and most-likely-dead salesman who had picked up a hitchhiker in my town of Golden, Colo. He had disappeared and it was thought that the hitchhiker had killed him and stolen the van and his belongings. The media brandished tip boxes and past statistics warning people not — under any circumstances — to pick up hitchhikers.

I decide I am going to hitchhike. But it takes a lot of walking before I can even muster the courage to stick out my thumb. Somehow, with me walking backwards awkwardly in flip-flops and them driving by at 60 mph, a complete stranger and I are going to size each other up, and we will, through ways I don't understand, find trust in one another.

It happens quickly. Elise Carroll, 19, pulls over her '86 Bronco and flashes me a smile. She stops to get gas, won't let me pay for any of it, and tells me she'll take me wherever I want to go.

"I just had a good feeling about you. And I think your first judgment about people is good," she says.

She talks about growing up in small-town Colorado, a place so small and devoid of things to do that she and her friends would hitchhike "just for the hell of it." But as the town expanded, things changed. "The locals moved out and new people moved in. As the town got bigger, things changed. We couldn't get rides anymore."

She drops me at a turnoff, at my insistence. I'm on a weaving mountain highway, and the drivers have to slow as they pass me. And I'm making eye contact with strangers, strangers who look at me and obviously do not feel as Elise did, and pass me by with purpose.

But a car finally pulls off far ahead of me, and two young men are working diligently to make sure the back seat is clear for me. And driver Ryan Kragerud, 31, has a story to tell when I reveal why I'm hitchhiking.

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JENNIE DORRIS

An Interview with an Irony Expert

Mo Rocca is snarky but post-ironic. Is there anything he can't do?

Talking sarcasm with other people sets up a sort of unspoken duel — while they're saying their piece, your mind is on the trigger, waiting to top their wit, build on their comment and trump their idea.

Though the idea of Mo Rocca in chaps is pretty damn hot, I had no desire to duel with him about irony. Instead, I asked him to be my irony expert (a pretty sad and unpaid gig compared to hosting the new Court TV show "Smoking Gun TV," his job as a correspondent for "The Today Show" and "The Daily Show," and his regular contributions to the NPR show "Wait, Wait… Don't Tell Me").

Flak Magazine: What the hell is irony, anyway? Is it sarcasm?

MR: Like most people my age, I learned my literary theory from *Reality Bites*. It was Ethan Hawke's character that said sarcasm is the difference between what's said and what's meant.

I think we channel detachment into sarcasm. It makes us snarky. And sardonic. These are great words — some of those words that we don't exactly know what they mean. But they sound more nuanced, and this full-fledged kind of societal attitude deserves some kind of nuance.

[When prompted to talk about the roots of irony] I think Letterman is a trailblazer. But also, my father does not understand Letterman. He looks at Letterman as if he is speaking Chinese. And my father lived in Thailand and speaks a smattering of Chinese. At the same time, a lot of people in my generation look at Johnny Carson shows with respect, but I don't think with genuine laughter — this isn't the comedy we've been weaned on.

Flak: Cameron Diaz, Lucy Liu and Drew Barrymore: How can they be a sign of a post-ironic world?

MR: [In the middle of our phone conversation, "The Today Show" called, wanting to bring him a tape of the recently released *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*.] Isn't it funny that they should call in the middle of us discussing irony? Because this movie was supposed to be some sort of ironic take on the original. Yet I'd rather watch the original.

I think we're moving into a post-ironic world — we're so tired of people delivering statements with a wink that we need to take a flat-out earnest approach. Look, it's exhausting to constantly have a sneer and have to be

oh-so-ironic about everything.

Flak: But aren't you the king of this medium? And is it bad that "The Daily Show" makes fun of everything — not only serious events, but the media that covers them? Does that provide more detachment?

MR: There are things I find genuinely amusing — and with things like my take on the reality television and comparing it to the Old Testament on "The Today Show," more often than not, it's silliness. However, it's not fair to just carpet-bomb larger issues — for example, we wouldn't just lambaste all the embedded journalists in the Iraqi war — that's unquantifiable. Many of them are inarguably acting honorably, and it would be absurd to lump those people in with people covering the war for "Entertainment Tonight."

Flak: The other media. Do you get along with them?

MR: You know, despite the fact that they're probably fairly jealous of me, the people at NPR are just so sweet and quaint with their hemp clothing and their tote bags with month-old issues of the Nation. And I just can't tell you how many times that NPR people I barely know have invited me over to make hummus. And while no one loves chickpeas and garbanzo beans more than I, I normally decline.

Katie and Matt (from "The Today Show") have really welcomed me into the family. I had Easter at Katie's house, and Seder at Matt's, which was so fun. And I really enjoyed spending May Day with Al!

Flak: We've grown up sarcastic and not always saying what we mean. How do you see irony affecting the twentysomething generation?

MR: I think it's always difficult to generalize, and I do wish I had my finger on the pulse more. However, I think young people are less cynical about community service and societal progress. I think that government continues to be on the outs, though. But I do think that people are becoming more hopeful and more interested in the power of communities to come together and help other people.

Flak: How will we become friendlier? Save the world, Mo.

MR: You know, puppies generally make people friendlier. In New York, people are nicer to their dogs than to each other. Actually, maybe we need fewer puppies. Maybe they're monopolizing people's sweetness. I'm not saying to kill puppies. But there must be some land — like uninhabited parts of Australia — where they could stop dominating and sucking up people's friendliness.

"I came out here two years ago to interview for a job. I pretty much just hated life. And at an intersection, I saw a scruffy guy holding a sign. He was just asking for a buck, and I was probably sitting on $100. But I sat there in my rented Cavalier and thought 'Oh, get a job.' Later that night, we actually both ended up at the same bar. I started talking to him and I learned that he had an on-the-job accident, had lost his wife to a drunk driver, and just started riding the rails. I offered him a ride back to wherever he was staying, which turned out to be a Buick LaSabre that was parked behind a liquor store. He kept offering me a six-pack for being so kind to him."

"I think people always want to be nice," agrees his brother, Scott, 29. "One time, my truck broke down, and complete strangers put me up in their guest house and fed me until I could get it fixed."

Despite their good experiences, the two are still skeptical. And they blame the media.

"The media sells fear," Scott says. "I believe that everything is sensationalized, and it makes a person overly conscious, it makes you have all these memories that can subconsciously change how you would act."

They drop me off, and it seems that Scott feels bad for ending the conversation on a dark note. "I really think people always want to be nice," he says before they drive away.

People want to be nice, until they steal your wallet

Other people were picking up on my shyness. While my friends just wanted to get to know me, other kids weren't that nice. Every day a guy named Brian Green would steal my lunch. It would be sitting under my desk, and he would grab it when I turned in a paper. I'd return, and he'd be eating it, daring me to say something.

Recently, I was buying flowers for a friend, and left my wallet on the counter by the daisies. When I realized my mistake at the register and returned, it was gone.

My flowering appreciation for humankind fostered on my hitchhiking trip was gone. Locked doors quickly set in again as making sense to me. And the protectiveness of my parents was validated.

ONLINE

Knot Magazine
knotmag.com

Thompson believes this is a generational phenomenon. "In the Baby Boomer generation, it was customary during the summer that we grew up playing outside — we had our run of the neighborhood until our mothers yelled for us for dinner. Now there's the sense that kids grow up more institutionalized — after school they go to soccer or gymnastics, which, of course, have adult supervision. There's even places like Discovery Zone and Chuck E. Cheese, where you get the idea of playing behind locked doors," Thompson says.

I took a trip to the Boulder County Sheriff's Office, and went through the press boards (the lists and documentations of arrests) for just one weekend's worth of arrests. The stack of papers was at least a foot high. Thefts from Target, random assaults and domestic violence peppered the stack. Child molesters out on bail. Rapists at large. Countless victim reports of people that had their stuff stolen — from mountain bikes to electronics to a flat-bed trailer.

Boulder is a small, liberal Colorado city. While I knew there was crime, I had no idea of the actual amount nor the severity. Elise, the first driver to pick me up, had commented that she herself used to hitchhike around her small town, just because there was very little to do in high school. But as the town had more and more newcomers, very few people would pick her up.

Tessina agrees. "I grew up in a small town. Everybody knew everybody and we were helpful to strangers — now we're in impersonal big cities and we're not as comfortable to help."

The nature of communities is changing: The suburbs, while marketed heavily as their own small communities, are a blatant admission that we don't trust people we don't know, so we keep segregating ourselves into smaller and smaller groups.

"There has been an aggressive rise in privacy with the new gated communities," Thompson says. "The suburbs used to be houses that looked the same and therefore had a sort of democratic sense to them. Now with the gated communities, a kid can't come over without a fingerprint and a pupil scan."

So in creating smaller communities for ourselves, we've reduced our

INSURANCE by James Stegall **DAY THREE**

Time now for inoculations. Most of the recruits are too fatigued to protest. The rest surrender themselves like everything else.

File past a multi-compartmented tray and take pills from a medic. No explanation: yellow, red, green. Just eat them. Thimble-sized cups of warm water.

After the pills, another line feeds recruits between two techs wielding what sound like riveting guns — tapping biceps to inject a medication cocktail. The nailgun-device penetrates the skin without a needle. Like "Star Trek." No idea what's in the shot.

Too tired. Some plagues are natural and others manmade. Japanese testing in China rivaling the American race to the atom bomb. History's armies have lost more soldiers to disease than combat. Vaccination as combat multiplier. The vaccines have been effective in the civilian sector for decades. Anthrax vaccine used widely by veterinarians and ranchers. Smallpox inoculation mandatory in the United States until the early '70s. That scene in *The Rock.* Soviet bio-labs for sale.

And: You took the fucking oath so let's go.

interaction to those we know, down to separating ourselves physically from people and having caller ID on our cellphones (do you answer a number not attached to a name?) and a buddy list of exclusive friends. And to interact, we never really have to see anyone….

Can I find an ironic ring-tone for my Nokia?

By high school I was better at talking to people. Even groups of people. But after I got over my fear of strangers, and after I got over my shyness, I didn't always want to talk to people. I did not want to take their flyers, I did not want to hear them ask me for change. I wear headphones with every outfit — they give me an easy way out of shaking my head at people's begging, of negotiating my way out of conversations I do not want to have.

And most of our interaction is not face-to-face. When I want to learn about my friends, I read their blogs. I'm used to getting on-the-way-to-work phone calls with quick bulleted information from friends. I am completely comfortable multi-tasking with three instant messenger conversations going — jabbering aimlessly with high school friends I barely know anymore.

But there seems to be some sick physics rule we all missed — the more we plugged into technology, the less we were able to talk to people in person.

"We're living in times where we protect our privacy fiercely, yet we'll go on 'Jerry Springer' and tell our darkest secrets," says Thompson.

And it is odd to walk around my college campus, an ecosystem created for easy social interaction, and find everyone on a cellphone. Gone are the smiles, the "how are yous," even the dishing on common classes.

I went to the mall to talk to those who sell the cellular technology. They deal with people that want to have mobile social lives every day — they must know what's going on.

In the first store sits Jason, 32, who is selling AT&T and T-Mobile products. The store is empty and he is talking on his cellphone to a friend.

I approach and he keeps the phone to his ear, swiveling it down from his mouth toward his neck. I ask him if we can talk about cellphones.

"Um, can you call me back — I mean — can you come back in, like, an hour?"

He slides the phone back up to his mouth. "OK, anyway. …"

I sit outside the store for an hour and re-enter.

"I'd like to talk about the popularity and overuse of cellphones," I begin.

He looks at me for a long time. "You know what? I hate cellphones! I hate that people can get a hold of me all the time!" He looks down at his hands.

And the irony continues.

Are we all a bunch of Chandler Bings?

In high school I befriended a foreign exchange student from Germany. They are not sarcastic in Germany. By her second week, she was trying to join in and figure out our sarcasm. "You just say the opposite of what you mean?" she asked me. "And you guys associate this with being smart?"

"The idea of twentysomethings is intense irony. But their parents are ironic, too — they grew up with Letterman just as this generation grows up with Jon Stewart — you can have a family dinner conversation where everyone talks like Chandler Bing," Thompson says.

Thompson cites the rise of Letterman in the '80s as the point when irony crossed over from being a subculture to a national phenomenon. And, embarrassingly, I had found myself so immersed in it that I had not even considered irony as some kind of cultural trend. Saying the opposite of what I meant, being quick to make fun of myself and others, this was the way people thought I was witty. And witty means intelligent. And intelligent means accepted. And this is just what we have all done for so long; I have never known it to be another way. But the nature of irony, as Thompson says, is that it is a distancer.

Jedidiah Purdy, a home-schooler who attended Harvard, wrote "Of Common Things" in his mid-20s. He blames a lot of the societal problems on the nature of our generation, saying, "Often it begins in ironic avoidance, the studied refusal to trust or hope openly."

Witty book critics found his book boring, and wished he would "loosen up." Most wrote that Purdy definitely did not sound like a twentysomething, that he had the style of a stodgy old man. And while the point of Purdy's book was that sincerity was becoming less prevalent, we were making fun of him for trying to find it again.

Yet everyone I talked to had, when I asked them what their "utopian" society would be like, talked almost cheesily of people all getting along. They had felt a "good feeling" about me and picked me to give me a ride. They all talked about a drive to be nice, but a worry about finding a context in which to do it.

Sincerity is something I found on the road, and something I found from talking to experts. It was something I found even while jabbering online to friends who lived a few doors down. And it was something, as I turned to chat with the woman in line at Safeway, that I thought could start to turn things around.

ULTRA-VIOLE(N)TS
BY CHRISTOPHER HICKMAN

"I wouldn't do that. I really wouldn't."

Violet Beauregarde has just been warned not to chew a piece of gum.

"Violet, now don't do anything stupid," warns her father, but this young gum addict shrugs him off and pops Willy Wonka's confection, which simulates a three-course meal (tomato soup, roast beef and baked potato, blueberry pie and cream). If you've seen *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, you know the result: Violet turns blue during the dessert portion, and inflates to near-bursting with blueberry juice. "Roll the young lady down to the juicing room," Wonka instructs an Oompa-Loompa, and off she goes, while the oddly orange-and-green Loompas sing the moral:

Gum-chewing's fine when it's once in a while
It stops you from smoking and brightens your smile
But it's repulsive, revolting and wrong
Chewing and chewing all day long
The way that a cow does.

Once she's gone, Wonka addresses the remaining children, "Well, well… two naughty, nasty little children gone, three good, sweet little children left." Before Violet, the rotund Augustus Gloop drank rapaciously from a river of chocolate and was carried off, presumably to be made into a chocolate bar. Earlier in the film, Violet boasts of chewing a single piece of gum for three months solid, and remarks, "That's a world record." Gum-chewing can't be said to rank with envy, greed, sloth or hubris in the pantheon of character defects, but no matter. For Wonka's money, she has cultivated a habit he finds repellent, and for punishment, there is no sliding scale.

It gets tricky, this doling out of punishments to the young ones. Roald Dahl, the author of the screenplay (and the book from which it was derived), presents a world of moral absolutes. Those are the hands of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm on Dahl's shoulders. The clearest way to get the message across in a Grimm tale was to set up a conflict between a paragon of virtue (say, Snow White) and a vessel of evil (the sorceress in "Rapunzel"). Virtue is allowed to triumph, and evil is punished in terrifically grotesque fashion. The stepsisters in the Grimm version of "Cinderella," for their sins, have their

eyes pecked out by doves. Cinderella, meanwhile, for her Job-like suffering, wins a kick-ass prince for a husband, and the attendant wealth and luxury of nobility.

The best of the Grimm tales can get away with these stark terms of good and evil, as they are, brief pieces of literature, stripped of extraneous subplots and based on tales that had been radically streamlined through countless years of telling and re-telling. Movies are different. Good and evil are evidenced in many films, but the dichotomy rarely escapes without damage. A quick reading of the weekly box office report should persuade you that crafting an exquisite story is less important than pitching the audience a concept. Moreover, films — even animated films — deal in the concrete, the actual, and are unforgiving of small errors in tone. The filmmakers might be too baroque in what they consider "good" and "bad" behavior; too liberal, excusing all behavior due to mitigating factors; they might try to dodge the construction, in effort to be clever or avant-garde; they might have a fair central construction, but allow their own worldview to intrude in the fringes. This is most evident when addressing the Grimm standby of the missing parent (also, the corrupt

INSURANCE by James Stegall **DAY FOUR**

"We cultured dysentery, typhoid, paratyphoid, cholera, plague and anthrax. Especially after 1941, anthrax, plague and cholera were produced in quantity.

"We were never told what kind of germs we were producing. We just figured it out by the smells and shapes.

"Dysentery bacillus smells like cucumber.

"Typhoid bacillus was rather beautiful: A colony of the bacilli reminded me of a group of pearls.

"Anthrax bacillus was muddy, and cholera bacillus was rough in texture.

"Plague bacillus was rather stringy, like if you stir up fermented soybeans and pull off the stringy material."

According to Mr. Yoshio Shinozuka, member of Japanese germ mass-production "Unit 731" operating in Ping Fan, China, during World War II. Statement taken from court testimony.

stepparent). The brothers Grimm merely list the damage to the family unit as fact; children's films tend to use it to elicit sympathy for their heroes, and, incredibly, for their villains. (See *Hook* for the most glaring example of this, when young Wendy screams out to Captain Hook, "You need a mother!")

Even the earliest children's films send out mixed signals. In the Our Gang short *Shiver My Timbers*, the Little Rascals skip school to hear a seafarer tell them about his life as a pirate on the high seas. Truancy, certainly, is not proper behavior, and when their teacher berates the seafarer, he decides to scare them straight: He and his gang of sailors will invite the kids on to his ship, ostensibly to begin "pirate training." Then, he will pretend to be a ruthless and vicious pirate who is abusive to the crew. The seafarer puts on quite a show, screaming and putting on mock beatings of his shipmates. The teacher comes onboard and is also subject to a mock session of abuse.

So, wait a second: The kids are persuaded to return to school through lies and deceit? And the schoolteacher is in on the fix? Who, exactly, is at fault here? And who's in a position to make moral judgments? It doesn't get any clearer in later Our Gang shorts — at least not in *Choo-Choo!* which features young Spanky being sneaked aboard a train, where he repeatedly hits a man watching over him for absolutely no reason.

The live-action *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* takes a page from the Our Gang playbook. In the animated short, which closely followed Dr. Seuss' story, the Grinch is a disreputable figure who disdains Christmas. The Whos, who live below the Grinch's mountaintop hovel, celebrate Christmas to the hilt, throwing huge parties, having a town-wide feast, showering gifts on one another. But this is all show.

For them, Christmas is about togetherness, about love for your fellow man, about peace and harmony and acceptance, all that stuff. They prove it when, after the Grinch robs the town blind, they respond by gathering in the town center and singing a song of joy. No conspicuous consumers, these Whos.

The live-action film, however, has no such altruism. There's not a single figure who acts out of anything other than self-interest — other than Cindy Lou Who, a marginal character in the animated short who is suddenly front and center in the film and judging everyone in Whoville, including her parents. The Whos are here characterized as tireless consumers who, in some cases, compete with one another to demonstrate superior holiday spirit. And

the Grinch? Ron Howard has decided that he exiled himself from Whoville as a young boy, where he was mocked for his green fur and his misanthropy. Further, he was the victim of a vendetta by a young schoolchum (who will become Whoville's elected mayor in adulthood), who correctly deduced that the Grinch was the rival of his love, Martha May Whovier's, affections.

The Grinch's Lilliputian heart is, in this rendering, hardly the point. His vulgarity, his soul-sickness, is justified. (In the Our Gang shorts, Spanky's violence has a similar justification: He is, in essence, an urchin, one of society's outcasts, blessed with neither a stable home life nor pocket money. And he's barely more than a toddler. Let the kid hit people, for God's sake!) The Grinch is a damn sight better adjusted than the Whos, slaves as they are to enforced holiday cheer. (The town, you see, has numerous organized events for the holiday season, for which attendance is mandatory.) He has every reason to reject this Whoville fanaticism.

Disney films, of course, do their best to avoid such moral vagueness. They don't always succeed.

Disney punishments are meted out to the truly reprobate, such as Gaston, in *Beauty and the Beast.* Gaston is a narcissist without peer — he even takes lead vocals in a song about his perfection, boasting, "I use antlers in all of my decorating." Gaston will lead a raid on the Beast's home late in the film. A climactic battle to the death ensues, he is flung off the side of the Beast's castle, and he plummets to a grim end many feet below. It was his narcissism that led him to the Beast's door — he meant to kill the Beast to send a message to Belle, the film's heroine, who rejects Gaston's many marriage proposals.

Gaston is, all things considered, an easy target. The filmmakers content themselves with crafting this easy moral — beware of self-love run rampant — and are caught napping in other areas of the film. For example, on two separate occasions, major characters in *Beast* are attacked by a pack of wild and bloodthirsty wolves. There's no set-up for it: The wolves aren't seen protecting their young or their home. They just want to feast on humans.

A review of what hunting and human encroachment on wildlife habitats has done to the wolf population, or a symposium on wolf behavior, which would demonstrate that they do not actively seek out human and pig flesh for their diets, is unnecessary here. But it might have aided the creative minds of *Beast*, who animate them with fangs bared, and depict one such man-eater being

thrown fatally against a tree by the Beast, who is quite nobly protecting the helpless Belle.

And boy does Belle need help. She's presented as a woman of curiosity, a bit bookish and fiercely independent. While a trio of bosomy blondes moon after Gaston, Belle dreams of a deeper union with a multi-faceted man. She stands up to the foul-tempered Beast, even when he is at his most fierce. But when the film's conflicts are so great that only violence will end them, she ceases to be Belle and becomes a girl. While a battle rages in the castle and Gaston and the Beast duel to the death, Belle recoils in horror, shrieks and gasps with fear.

So listen, kiddies, too much pride is a bad thing. And wolves have no place in God's kingdom. And girls: watch out. We've got some problems here, and the boys have to fix them.

The moral knottiness of children's movies is not a matter of politics; it's a matter of (literally) paternalism. *Ice Age,* for instance, is undone by liberal forgiveness. The film's message has something to do with respect for God's creatures, regardless of differences, and that selfless acts reap rewards. Manfred the woolly mammoth is aloof and cynical, but he lost his family to attacking humans; Diego the saber-toothed tiger plots to kill Manfred and a child, but it's revenge for the loss of other of his tiger friends to humans; Sid the sloth is an idiot, therefore lovable. Where's the Evil Queen? No one in this movie is allowed to be bad.

The liberal "white man savior" appears in other films, to reliably uneasy effect. *The Road to El Dorado* features two wise-cracking Spanish con artists, and asks us to laugh along with them as they renounce their desire to the pleasures of mythic El Dorado, the

INSURANCE by James Stegall **DAY FIVE**

The anthrax vaccine is a series. First every two weeks, then monthly, every six months and finally a yearly booster. The shot site must alternate between biceps because of the resulting pain and swelling. Cold as it goes in, it raises a golfball sized knot. It's fairly common for paperwork to get lost and service members forget which series they're on. Recalling which arm took the last shot offers a chance of picking up where the series left off. Otherwise, restart the entire series. Pushups after the injection relieve some of the swelling.

"City of Gold," and ultimately help defend it from Cortez and his men. Thus, the movie presents two Europeans who befriend the Aztec natives in Mexico, rather than conquer and enslave them, a neat little bit of revisionism that nonetheless falls short, in that it supposes that the "savages" would be casualties of Cortez if not for the help of two benevolent — and white — men.

Atlantis: the Lost Empire features an entire culture under threat of extinction, but for the intervention of a plucky white guy from the Smithsonian, who teaches the Atlanteans how to read their own language (they'd lost the power since Atlantis sank) and understand their own culture. Here, as in *El Dorado,* the white male protagonist is just blinkered and bumbling enough to take the curse off the whole "liberal white chosen one saves the ignorant masses" thread of the film.

Wonka's handling of Violet reveals an attitude toward empowered women that is, in its way, as unkind as Disney's. Violet is boorish, true; she is also independent and willful. She believes in accomplishment (see her "world record" comment), but her energies are misdirected (score one for her parents, who indulge her.) She is never allowed an opportunity to repent. Her addiction is considered incurable in the house of Wonka. A similar fate awaits the covetous and spoiled Veruca Salt, who falls into the Wonka factory's garbage chute. She and Violet are self-determining women, whereas Augustus Gloop is merely a glutton, devoid of goals or opinions on anything save where the next meal is coming from.

Dahl leaves it to the parents to explain that gorging yourself on chocolates (preferably Wonka brand) might not be a suitable alternative. Then there's the Oompa Loompas. Wonka claims he spirited them away from Loompa Land, where they were constantly under attack from such horrifying creatures as the Vermicious Knids. Certainly they're grateful to have escaped their perilous homeland, but in the Wonka compound, as one character says, "Nobody ever goes in, nobody ever comes out." So, what exactly are the Oompa Loompas free to do, other than make chocolates? Is there a profit-sharing plan? Can they unionize?

It's possible that these "bad" children are expendable mainly because they will not submit immediately to Wonka's martial authority. Wonka initially dismisses even our hero, Charlie Bucket, for the unauthorized consumption of Fizzy Lifting Drink. Charlie redeems himself at film's end, and he is

rewarded with Wonka's factory and his fortune. Wonka tells Charlie this was his plan all along: to have a child assume the helm when he stepped down. But only a good child, one free of even the most minor defects of character. And it had to be a child, because, he says, an adult would have wanted to do things their own way, not his.

Wonka's control issues extend to any self-determinism Charlie has that differs from the Wonka dogma. And so it is with Disney, with Dreamworks, even with the Whos. Are you a strong-willed female character, a native of a watery utopia or an Aztec enclave confident that your community can take care of itself, a Who wishing to observe Christmas for its religious — not corporate — implications, a crew member of a ship in some dead-end town who is uncomfortable traumatizing children in order to make a point? The answer, per Wonka's infantilizing rationale, is clear:

I wouldn't do that. I really wouldn't.

BAZOOKA JOSEF

#3 of 7

FORTUNE: BAZOOKA JOSEF SAYS, 'CONTROL THE PARTY'S INTERNAL BUREAUCRACY IN ORDER TO ISOLATE AND CRUSH YOUR RIVALS!'

AMERICAN CULTURE IS MASS CULTURE: DEAL WITH IT

BY LUCIANO D'ORAZIO

"America is the only country that went from barbarism to decadence without civilization in between." — Oscar Wilde

"A snob has to spend so much time being a snob that he has little time left to meddle with you." — William Faulkner

The Public Broadcasting System was the background noise of my childhood.

In their zeal to provide the best education possible, my parents baptized me in the educational fountain that is public TV. Nary was a minute spent without the drone of WNET Channel 13. Wake up with a little "Sesame Street." Catch a nature special around noon. "Reading Rainbow," "Mister Rogers" and the repeat of "Sesame Street" to round out the afternoon. Then a choice of British comedy, "Nature" or a science special for the evening.

Of all the shows, "Masterpiece Theatre" had been a ritual for quite a long time. I've lumbered along with "I, Claudius," booed the snooty lords of "Upstairs, Downstairs" and cheered on Scots as they skewered Napoleon's hordes in "Sharpe's Rifles."

But one day, while watching something about pith-helmeted nabobs in Kenya, I asked myself a few things: Why wasn't there a single American story on "Masterpiece Theatre?" (The recent addition, "American Stories," doesn't cut it.) Why is it the only American thing I see, outside of morning programming, is a Ken Burns documentary filled with academes and literati? Why are there no rock concerts? And why, in the pledge drives, do they always pooh-pooh the other channels, which I also enjoy?

I came to the inevitable conclusion. PBS hates America.

It's a bold statement, one that exudes barbarous parochialism, anti-intellectual thuggery and the like. Evangelical Christians, the extreme Right and certain ultra-conservative elements of the Republican Party would rate this observation highly. No self-respecting open-minded 21st century intellectual should ever give this statement any more than a passing glance.

But I believed it then. And, more mutedly, I believe it now. It has everything

to do with two divergent concepts of American culture. The highbrow version says the America of Hawthorne, Whitman and Emerson is in some state of intellectual and moral decline. The lowbrow version values entertainment, novelty, innovation and popular taste.

INSURANCE by James Stegall **DAY SIX**

Gil Elliot, author of "Twentieth Century Book of the Dead" writes: "The hundred million or so man-made deaths of the twentieth century… are more directly comparable with the scale of death from disease and plague which was the accepted norm before this century.

"Indeed, man-made death has largely replaced these as a source of untimely death. This is the kind of change that Hegel meant when he said that a quantitative change, if large enough, could bring about a qualitative change. The quality of this particular change becomes clear if we connect the present total of deaths with the scale of death inherent in the weapons now possessed by the large powers."

Ring around the rosey, a pocket full of posies, ashes, ashes, we all fall down… is a children's poem about the symptoms and effect of the Black Plague, still sung in preschools today.

Of course, cultures in Europe and Asia have their popular rituals and entertainment. But none of these cultures puts itself out to the world as being defined by its mass culture. What is presented as representative of Italy is not tarantellas, the mafia and mandolins, but the high culture of Verdi, Puccini, Michelangelo and Raphael. Germany is Wagner's Ring Cycle, not polkas and beer. France is medieval architecture and Impressionist painting, not Maurice Chevalier, Edith Piaf, street shows or accordion players cranking out "La Vie en Rose" for the tourists.

Only America has a culture dominated by mass influence. And it is this mass culture that is America's greatest contribution to mankind.

Take, for example, the classical culture of ancient Rome. A casual amble through the ruins of the Forum would convince anyone that only a culture based on the highest, most noble principles could create such magnificent piles of marble. Alas, the vast majority of buildings in the Forum, as with most ruins in the rest of Rome's empire, were designed for a fraction of a percentage of the populace. What, then, dominated the cultural activity of the vast remainder of Rome? Look no further than the biggest pile of

ONLINE

Biography: Luciano D'Orazio
flakmag.com/misc/luciano.html

More on bear baiting
angryflower.com/bobsam.gif

More on American culture
flakmag.com/rejected/culture.html

marble in town: the Colosseum. There, the people stood enthralled at rape, incest, sodomy, murder, slaughter, disembowelment, arson and other forms of savagery. Although scholars of the period like Pliny and Tacitus do take into account the gladiator games — even criticizing the cruelty in Juvenal's case — modern scholars don't glorify it. And yet it is the games that captured the imagination of a huge majority of the known world.

How about Elizabethan England? Surely, a culture that produced the Bard of Avon would produce groundswells of literary activity. But what actually encompassed activity for most people in England, who did not share Shakespeare's literary capacity? How about setting wild dogs on chained bear cubs, a savage bloodsport known as "bear baiting?" Or public execution so heinous it would make a gladiator cringe?

Think the Enlightenment was very illuminating to most of Europe? Think again. While Montesquieu, Diderot and Voltaire flounced in Parisian salons, the people had boisterous street festivals to watch criminals being "broken at the wheel." This involved a condemned criminal being strapped to a spinning wheel and having his limbs and entrails beaten into the wheel with iron rods. Of course, a blood-stained wheel is not an appropriate symbol of an age of reason and logic.

Not everyone was a Pliny, a Tacitus, a Shakespeare, a Marlowe, a Spenser or a Rousseau. And yet these people define the culture of populations that couldn't care less about them. Not only did they not care, the populations of societies past were institutionally barred from defining the very society in which they lived.

America, on the other hand, created a culture not based on the few, but rather an amazing hybrid of folk culture and haute European traditions. There are several reasons for this phenomenon. Colonists from Europe, as a whole, enjoyed the best living conditions and the highest literacy rates in the Western world. Unburdened by the arts monopoly of privileged nobility on the Continent, Americans dared to create a culture from the bottom up.

The groundswell of American cultural foment not only created such literary giants as Hawthorne, Emerson, Whitman and Twain. It created entertainment staples that today serve as the backbone of all things American. Tap dancing, borne by the amalgam of Irish and African influences in the Five Points section of New York, led to that American creation, musical theater. Minstrel shows (however socially myopic they may seem), with their folksy lyrics, racist banter and emphasis on variety and mass appeal, are the forerunner of all modern American music.

In the 20th century, as more Americans became involved in cultural discourse, a true mass culture emerged. It synched the old notions and the popular entertainments of yore with better communication (radio, film and eventually TV) and big business, wedding advertising to popular culture for all time. This was not necessarily a bad thing. Like the Florentine painters who had their Medici, so, too did cultural actors have their patron in big business, which translated the tastes of the American public into a truly popular culture. It took an already accelerating popular movement and translated to a national, then global audience. The GIs who helped liberate Europe did not throw volumes of Longfellow and Emerson to starving Parisians. Hershey Chocolate, Coca-Cola, swing music and Betty Grable pin-ups did more for American foreign policy than any tome of intellectual heft.

This rubs many in the intelligentsia the wrong way. They see any sign of mass appeal as inherently puerile and not worthy of discussion. Take James Fenimore Cooper. For almost two centuries, he was considered one of the premier American authors of the early 19th century. After careful inspection, however, literary scholars noticed he was no better than the Dean Koontz of Jacksonian America. "The Last of the Mohicans," "The Deerslayer," an entire middle school English curriculum rendered obsolete.

Haute culture is a distinctly European concept. It implies that a certain elite has exclusive access to cultural development and innovation. So the highbrow literati, while lamenting the decline of American culture, barely realize that they are really lamenting the fact that they are not European. There is this tendency among American intellectuals to look upon our society in the same light as the departed civilizations of Egypt, Assyria, Greece and Rome. They see bygone eras as having a beginning, a peak and a decline. Viewed in this light, any deviation from accepted norms of "civilization" or "academia" denotes the imminent collapse of society.

INSURANCE by James Stegall **DAY SEVEN**

To inoculate a baby, the nurses prepare syringes. They remove the safety caps and place the needles on a nearby table for easy access.

The baby is laid on his back on a gurney and held at the shoulders and legs. One nurse stands on either side of the baby's exposed legs.

They count ready, set, go… and as quickly as possible jab the syringes in the baby's thighs, inject the syrum and yank out the syringe, then reach for the next needle.

The baby starts screaming immediately. The first series is every two months, then six, then yearly.

Take renowned American dancer Isadora Duncan's critique of jazz music: "It seems to me monstrous that anyone should believe that the jazz rhythm expresses America. Jazz rhythm expresses the primitive savage." Today, we know differently, yet in the 1920s, jazz was seen as the ruin of civilization by intellectuals and polite society — partly due to its suggestive rhythms and lyrics, but mostly because it was spearheaded by blacks. Author George Santayana had a ready response: "It is veneer, rouge, aestheticism, art museums, etc. that make America impotent. The good things are football, kindness and jazz bands."

And what of today's reality shows, "TRL" and men's magazines that don't quite show all? Popular MTV culture is in a state of Armageddon. At least, that's what cultural scholars like Morris Berman think. In his work "The Twilight of American Culture," Berman sees American culture much like scholars past. The United States, according to Berman, shows the classic symptoms of imminent societal disaster: rising economic inequality, falling literacy, rising anti-intellectualism and spiritual death through an expanding corporate culture. He compares American culture using the same old paradigm of rising, height and collapse.

Sound familiar? It's the same tired argument that Duncan made about jazz. It arrogantly implies there is some new elite of corporate icons that drives American culture, which dupes poor stupid Joe Lunchpail into buying whatever they want him to. For Berman, the masses, who largely propel corporate needs through focus groups and ratings, have no value as a cultural

force. Literary critic Van Wyck Brooks was right in his assertion that: "The 'Highbrow' is the superior person whose virtue is admitted but felt to be an inept unpalatable virtue; while the 'Lowbrow' is a good fellow one readily takes to, but with a certain scorn for him and all his works."

What about corporate culture creating a mass of drones ready to buy whatever the masters of the universe want them to buy? Everyone's familiar with the argument that big business has homogenized American culture. To this I have a ready reply: So what?

This is not a problem for two reasons. First, the corporations would not be in the business of culture if there wasn't a willing and receptive audience in the majority. If you don't like mass culture, you're not with the program, regardless of who is running the show. The second, and more important reason is that the bottom-up, democratic nature of American culture creates its own innovation, regardless of the controls or restraints placed on American society.

History has borne this out. When America languished in lucrative operettas and march music at the turn of the century, outside forces burst it open with ragtime, a jaunty piano style popularized by black composer Scott Joplin. When ragtime became de rigueur in high society, jazz emanated from the brothels of New Orleans into Chicago and New York. When jazz became mainstream and corporate with the society swing bands of the 1940s, along came the revolutionary bebop of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. When bebop became stale and "square," rock 'n' roll spawned from black rhythm and blues and Southern country music. When rock became teen idols and surf movies, America let in the Beatles and the British Invasion, and the psychedelic era burbled forth. When the psychedelics became bloated arena rock monstrosities, up came punk, new wave and disco to take music in new directions. When punk and disco became bland '80s pop, along came hip-hop, still the most vibrant force in American music, and "alternative" rock, which, starting with grunge, attempted a postmodern synthesis between old and new.

When millions are involved in cultural innovation, there are millions of avenues for cultural innovation. If it's not juke joints, it's smoky jazz clubs. If not that, coffeehouses and underground venues. Today, the Internet is the great cauldron of innovation. Because of the vast amount of information — and the almost complete lack of control — the Web is today's source for

unfettered entertainment. But even with the Internet's imminent regulation and control, there will inevitably be another avenue out of our reach wherein development will rise to the needs of the mainstream.

So what is American culture? It has nothing to do with literati, with intellectuals, with snobby critics and experts. Essentially, in the high school sense, it isn't the nerd. It isn't the drama geek. It certainly isn't the goth or general misanthrope, although they may influence culture in their own ways. Like it or not, American culture is the jock. It's the three-letter varsity athlete who torments the nerds to no end and ends up with the homecoming queen come prom night. American culture, because of its emphasis on mass tastes and mass appeal, is inherently a popularity contest. And it's supposed to be that way. Any true democratic society needs a collective culture reflective of the assorted tastes of the population. Anything else is a shadow, a mirage, a mere reflection of only a fraction of society.

Which brings us back to "Masterpiece Theatre." As I postulated the inherent loathing PBS has for the Stars and Stripes, the pledge drive came on screen again. It finally dawned on me: Of course they hate America. Any channel that has to resort to a pledge drive to get operating revenue must not appeal to the broad spectrum of American society. It is therefore not very American.

It doesn't mean I don't watch PBS anymore. But next time a pledge drive comes on, I'm heading straight for a ballgame. Besides, Babe Ruth could've whupped Henry V's ass any day of the week.

BAZOOKA JOSEF

#4 of 7

FORTUNE: THE EARLY BIRD GETS THE WORM, WHICH PROVIDES LIFE-SUSTAINING PROTEIN.

REAL INTERVIEWS / FICTIONAL PEOPLE
QUESTIONS FOR SEAN FLEMING
BY ERIC WITTMERSHAUS

Flak Magazine: You've been pretty busy lately as the CEO and one of four full-time employees of Rockers Without Borders. Until recently, there were just two of you. Have recent geopolitical events helped propel your growth?

Sean Fleming: Definitely. We got started after 9/11, but things didn't really pick up until the Bali bombings, the attacks in Kenya and the invasion of Iraq, which, of course, led to all these guerilla attacks on US troops. There's sort of been a lot more awareness of how much kids in Third World countries, particularly Arab countries, hate America.

Flak: So Sept. 11 was what got you guys started, but the sustained, anti-Western activity since then has given you momentum?

SF: Yeah, that's a good way to put it. We'd probably still be slogging on in relative obscurity if the US would've turned the other cheek after 9/11.

Flak: How did Sept. 11 turn into Rockers Without Borders?

SF: Well, first I noticed that a lot of the hijackers on 9/11 were pretty young. And that the kids firing guns into the air on the West Bank were even younger. I found myself wondering what led so many Third World teenagers down a path of violent opposition to Western society and Western symbols. Obviously, socioeconomic factors have a lot to do with it, but what makes a kid in, say, Cairo, travel 500 miles to Afghanistan to train in a terrorist camp? And why don't many kids from London do the same thing?

Flak: And what did you decide?

SF: Well, the stock liberal humanist answer would be that children in underdeveloped countries have a lot more to rage against than their North American and Western European counterparts. But any Western kid who ever stuck safety pins through his nose or dyed his hair blue knows that it doesn't matter if you've got running water and e-mail. Teenagers are an angsty bunch.

What makes teenagers of undeveloped countries so prone to violence is that they often lack an outlet for their frustrations. Robert Zimmerman was

reborn as Bob Dylan. John Lydon changed his name to Johnny Rotten and fronted the Sex Pistols. Your average Tom, Dick and Habib don't have the political freedom to do that, let alone the capital to buy a guitar and amp.

Flak: So music acts as a kind of pacifier for social malcontents who would otherwise cause far greater trouble?

SF: Exactly. It need not be music, though. Kids could knit. The whole bitch-and-stitch scene has really kept kids in line in America. Or they could start a zine. But my expertise lies in the music business, so that's why we have Rockers Without Borders instead of, say, Bloggers Without Borders.

Flak: So do you just send these kids instruments?

SF: No, it's much more personal than that. Interaction is crucial. Despite their anti-Westernism, many of these kids haven't actually met an American.

Flak: But you're not American.

SF: Well, that's where Don [Brewer, of Grand Funk Railroad fame] comes in. Generally, when you get a visit from Rockers Without Borders, you get both Don, an American, and me, an Englishman. After all, our two countries are pretty much the twin bogeymen of anti-Western insurgencies right now.

Flak: What do you and Don do once you arrive in a country? And how long are you there?

SF: Well, our approach varies for each country. For instance, much of Afghanistan is chaotic and lawless right now. People there don't have to worry about much of a government crackdown on those who express their opinions in public. For a country like Afghanistan, Don and I will go in with a planeload of instruments and sound equipment. We spend a few weeks setting up a music center staffed by locals, where teens can come and get their ya-yas out.

Flak: How do you find the locals to run the music center? Do you scout them out ahead of time? Or do you just go and see who you can find?

SF: We used to just go and see who we could find, but then we ran into some problems in the Sudan. After we left, our administrators sold all the amps to

a warlord, who used the ground switches in car bombs. Now that we've been doing this for a while, though, we've gotten better at screening these people before we even arrive on site.

Flak: You would think warlords and looters would pose a pretty big problem for your group before you even got the instruments to their destination.

SF: You'd be amazed at what a little lucre will do. Sometimes we've got to grease a few palms.

Flak: Wait, you guys actually give money to warlords?

SF: It's quite a bit of our budget actually, but we like to think the money that goes to warlords is enabling us to serve the greater good. And we're not doing anything the US hasn't already done.

Flak: Aren't you worried Rockers Without Borders will be branded as an organization that funds terrorist activities?

SF: We're not too worried. Joe Lieberman has been a big backer ever since those terrorist attacks in Kenya. He can be pretty helpful in explaining the mission to certain outraged Southern senators.

Flak: OK, how does your approach work in a country where the government is a bigger obstacle than warlords, like North Korea, where speaking out against the government in the form of a rock song can lead to a harsh political crackdown?

INSURANCE by James Stegall **DAY EIGHT**

Staring in the mirror: Every bump, pimple, black/whitehead, tear or saliva is a potential viral reservoir.

Keenly aware, suddenly, of all the escape routes. How can it be constrained to just the blister on the arm? Isn't it circulating, spreading the magic of inoculation? Tricking the body right now into a false memory of the virus, a training video for the white blood cells? Don't pop the zit, no matter how much you want to. No surrogate for the blister. Like the liquid center of bubblegum, waiting to squirt out. Tidal wave. Brush the arm against a wall. Scratch it through the shirt without thinking, saved by the slick plastic Band-Aid. Isn't the body leaking the virus through every orifice, follicle and duct? It would have been nice to hug the baby before leaving.

SF: For some of the countries with less than stellar human rights records, the solution is often to spirit a group of teens outside the country. For example, until recently, Iraqi teens kicked out the jams in Mosul under the watchful eyes of sold—, uh, peacekeepers. Don is actually looking at using some of his royalties from "We're an American Band" to rent a yacht we would take out on the Persian Gulf, so we can teach kids from Iran.

Flak: Are the political difficulties among the most difficult challenges facing Rockers Without Borders?

SF: Probably the toughest things to deal with are issues of infrastructure. You can read "Lonely Planet" and study up on the Web all you want, but nothing's really gonna prepare you for life on the ground in some Third World shithole. You've gotta step off the plane and live it. You learn really quickly to pack light because all those amplifiers and guitars and so on are heavy. If you can find someone trustworthy, sometimes you can ship supplies over before your arrival. And after a disaster in Aceh in Indonesia, we've learned to make sure we bring over every shape and size of electrical adapter. Nothing like traveling halfway around the world and journeying a day through the wilderness only to find out your equipment won't work.

Flak: What do you do for areas without a steady supply of electricity?

SF: We try to lug around small generators if we can. In the oil-producing regions, which a lot of these countries are, that's not so tough. But those sometimes get sold off in the less stable regions, so we often just bring along bicycle generators, you know, the kind the off-the-grid types use to run their TV on the days when it's too cloudy for their solar power to work.

Flak: Isn't that something of a tall order in countries where many of the people don't have enough food to eat, let alone energy to ride a bicycle?

SF: (Running hands through hair) Well… we usually don't target kids on the verge of starving to death. If they don't have enough energy to pedal a bicycle, they probably don't have enough energy to blow up an American embassy.

Flak: Rockers Without Borders just released its first CD, *Djibouti Call*, in August. How did you settle on Djibouti for the site of your first recording session?

SF: Djibouti's 50 percent unemployment rate and lawless borders make it a potential hotbed of anti-Americanism, though its capital, where most of the people live, is a multicultural safe haven. That allowed us a safe place to operate where we could bring in Djiboutians from the countryside. In addition, its proximity to Somalia, Yemen and Kenya, as well as the Middle East as a whole, made it a great staging ground for our first recording. We were able to work with local Djiboutians as well as groups from Yemen, Eritrea and Kenya. The CD itself was recorded in a 16-track studio we set up in Djibouti City. Plus, we liked the name.

Flak: What's on the CD?

SF: It's kind of all over the map. It's got traditional Djiboutian music, as well as Kenyan garage rock, Yemeni hip-hop and a multinational acid-rock freakout. Plus Don leads an Armenian remake of "We're an American Band," renamed, naturally, "We're an Armenian Band." The CD sells for 12 bucks and we've sold out the LP. To provide some continuity to the whole thing, I do brief,

INSURANCE by James Stegall **DAY NINE**

The big question is why do it? Fear? Like insurance? The doctor explains… to inoculate or not inoculate, as long as the population as a whole is vaccinated, you should be safe. But there's always the chance of exposure. Many diseases are still out there.

Your child needs all the defenses available.

You should not be concerned about speculated connections between baby vaccination and autism.

You should have faith in the statistics. Think about what one in a million really means. One million Chinese with spoons.

It's chance of exposure vs. side effects of the vaccine, and I'm assuring you side effects are minimal to nonexistent.

Well, we won't know if he's allergic until after the shot. You have to watch him.

And there's the fact most schools require a shot record.

You were probably shot up with a lot worse stuff when you were little, trust me. All the vaccines have made huge advances in the last 20 years.

If he proves to be allergic, we have medications for that.

spoken-word intros for each song. The liner notes profile the musicians, and we're hoping maybe we can get some of them recording contracts. We think it could be the next Langley Schools Music Project. Most of these kids didn't even know what a guitar was before we got 'em started.

Flak: Now wait a minute; weren't some of the earliest guitars made in Babylon and brought into Spain by the Moors?

SF: Uh, I meant electric guitar.

Flak: Speaking of electric guitar, you used to play in a band with the guys who would go on to become Radiohead. Do they help out now and again with donations or time contributions for Rockers Without Borders?

SF: No, I don't really talk to them anymore.

Flak: Well, you would think that with the connections you have…

SF: Look, those guys have made their choices and I've made mine. My choice was to quit the band and start a movement dedicated to helping create peace in this world. Those guys chose to get rich.

Flak: Well, I don't know if I'd say…

SF: Listen, what do you know about Radiohead? You can listen to their records and swallow all that dystopian shit like "Fitter, Happier" because you don't know those guys. They can paint such a bleak picture of the workaday world yet still be able to hit the pillow snoring each night because they're fucking rich. If Rockers Without Borders had even half the money they earned from "Creep," I wouldn't be sitting here doing this interview with your little magazine, man.

ONLINE

Biography: Eric Wittmershaus
flakmag.com/misc/eric.html

Doctors Without Borders
doctorswithoutborders.org

Lawyers Without Borders
lawyerswithoutborders.org

REAL INTERVIEWS / FICTIONAL PEOPLE
QUESTIONS FOR FARHAT KHAN PASHA
BY JAMES NORTON

Flak Magazine: You're the editor-in-chief of the Boston Bugle, the city's third-largest daily and fastest-growing paper. Your paper has gained a lot of attention for its 11 percent growth in circulation last year. A few months ago, though, your paper received even more notice when a major story came out about the full scope of the Catholic Church abuse scandal. Not surprisingly, your competition, the Globe and the Herald, ran it as their top story. But the Bugle didn't.

Farhat Khan Pasha: We didn't. I mean, it was on our front page, but we didn't put it up top.

Flak: What was your top headline?

FKP: "Daredevil dog waterskis, skateboards."

Flak: Were your sales OK?

FKP: We basically sold everything on the newstands, and we saw an immediate 2-point bump in our daily subscriber base. I mean… the dog *waterskis*! Isn't that awesome? Child-molesting priests is a very serious story, a very sad story. And like everyone else, we ran it. But man, that dog….

Flak: The week before that, three American soldiers were killed in a grenade attack in Baghdad, a story you put on page four. You ran a front-page package on a newly discovered species of spider that dives underwater to catch fish.

FKP: (Laughing) Those things are huge!

Flak: Some media critics have criticized the way you rank news.

FKP: When you say "media critics," I suspect you are talking about the pointy-headed pundits who work for the very people we're grabbing market share from, right?

Flak: Not just the Globe, which has taken some shots at you, but the New York Times, too….

ONLINE

Biography: James Norton
flakmag.com/misc/jim.html

Homepage
jrnorton.com

FKP: Talk to someone at the Globe or Herald — particularly the Globe, OK? — and they'll tell you that they lead with the most important news. But like hell if they really follow that, OK?

There are days when they're good, and days when they figure, hell, news is slow, let's run some handicapped crack addict who beat his wife and then found God and recovered. I mean, who really cares about an African civil war, or AIDS in China, or anything like that? They break their own high-minded rules whenever they can get away with it.

The thing is, everyone does it. Have you noticed how many shots of bikini-clad women the Times runs these days? They did a whole center spread the other day. There's always some threadbare justification for it: the "changing mores of the American beach" or some crap like that.

And then: All the tits that's fit to print!

Or, holy hell — did you read that piece on the "down low" that the Times ran in its Sunday magazine? Gay black sex, viscerally dished up on a nice fancy platter for the upper crust demographic, garnished with some paper-thin cover story about AIDS awareness… it was just amazing. I just imagined some Yale law professor, reading the story while sipping his cafe latte, and getting this big, pinstriped boner. And hating himself. And loving every minute of it.

But it's so hypocritical. At the Bugle, we just come out in the open, and say, "We'll put the article you actually want to read at the top of the paper. We'll make sure you get the news, and make sure that the important boring stuff is ranked ahead of the less important boring stuff. But the front page will always be a blast." And you'll look forward to it.

Flak: Don't you think the media has a responsibility to educate its readers? To run stories that capture the events of the day in a way that meaningfully reflects the issues of the day?

FKP: Did you even think about that question before asking it? That was a boring-ass question. Don't you run a Web magazine?

Flak: Yes, I do.

FKP: Well, what the fuck? Haven't you guys made your name — such as it is, because the last time I checked you didn't exactly have a book deal, or any actual backers — by being unconventional? By fronting stuff other people missed?

Flak: Yeah, but —

FKP: But because we're printed on paper, we have to be boring?

Flak: No, but —

FKP: Screw that, OK? Not going to do it. Let the Globe fool itself into thinking that it's in touch with what readers need, and we'll actually deliver what readers want.

INSURANCE by James Stegall **DAY TEN**

Yoshio Shinozuka: "It started in December 1942. Before that, we used mice. But in 1942 the experiments I attended were on Chinese people.

"They brought the human specimens to the treatment room, and I drew their blood. We would draw blood and test for antibodies. Then we would inject the plague vaccine that had been developed by Unit 731. After that, blood would be drawn and tested again. The live plague bacteria would be injected. Then, after they got critically sick, the doctors would start a dissection.

"As soon as the medic checked the specimen with the stethoscope, the chief pathologist started to dissect him. I put the pieces of organs in the culturing medium, which was placed in the culture dish.

"This was done, we were told, to verify the toxicity of the pathogenic germs we had produced, as well as to check the efficacy of vaccinations. Also it enabled us to obtain stumps for future germ production."

Flak: But community newspapers are one of the last parts of the media world that still challenge people. That still run in-depth stories on serious issues.

FKP: Which is exactly why they're in stasis while Fox TV explodes. Listen, you can read about all the world's headaches in the Bugle, too. We rank our hard news seriously.

And we're not trying to be the [New York] Post, or anything like that — there's no need to bathe in an ocean of sleaze in order to catch people's attention, although I definitely see how it beats a tedious four-page exposé on unsafe conditions in a logging plant, or whatever. And I respect their honesty.

But we're trying to engage our readers and catch their attention, so we don't write stories like we're trying to score points on a Columbia journalism school final exam. You're never going to catch us pumping up the portentousness to suggest that everything that ever happened is some sort of world-shaking trend. It's crap, and readers know that.

We dig in and tell our stories like we're everyday people with something exciting to say. We look at our front page, and say, "How many times will our reader turn to the guy next to him on the [subway] and say, 'Have you *heard* about this? This is crazy!'"

Our first goal is making people excited to read us. Everything else can get in line.

Flak: Is the Bugle the future of print journalism?

FKP: I hope to hell we are. If someone doesn't figure out how to breathe some life back into newsprint, we're all doomed. The coffin is shutting on the old model of print journalism. We're trying to evolve our way out, and if that means we need to change into something fast and greasy to dodge the lid, so be it.

BAZOOKA JOSEF

#5 of 7

FORTUNE: GETTING 'HOT AND HEAVY' COULD JUST MEAN NORMAN MAILER IN A TURTLENECK.

THE COOKIE NOT TAKEN: A MUPPETS SYMPOSIUM
BY ERIC SPITZNAGEL

During his tenure on the popular PBS program "Sesame Street," Cookie Monster earned a much-deserved reputation as the clown prince of junk food. His self-effacing antics delighted children of all ages. But few of his admirers grasped the true depth of his performances.

On the surface, he may be a bug-eyed buffoon who delights in making us laugh, but hidden behind the fur is a tortured artist driven by inner demons. In his quest for answers in a world gone mad, he has created an oeuvre that should secure his place among the greatest philosophers of his generation.

Cookie Monster's most significant creations have been, without a doubt, his songs. Cookie Monster not only sang about cookies, he celebrated them. He found passion in a subject that has often been ignored or glossed over by his musical contemporaries. But at the same time, Cookie Monster was tormented by his beloved cookies. In haunting detail, his songs documented the dark underbelly of his cookie obsession.

His musical legacy began with "C Is For Cookie," by far his best-known work.

C is for cookie, that's good enough for me
Oh, cookie, cookie, cookie starts with C!

At the outset, it would appear that Cookie Monster is engaged in nothing more than a simple linguistic exercise. But what begins as an earnest (if unsophisticated) exploration of language is quickly abandoned as the song makes an unexpected detour into the far murkier waters of philosophy.

When Cookie says that cookies are "good enough for me," he is not merely suggesting he has found a satisfactory solution to his game of alphabetic association. He is pondering issues far more profound, indicating a desire to cast off the shackles of material possessions. He has discovered, quite by accident, that personal fulfillment can be achieved by something as inconsequential as a cookie. Society may demand that he pursue more substantial indulgences, like wealth and power and things that start with other letters. But as Cookie Monster so wisely states in the song's opening, "Who cares about the other things?"

In "Goodbye Little Cookie," Cookie Monster examines the heartbreak of love

and loss, particularly in how it relates to cookies:

Goodbye, goodbye little cookie
Me always remember just you
Goodbye, goodbye little cookie
It now time to bid you adieu

Cookie's painful realization that love does not last forever is at first unbearable. He begs his cookie not to leave, promising to carry a torch and devote his life to grieving. But eventually he learns to accept the inevitable separation, finding the strength to "bid adieu" to a cookie that, for whatever reason, can no longer be his. Cookie's poignant moment of mourning takes on a deeper meaning in the next verse.

Me love your nuts and your raisins
Me love your color and smell
Me like to hold you forever
But now it is time for farewell

There are several ways in which this "cookie" can be interpreted; the most obvious being as a metaphor for the author's life. As the curtain of mortality draws ever closer, Cookie finds some comfort in the knowledge that he lived to the fullest, taking the time to appreciate the colors, the smells and, yes, even the nuts. He may have once naïvely assumed that it would last "forever," but only now, at the end, does he understand that it is impossible to live without dying. To enjoy all that a cookie has to offer, he must eat it, and thereby destroy it. It is useless, he learns, to deny death.

There are some critics, however, who argue that this explanation is inherently flawed. After all, for an artist who frequently alluded to his crippling addiction to baked goods, even Cookie would concede that his life had been mostly squandered. Could it be that this "cookie" is not a thematic device at all, but meant to be taken literally? Perhaps he laments the loss of his cookie because only now, as it is plucked from his dying paws, does he realize how much of his youth and vitality it has cost him.

In "If Moon Was Cookie," Cookie Monster turns his muse on Social Darwinism, taking an unflinching look at the true nature of Man.

If moon was cookie, me think me would be

The happiest monster you've ever seen
I'd put on a space suit and up through the night
I'd ride in a rocket and go take a bite.

This amusing fantasy may delight us with its lyrical beauty, but look closer and you'll discover a more thought-provoking thesis. While Cookie Monster shares our desire to travel to other worlds, he is also fearful of our tendency to savagely conquer and colonize all that we come in contact with.

Throughout history, we have killed and enslaved entire races of people, and polluted the land and waters of our own Mother Earth. Now we have turned our attention to the universe outside our planet, and time will only tell if we continue our legacy of destruction. "Must we take the magnificence of the universe and pillage it like a cookie?" Cookie asks us, and more importantly, himself.

As the song continues, Cookie finds a way to get to the moon and, just as he predicted, eats it. He has made one small step for Muppet, but Muppetkind is left with only carnage and devastation. Cookie soon realizes the error of his ways.

If moon was Cookie it wouldn't be fine
'Cause if me ate it, then it wouldn't shine
So me not like to say it, but it clear to me
We're lucky that moon is not a cookie.

Cookie seems to be suggesting that, given our genetic impulse to triumph over the cosmos, it might be better if we never ventured into the unknown. Perhaps the universe should remain unattainable and thus preserve its innocent, unsoiled splendor. If we continue to probe the galaxy, who knows what planets we may find that could be destroyed, colonized or, if they're tasty enough, eaten?

Cookie's next creative effort, "The Last Cookie Roundup," was written during one of the darkest periods in the life of this troubled genius. The complex themes of this Western sing-along have puzzled scholars for decades. Is it an apocalyptic vision of the future, or a glimpse into Cookie's growing fascination with fatalism?

This is the last cookie roundup

Eat 'em up cookie ya-yay
This is the last cookie roundup
Get along, little cookies, me eat you today

A number of horrifying questions are posed in the first verse. Why is this the "last" cookie roundup? Is there some sort of shortage of cookies? Are cookies no longer available in stores and bakeries? Why must they be collected and eaten "today," as if saving them for later might cause them to be stolen by criminals and outlaws?

Faced with an unexpected famine, Cookie adjusts his morality to ensure survival. Like Nietzsche's superman, he transcends the traditional categories of good and evil. Unburdened by feelings of guilt or responsibility, Cookie now has the freedom to do whatever he wants, or more importantly, to eat as much as he wants. But Cookie's gastronomic "will to power" ends, predictably, in disaster. After gorging on every last available scrap, he's soon unable to find "even one" cookie. The cookies have all been eaten, and the author slips into madness.

Not looking for silver
Me no look for gold
Me got to find cookies
Before me explode

Cookie's curious reference to "silver and gold" might very well be the key to understanding this disquieting aria. Cookie is not interested in amassing more financial gain. (At this stage in his career, money is no object to the famous muppet.) Only cookies give him satisfaction and a sense of purpose. But in a world where cookies are scarce, all the money in the world won't buy him more cookies. Cookie Monster has made a frightening discovery about the fragile nature of junk food. Cookies may be plentiful today, but the time could come when cookies will no longer be available to him in any quantity, at any price.

But Cookie does not mourn the loss. He makes the best of a disastrous situation. In an epiphany that will change his life forever, he declares that, "Me settle for crumbs."

"Me Lost Me Cookie At The Disco," by far Cookie Monster's most vital work, is a riveting tale of lost innocence.

Me lost me cookie at the disco
Me lost me cookie in the boogie music
Me want it back

Cookie, like many of his "Sesame Street" peers, is a child of the '60s and '70s. During his early years as a Muppet entertainer, he was a freedom-loving, Establishment-hating bohemian who embraced the vivacious spirit of the counterculture with open arms. But somewhere along the way, the Summer of Love turned ugly. His innocence (or "cookie," as it is represented in this song) was lost in a haze of drugs and free love. In this somber ballad, Cookie returns to the haunts of his youth and wades through the muddy waters of today's boogie culture. "Where's my cookie?" He asks no one in particular. "Help me find my cookie!" He is given no answer, and leaves the disco with a heavy heart, the cookies of his past apparently gone forever.

But all was not lost for Cookie Monster. He experiences a spiritual and emotional rebirth in a lively duet with Ernie called "Breakfast Time." In it, Cookie and Ernie sing joyfully about their favorite breakfast foods. Ernie expresses a fondness for crunchy cereal, orange juice and boiled eggs, while Cookie gives praise to the junk food that has inspired and nourished him most.

It isn't hard each morning
To keep me satisfied
Just give me a soft-boiled cookie
And a glass of cookie juice on the side

Once the nausea provoked by the mere mention of "cookie juice" has subsided, we can see that Cookie Monster's message is one of hope. His career has seen many highs and lows, but his constant love for cookies has helped him survive it all. Even with all the distractions of this modern age, it is important to pause and reflect on the important things, such as cookies.

Cookie Monster has seen the light at the end of the tunnel. And if we're willing to listen to his wise words, so can we.

ONLINE

The Cookie Monster on Shakespeare
island-of-freedom.com/satire/cookie.htm


DON'T GIMME NO FLAK...
IT'S THE PINKEY SUTHERS SHOW
HELLO AND WELCOME TO THE SHOW.
THIS GUY HAS CREATED "EXPLODING CHEWING GUM"
...WHICH SEEMS LIKE A VERY BAD IDEA.
HA HA! NO, NO— IT'S PERFECTLY SAFE. LOOK...
GUM BLAST-O
I POP THE GUM INTO MY MOUTH AND...
POP!
BOOM!
WELL, HE'LL DO NO MORE HARM.
THERE YOU HAVE IT — IF USED PROPERLY, EXPLODING CHEWING GUM CAN KEEP US ALL SAFE FROM ITS CREATORS.
GOODDAY.

COLLECTOR'S ITEM
BY CHRIS JUNIOR

Many moons ago, I was obsessed with collecting baseball cards, and buying them was a daily and almost necessary activity — on par with eating and sleeping, really. On a summer day, it wasn't unusual for me to make multiple trips to the neighborhood convenience store between pickup baseball games for a few packs.

On May 22, ending an eight-year drought, I bought a new pack of baseball cards. I didn't hastily grab any brand — I plunked down a whopping $4.75 at a Manhattan collectibles shop for a pack of this year's Topps Heritage. I opened the top of the package and pulled out a mere eight cards, including ones of star pitchers Greg Maddux, Randy Johnson and Barry Zito. As a youth, scoring three primo players in one pack would have made my day.

But for the first time ever, I wasn't concerned with the cards — I wanted to know if this Topps product came with something else. And then I saw it: There, covering the face of a Seattle Mariners outfield prospect named Jaime Bubela, was a piece of pink bubblegum. It felt like déjà vu all over again.

What was common in Topps baseball card packs produced from the 1950s into the early 1990s — but not offered by the competitors that emerged in the 1980s — was a stick of bubblegum. The gum was discontinued in 1991; Topps Heritage, introduced in 2001, is a throwback-look edition launched to coincide with the company's 50th anniversary as a baseball card maker.

Topps didn't invent baseball cards, but the Brooklyn-bred company did set the visual and component standards, starting with its 1952 set, which included such now-standard card elements as players' images, team logos and statistics. The distinctive edible extra actually predates the birth of Topps' baseball cards, and was originally seen by the company as a selling point, not a sidebar. In 1950, looking to boost sales of gum, its staple product, Topps came up with the idea to package the chewy stuff with trading cards unrelated to baseball. Topps cards and gum soon became a popular tandem, much like Yankees teammates Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris.

As hundreds of players came and went, Topps was there to chronicle the national pastime's ever-changing personnel through its trading cards — all the while providing a big blast of sugar by way of its gum. In some ways, Topps

was a victim of its own success, as baseball cards became valuable collector's items, leading to more competition. According to the official Topps website, the company "eliminated" the gum from its packs after receiving "numerous complaints from collectors that the gum was either staining the cards or creating an impression in them, sacrificing their 'mint condition.'"

Topps spokesman Clay Luraschi traces the turning point in the public's opinion of the gum back to the mid-1980s. "Collecting became so huge," says Luraschi, who's been with Topps for about three years. "People were banking their kids' college tuition on baseball cards. But what came along with that [huge baseball card boom] is everyone wanted cards in perfect condition." A "very high" condition grade can be sold for a higher price on the open market than one graded lower because of such flaws as worn corners, discoloration and, of course, gum-related stains.

Grant Sandground grew up in the Los Angeles area in the 1970s, chasing down the neighborhood ice cream truck to buy Topps baseball cards, collecting as many of his beloved Dodgers as he could. By the time Topps made its major gum decision, Sandground was working for Dallas-based Beckett Publications, which produces Beckett Baseball Collector.

"I was a little disappointed to see the end of a great tradition," he says. "[The gum was] part of a childhood memory." While the gum may have been problematic to some Topps buyers, Sandground says "90 percent or more" of the surface stains found on vintage Topps cards still circulating today are due to the wax-textured paper

used back then to package the cards.

"They had to heat those wrappers to seal them on the back — that melted the wax internally, which soaked into the back of the [bottom card]," explains Sandground, currently Beckett Baseball Collector's Senior Price Guide Editor. The residue from the "chalky" Topps gum usually could be wiped off a card's slick front without leaving any marks, Sandground recalls.

"It was never really a wet gum," he adds. "A couple instances — maybe in the real muggy cities, maybe that gum got a little wet and may have stuck to the front card. I have seen some circumstances where the gum is literally embedded into the very top card. It's really rare."

So, will the Heritage line lead to a wide reintroduction of gum into baseball card packs? Probably not. For one thing, a Topps patent prevents other companies from including gum with baseball cards, says Luraschi.

Then there's the gum's expense.

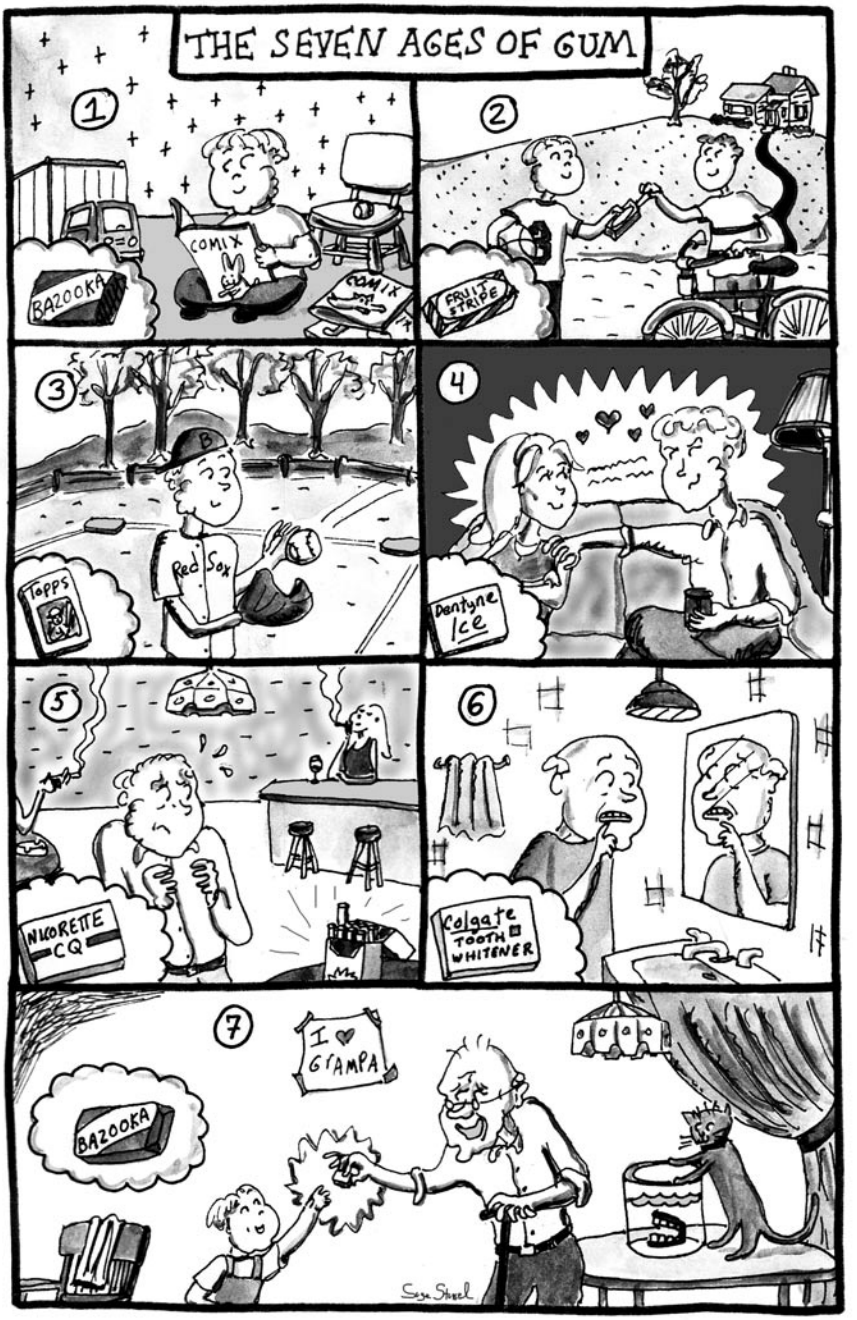
"There are so many costs associated per one pack of cards already, we'd have to raise the pack price a little more [in order to have gum in other baseball products], and we don't want to do that," he says.

Each pack of Heritage, now in its third year, comes with a stick of gum, which is wrapped in clear plastic — for the sake of freshness, says Luraschi. It's wider than in the past and has a wintergreen flavor — a tribute to the size and taste of the gum from the early 1950s, he adds.

According to Sandground, Heritage has been "an extremely successful brand" for Topps, and the gum is one of several contributing factors. He isn't aware of a collector's market for the old baseball card gum, but Sandground knows what he'd do today with a piece from a classic wax pack.

"I'd pawn it off on a buddy and see if he'd eat it for cash," he says with a laugh.

Maybe there's money to be made from the old gum after all.


THE SEVEN AGES OF GUM
1
BAZOOKA
COMIX
COMIX
2
FRUIT STRIPE
3
Topps
Red Sox
4
Dentyne Ice
5
NICORETTE CQ
6
Colgate TOOTH WHITENER
7
BAZOOKA
I ♥ GRAMPA
Suzy Steel

'THIS COULD BE A LOT MORE, UH, UH, UH, COMPLEX, I MEAN, IT JUST MIGHT, IT MIGHT NOT BE SUCH A SIMPLE, UH, YOU KNOW?'

NOTES ON THE BIG LEBOWSKI

BY SEAN WEITNER

The cinema literati have never really agreed on a specific canon — of titles, at least; they can more or less come to a consensus about directors — but it's generally held that if they had to pick a list, it would be the American Film Institute's *100 Years… 100 Passions*.

OK, not really. It would be the Sight & Sound Top 10, a decennial survey conducted by the British Film Institute whose most recent installment — rather, installments, since there are now separate lists collating the Top 10 lists of filmmakers and of critics — came out in 2002. Upon seeing the lists and noting that neither featured a movie more recent than 1974's *The Godfather Part II,* Boston Globe critic Ty Burr was prompted to conduct his own survey, this one targeting only film students. Of their responses, he writes:

Time and again, a certain group of modern films studded the lists, the same disreputable new classics I'd been hearing about. True, the official canon still holds considerable sway: Citizen Kane *popped up on many a list (if not at the top), as did* Casablanca*, Fellini's* 8 ½*, Fritz Lang's sci-fi silent* Metropolis*, and plenty of Kubrick. There was a pronounced tendency, too, to stake a claim for the offshore and relatively esoteric: Iranian movies, the Hong Kong art films of Wong Kar-wai, Krzysztof Kieslowski's astringent moral fables. They're the antithesis of Hollywood pap, yes, and sometimes it's just easy to love a film when it's your secret.*

But then there were those other, newer movies, caustic, commercial, resolutely un-classic. You'd get one or two titles per list, never a straight flush, and if a desire for balance has something to do with that, so does shyness in the face of the seemingly indefensible. Imagine, then, that I've sifted 10 of these movies out from the others and arranged them in general order of their number of mentions.

While, as a rule, you should throw out any results that require you to "imagine" how they were compiled, there's something to Burr's list, which runs like so: *Pulp Fiction, The Godfather, Fight Club, Run Lola Run, Amélie, 12 Monkeys* and/or *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (both directed by Terry Gilliam), *The*

INSURANCE by James Stegall **DAY ELEVEN**

Elliot links the rise of the nation-state with the rise of mass-death. The nation-state has made possible the science behind mass-death. War between nations encompasses the "full spectrum of conflict" to use modern doctrinal terms. The response to Axis Powers aggression during World War II was not a matter of stylized combat in an arena — it was a complete attack on all aspects of the peoples involved: their armies, means of production and civilian populations. The fire bombings in Germany and the atom bombs dropped on Japan represented a basic shift in the methods by which human beings reconciled their problems, an escalation in human suffering.

Whether the means to this end is nuclear or biological doesn't matter much; although nuclear weapons aren't nearly as unreliable and messy as biological or chemical attack.

Bio-weapons, however, are infinitely cheaper and possess nearly the same psychological effectiveness.

Big Lebowski, Memento, Boogie Nights and/or *Magnolia* (both directed by P.T. Anderson) and *The Matrix*.

Having taken film courses in the past five years, this seems more or less believable to me. *The Godfather* requires no further comment; on the other hand, *Amélie* would have most likely have been first seen by respondents within 12 months of taking this survey, which is too recent to be properly contextualized. *Pulp Fiction*, *Fight Club*, *Run Lola Run*, *Memento*, the Anderson films and *The Matrix* are all acclaimed works by the upper echelon of the tyro directors — they are, respectively, the second, fourth, third, second, second, third and second features by directors who debuted in the '90s — that have been embraced by film students. (If the list were four entries longer, I have little doubt those positions would be filled with films by Wes Anderson, Alexander Payne, Spike Jonze and David O. Russell, who, take or leave Sam Mendes, complete that list of tyros.)

That leaves the relative oldsters: Gilliam and *Lebowski*'s Joel and Ethan Coen. Gilliam's first film without support from his Monty Python troupe, *Brazil*, was released in 1985; the Coens debuted in 1984 with *Blood Simple*. In both cases, their films are always noted for their baroque visuals and gonzo flourishes. That they stand up in college students' esteem with the hottest of the hotshots is eminently reasonable.

Even still, seeing *The Big Lebowski* on that list was something of a surprise, and Burr is taken aback as well: "Of all the Coen brothers films out there — including the double-Oscar-winning *Fargo* — why is this shaggy-dog comic mystery about an aging hippie, White Russians, and Orthodox Jewish bowlers the one that crops up on all the lists?"

Why indeed? It's a good question that might be best served with the simplest answer: Maybe it's just that good. Put another way: *The Big Lebowski* is perhaps the funniest movie by the premier English-language comic filmmakers. What's not to like?

The Coens — Joel directs, Ethan produces, they co-write — have more highly esteemed movies: *Fargo,* as Burr notes, was Oscar fodder; the luxuriant, humor-steeped genre exercises *Blood Simple* and *Miller's Crossing* each have fervent defenders; *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* landed big, thanks in large part to its bestselling soundtrack. On the other hand, *Lebowski* was, upon its release, regarded even by their admirers as a particularly frivolous addition to the Coens' oeuvre, squandering their *Fargo* Oscar attention. A bowling-themed stoner retelling of Raymond Chandler's gumshoe classic "The Big Sleep" (with a musical number), *Lebowski* is the story of Jeff "The Dude" Lebowski (Jeff Bridges), mistaken by a pornographer's thugs for a more wealthy Jeff Lebowski whose trophy wife, Bunny, has run up too many debts. When Bunny is kidnapped, the Dude is recruited by the Big Lebowski to deliver the ransom, but things go awry, in part thanks to the Dude's right-hand man, Vietnam vet Walter Sobchak (John Goodman), and in part because that always happens when you take on a Chandler story.

Lebowski has proven to be an integral film to the Coens' body of work. It's their best blend of the two things that they're most passionate about as filmmakers — pulp fiction and cerebral comedy. You can basically break their films out into those two categories; the former gets *Blood Simple, The Man Who Wasn't There* (both informed by James M. Cain), *Miller's Crossing* (Dashiell Hammett) and *Fargo,* and the latter gets *Raising Arizona, Barton Fink*, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *Intolerable Cruelty.* While all their pulp films are funny — each of the Coens' movies is fundamentally a comedy — only *Lebowski* is designed to be an absolute panic.

But the genius of *Lebowski* is more than just its merger of the filmmakers' interests. Where, for instance, *Miller's Crossing* merely re-framed Hammett's "The Glass Key" for the Coens' eye — the movie and book share a time period and milieu — *Lebowski* fundamentally repurposes Chandler's tale of kidnapping, shedding its hardboiled-detective surface in order to comment

INSURANCE by James Stegall **DAY TWELVE**

Can't give the baby baths anymore. Sleeping in the spare bedroom. Using separate towels and pulling off the Band-Aids and dropping them carefully in Ziploc sandwich bags.

Don't touch the site while showering. Don't towel it off. Keep the towel away from the shoulder.

Resist the urge to scratch the arm even through the shirt. Be aware of the location of the baby. Don't lapse and give him a hug. Hug adults but be mindful of the arm.

Unintentional pressure on the site brings on the itching, and the itching under the shirt is unbearable.

Put itching thoughts away.

Don't think about the blister and the bacteria swimming in the liquid in the blister.

Resist the urge to stab the blister with a fork, to dig sharp bright tines in the irritatingly tingly/crawly bulb of pus just to pop it and get it over with, to get on with the scab already, to end the continuous writhing beneath the skin.

Should we use separate silverware? Should we completely separate the laundry? No sex. Those allergic to latex should not take the vaccine unless infected with smallpox. Minimize all genital contact.

Liquid soap. Antibacterial lotion. Is the faucet contaminated once touched prior to washing the hands?

on and update its subtext: a character study of Los Angeles.

It's Chandler's insight into his adopted city that, as much as his literary gifts (principally his unimpeachable figures of speech — e.g., "She smelled the way the Taj Mahal looks by moonlight"), have elevated him from the rank of "mere" genre writer. His Philip Marlowe novels, of which "The Big Sleep" was the first, portray a Los Angeles where corruption is contagious, turning the detective's adventures into gun-toting versions of Diogenes' fruitless quest for an honest man. Marlowe's perpetual disappointment in people's reactions to adverse circumstances gestates into an indictment of modern mores, and it's this bitterness that sticks with the reader after Marlowe has cut the story's Gordian knot.

It's not bitterness the Coens are after, however. In much the same way that, in 1973, Robert Altman deconstructed Chandler's "The Long Goodbye" by setting his movie version in the present day and playing with the anachronism of Marlowe's chivalry, the

Coens use the Chandler template to communicate their *affection* toward Los Angeles and their characters.

This is no small matter; the most consistent critical sentiment levied against the Coens, alongside charges of being too clever by half, is that they regard their characters indifferently at best and cruelly at worst. (All comedy directors get this from time to time.) This drumbeat reached a head with the release of *Fargo,* a paean to their home state (Minnesota, not North Dakota) that was unflinching and unflattering in its deadeye approach to reproducing the region's speech patterns (and sometimes vacant stares). For critics to interpret this as condescension doesn't suggest a deliberate misreading; the Coens have seemed happy to let the ambiguity hang there, abetting those who would call them heartless with the glossy technical perfection of their movies.

Lebowski, the Coens' follow-up to *Fargo,* is no less technically accomplished, but it quashes that ambiguity. This is where the inversion of Chandler figures in: In "The Big Sleep," the Sternwood family that brings Marlowe aboard is revealed to be at the root of the duplicitous, avaricious and homicidal activities they want Marlowe to investigate — they're petty, self-absorbed and just smart enough to be cruel, and it's easy to extrapolate Chandler's critique of L.A. from his portrayals of its denizens. In *The Big Lebowski,* the characters are still petty and self-absorbed, but their untoward intentions are tempered by their general inability to execute anything more complicated than bluster. At one level, this might seem like an extra dollop of superciliousness — *Fargo*'s felons trip themselves up in a similar way — but it's really humanizing: It reveals the assumption of *in*humanity, of mechanistic thinking, that underpins the mastermind archetype. It's not that *Lebowski*'s dramatis personae are corrupt. They're just schlubs of various stripes, bundles of self-contradiction — the Jeff Lebowski who's not Jeff Lebowski; Walter, the observant Polish Catholic Jew; Bunny, the Valley girl who's revealed to be from Minnesota; Jesus, a Hispanic bowler whose name is not pronounced *hey, Zeus* and who's a sex offender to boot; nihilists who want money; the marmot that's really a ferret; and on and on.

And so in the same way that Chandler's delinquents give Los Angeles a black eye, the Coens use their lovable losers to tousle its hair, turning their backs to Beverly Hills to show the low-rent Southern Californians that, we're left to presume, they came to admire during their times in L.A. (In William Preston Robertson's chronicle of the making of *Lebowski,* the brothers talk about the people that inspired the movie, saying: "*Fargo*, which was allegedly based on real events, in truth contains mostly made-up stuff. Whereas *The Big*

Lebowski, which purports to be fiction, actually is based on real-life people and events.") The Coens ground *The Big Lebowski* with the scene in which Jon Polito's detective character approaches the Dude, considering him a "brother shamus" who can help him find Bunny; he's has been hired by her parents to find her and bring her back to the family farm in Moorhead, Minn. (which is literally just across the river from Fargo). In the midst of *Lebowski*'s neon-vibrant production design and cinematography, Polito hauls out a faded black-and-white photo of a dilapidated farmhouse that could have been in the background of the first shot in *Fargo*. The jolt of a world beyond L.A. — and such a square world it is — at once takes you out of the movie and then settles you back in; the Coens' Los Angeles may be a profane, shrill, bathetic and uncertain place where pornographers will break into your house and urinate on your rug, but the brothers immerse you in their real endearment for it, and for their characters.

Altman went the other way in adapting "The Long Goodbye." In the novel, Marlowe tries to clear his good friend Terry Lennox of the murder of his wife, only to find out that Lennox was complicit in the crime (though not truly responsible — again, portraying an equivocating, morally bankrupt Los Angeles), and Marlowe leaves his last-chapter reunion with Lennox in disgust. In the movie, Lennox is responsible but unprosecuted… and Marlowe shoots him dead, an alteration regarded as an expression of Altman's exasperation with the wounded machismo in which Chandler specialized.

By contrast, at the end of *The Big Lebowski*, Walter unwittingly dumps an urn full of the cremated remains of their friend Donny — whose fatal heart attack was triggered by a fight set in motion by Walter's typical obstinance and aggression — toward the Dude. It is, by rough estimate, Walter's sixth or seventh serious cockup, most of them at the Dude's expense and most of

ONLINE

Ty Burr, "Once Upon a Classic." Boston Globe Magazine, March 23, 2003.
boston.com/globe/magazine/2003/0323/coverstory.htm

Sight & Sound Top 10 Lists
bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/topten/

American Film Institute 100 Years… 100 Passions
afi.com/tv/passions.asp

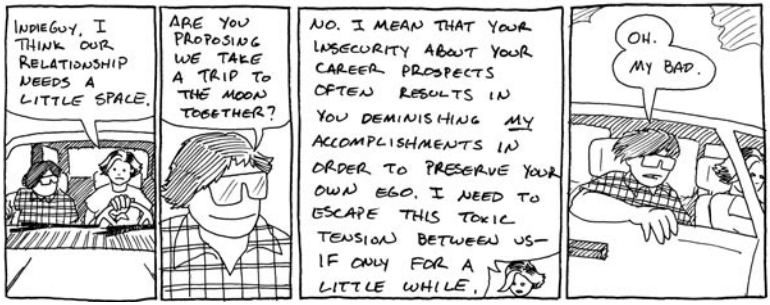
Lebowski Fest
lebowskifest.com

them criminal: pulling a gun on a fellow bowler, keeping ransom money for himself (because he believes the kidnapping was staged), hauling around an assault rifle he intends to use, destroying a Corvette believed to belong to a child believed to have stolen $1 million, throwing a crippled man out of his wheelchair. While this may not exactly be Lennox-caliber bad behavior, it nevertheless sets the stage for the Coens' final tweak of Chandler: Ash-covered, the friends embrace and go bowling; the Dude abides.

What none of the above adequately addresses is the fact that *The Big Lebowski* is hilarious, which is really why it's on the film students' lists, but even the Coens' straightest movies are pretty funny if you're on their wavelength. For *Lebowski* to be ranked above the rest, however, does suggest that the magic bullet is its undeniable warmth. For the first time, you're certain the Coens love their misfit creations (and the city they inhabit), and when you feel that filmmakers are laughing with, not at, their subjects, comedy becomes that much more affective. *The Big Lebowski* will never muscle its way onto the Sight & Sound list, and Burr's collection of "disreputable new classics" is nothing that cultural archaeologists will consider a Rosetta stone in 100, or even 10, years. But the Coens' body of work won't be forgotten — their stature as gifted filmmakers and American comedians is assured — and time will only add luster to *Lebowski* 's lunatic pleasures.

Sean Weitner is one of three commentators on Flak Magazine's The Big Lebowski *DVD audio commentary which, oddly enough, addresses very few of the above points. Pick it up at flakmag.com/print/*

BAZOOKA JOSEF



#6 of 7

FORTUNE: STEER CLEAR OF 'AUTHENTIC' CHINESE FOOD UNLESS YOU LIKE HUGE, FREUDIAN OYSTERS.

PIG'S GREASE ON A MUSLIM'S GUN
BY BEN ARNOLDY

TALIL, IRAQ — US forces may have surged with suprising speed through southern Iraq on their way to Baghdad, but the soldiers in their wake rippled slowly into the "liberated" villages and towns.

By April, little more than a fortnight into the war, civil affairs troops made camp at the captured Iraqi air base of Talil on the outskirts of Nasiriya. In the subsequent days, they set up temporary roadblocks twice a day along the major highway connecting Kuwait to Baghdad. Civil affairs units, aided by returning Iraqi exiles, stopped a handful of cars and trucks and requested the occupants step out of their vehicles for a meet and greet.

After a few days of this, the troops moved onto local highways. Here they asked for information about needs within local villages. Days turned into weeks before US forces would zero in and actually visit needy villages — at first driving through in their Humvees without doors, then later stopping to talk with leaders, and finally delivering aid.

"This is the exact opposite of the 'shock and awe' campaign — this is the 'slow and easy' here. We don't want to spook anybody," said Maj. Joe Hermann with the 402nd Civil Affairs battalion last April.

The United States didn't want to appear like a conqueror. And they also took a laissez-faire attitude, believing that without a heavy-handed approach, local leaders would emerge. These leaders would then be cultivated by the United States as helpers during a quick transitional phase. That was the plan, at least.

In reality, very few local leaders emerged. One sheikh in Nasiriyah opened up his house to civilians recovering from injuries, and this relieved some of the strain on the military hospital at Talil. But he proved to be an exception.

This attempt to rule through understanding the local scene and latching onto regional political networks appeared to be the larger modus operendi of Jay Garner's short tenure as the leader of Iraq's reconstruction.

In his first televised appearance, addressed to the Iraqi population, Garner appeared in rolled-up shirt sleeves and spoke in a folksy manner. He tried to project an air of approachability and a desire to shepherd a reconstruction led by the Iraqi people.

All of this would have made British Orientalists like William Harding blush. The British, of course, have had substantial experience managing an empire. In their early days in India, Harding and other administrators followed a similar model as Garner — but with considerably greater skill.

British historians such as William Jones delved into the ancient texts of Hinduism to understand the caste system. The Raj then exploited that system as a tool of stability by appointing Brahmins to carry out the administrative work. They also left intact the inefficient but palatable Moghul system of tax collection, whereby feudal chiefs, or zamindars, collected from peasants and passed along a percentage to the central government.

Of course, the British in late 18th century India enjoyed a population with low expectations and little communication between insular villages that had barely been touched by the passage of empires from the Mauryans to the Moghuls. The men from the East India Company were but the latest overlords from distant parts, stirring up resentment among the toppled elite but not injuring any wider sense of nationalism.

EXCERPT FROM "THE CLOWN'S GRAVEYARD" BY J. DANIEL JANZEN

The thing with cats is, you can never point anything out to them. They always look at your finger. The more you waggle and gesticulate, the more intently they fixate on your fingertip, tail lashing, and never at the bird dozing unawares just ahead, or the dropped chunk of tuna salad. That's where the expression "missing the point" comes from. Cats think the finger itself is what's significant but it's just an agent, a device to indicate something worthy of their attention, sometimes with increasing urgency but still no results until you give up in disgust with a poke on the cat's moist, idiotic nose. I suppose dogs have a clearer grip on the concept, given that some of them actually point at things themselves. I wouldn't know; I was never much for dogs. No, I was a cat person.

Biography: J. Daniel Janzen
flakmag.com/misc/jdaniel.html

Freelancing
jdjanzen.com

Creative writing
clownyard.com

Iraqis, on the other hand, viewed the US takeover like an Aladdin's lamp — tell the genie your troubles and in no time he will turn the electricity on, get the water running and maintain security. They could hardly be blamed. Even the most remote corners of the world have seen televised images from Hollywood with which to compare their present conditions. Meanwhile, citizens of the conquering nation could see the backward conditions of their charges.

And so, within a matter of weeks, both Americans and Iraqis clamored for the reconstruction project to be kicked into high gear. Out were plans to transfer power quickly to a transitional Iraqi administration. In came a new administrator, L. Paul Bremer, talking of two years of direct US administration and turning soldiers loose to chase after miscreants.

It took England a good half a century of rule after Robert Clive before succumbing to a similar temptation to remake India from the top-down. The old Orientalist spirit that latched onto local helpers and customs to rule from the ground up was replaced by an occupier's dream: Anglicizing Indians into "Brown Englishmen." The Anglicist push naturally came strongest from those back in England who had never set foot in India: utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill, Christian leaders and Members of Parliament. Communications and travel being onerous, it took awhile for the Anglicists to influence the next generation of British civil servants.

Indians were taught the English language, British history and government, while missionaries made a concerted effort to Christianize the subcontinent. Cricket was introduced. Local customs that offended British sensibilities, such as satee (or widow suicide by fire) were outlawed.

In the long run, the Anglicists' efforts alienated the cadre of Indians needed by the British to help run their government and man the ranks of their imperial army. The Mutiny of 1857, prompted partially by a rumor that the British were giving Hindu and Muslim soldiers pig and cow fat with which to grease their Enfield rifles, deeply impressed upon England the folly of antagonizing the population with heavy-handed, foreign ideals.

The United States appears headed down a similar path as the Anglicist misadventure in India. Noah Feldman, a 33-year-old American with Israeli dual citizenship, was intimately involved in crafting Iraq's constitution until his resignation in July. Feldman's appointment, the US support for Iraqi exile and convicted embezzler Ahmed Chalabi, and the presence of Christian missionaries in Iraq are all moves as tone-deaf and dangerous as pig's grease on a Muslim's gun.

HE REALLY LIKES IT

BY MATT RAND

They come in a bucket. You chew them for five to 10 minutes and then, voila! you have consumed your entire RDA of 11 essential vitamins. They come in grape, cherry, watermelon and bubble gum. They are the first thing to come up when you google "gumball."

If their existence comes as a surprise, it may be because they seem so unnecessary. (Why not just swallow or chew a pill?) But Amerifit Nutrition, a fitness supplement manufacturer, did some market research and determined that the vitamin gumballs filled a genuine need. Kids, apparently, think the Flintstones taste chalky and boring. They also don't see many options between vitamins that are for "babies" and giant, bitter "adult" pills. At least that's what the Amerifit's market research team says they said.

Amerifit's literature on its Vitaballs is filled with references and quotes from its focus group children, which are referenced as end-of-discussion justifications. One imagines the children sitting around a conference table in a room equipped with video cameras and microphones. Their parents are waiting just outside, pacing and saying things to one another like "I was thinking of getting a minivan, too," and "No, I'd never tried white wine for a grass stain."

In with the kids is a man trying to remember what it was that made him so insecure when he was younger. He offers candy and soda to the kids. "We're going to be talking about what things taste like," he explains, "so you don't have to worry about what Mom thinks about sweets. You can have as much as you want in here." At least three mothers roll their eyes when they hear this come through the microphones.

"We'll start off simple," he says, making eye contact with all of the children. "What are your favorite foods?"

Someone giggles.

"No, it's okay, whatever it is you can say it," he reassures.

The giggler blurts out "Pepperoni pizza!"

INSURANCE by James Stegall **DAY THIRTEEN**

The blister breaks during "60 Minutes." One hand holding the telephone, the other in the air to keep the yellow pus from running on the couch. Telling the phone:

"My smallpox just popped. I need to pat it down."

"Yes, it's popped. The stuff is running down my arm."

"Stuff. Pus. It's this sort of amber-looking fluid. No, there's nothing inside it. No sea monkeys."

"Once it dries and the scab forms and falls off, then it's over."

"It was never really smallpox — a different version of the disease, harmless. The real danger is from the scarring, getting it in your eyes or whatever. And latex allergy. Brain swelling. I'm not allergic to latex."

"Yeah, it was a such a big deal."

As soon as she speaks, others chime in. "Devil Dogs," says a large 8-year old boy with spikey hair. "Ice cream," might have come from at least two of the kids.

When all of the scientific research was done, Amerifit was convinced: Kids like gum. Combine that with the handy axiom "parents like nutrition," and this is like a bathtub "Eureka!" for an MBA student. Make a gum vitamin. A vitamin gumball. A Vitaball!

No matter that the FDA recommends the same vitamin levels for everyone more than 4-years old, making the idea of a children's vitamin already suspect. No matter the danger posed by little Dakota OD-ing on vitamin A when he decides that he wants to see how many Vitaballs fit in his mouth. The "Eureka!" must have felt so good that the vitamin gumball would be made to work.

Some innovations come as shocks to the market. Cars, for instance, changed the world. So did toothbrushes. Our world as it now exists could not be without them, and so these inventions have become, for us, not so much inventions as discoveries. But the vitamin gumball is not an inevitability waiting to be plucked from the recesses of the future. It's just a newly packaged vitamin. As a result, its marketers had to construct a scenario where it was inevitable, was fated even.

Suddenly parents the world over are having a hard time getting their out-of-control kids to eat their vitamins. Little Dakota and little Heather are nothing but trouble. They are wild, untrainable and they like nothing more than bad nutrition. So their parents must learn the art of the con. They must slip these good-tasting treats into the mouths of their babes and not tell them that the good taste is betraying them.

The Vitaball, then, is a solution. It is poised to confuse the senses, to lull the wild children into developing, against their better judgment, strong bones, teeth and eyes. And each side in this polarized game gets the last laugh, with parents knowing they've done their part for their kids' health and kids knowing they got to chew gum on their parents' watch.

Vitaballs, of course, aren't the first product to assume a polarized conflict between parents and children (and an

INSURANCE by James Stegall **DAY FOURTEEN**

Americans in a German hospital. The doctor checks the smiling boy who refuses to drink, has become severely dehydrated and explains how to make a homemade electrolyte drink from tea, sugar and salt.

The parents ask: Is that all? Aren't you going to prescribe anything?

The doctor explains that in Africa such drinks are all the people have, and their children live through dehydration.

The parents are tired and worried and the idea of such a remedy strikes them as insufficient.

This isn't the third world, the parents say.

Americans prescribe too much medicine, the doctor says.

That's because medicine works, the parents say.

The doctor complains in German and reiterates the tea will work. She signs the release form and hands it back.

Sometimes there is no medicine, she says.

ONLINE:

Serialtext: Fiction in Progress
serialtext.com

Meomore Screen Magazine
meomore.com

So New Media
sonewmedia.com

ONLINE

Biography: Matt Rand
mattrand.com

Vitaball
vitaball.com

inability for parents to convince their kids to make a compromise). One remembers the Life cereal ads, where a stunned family finds out that Mikey likes it! Does he realize it's good for him? Of course not.

The problem with this world that marketers have invented for us, this world where it's parents versus children, where youngsters are stubborn little animals who don't know what's good for them and where parents are helpless to change them, is that these little terrors are bound to grow up. And once they do, we understand that they are tamed. They grow up, have their own children and buy minivans, and they are seduced by marketing plans that expect less and less of them.

Why bother explaining nutrition to your child when you can buy a product that will make that conversation unnecessary? A docile and impressionable population, even one filled with wild little children running around, is going to spend more money than one that questions what it is told. Vitaballs cost three times as much per pill as a leading vitamin brand, and twice as much per pill as a leading chewable. Are they worth it?

BAZOOKA JOSEF

#7 of 7

FORTUNE: NEVER COMPROMISE YOUR DREAMS, UNLESS YOU ARE OFFERED MONEY.

A WRITTEN EXPRESSION OF GRATITUDE TO SOME KEY PEOPLE

We humbly suggest you read **THE BLACK TABLE** (blacktable.com), the mighty **KNOT MAGAZINE** (knotmag.com), **THE MORNING NEWS** (of New York, of course — themorningnews.org), and the publishing juggernaut that calls itself **SO NEW MEDIA** (sonewmedia.com). **WE WOULD BE RUDE** not to thank the inimitable Rob Walker, whose writing for Slate is, somehow, in perfect synch with Flak's editorial values. Un **SUPER GRACIAS** a **JENNIE DORRIS**. Many thanks to **BILL NORTON** and **RESPECT** to the people of **SHIFT MAGAZINE**. And a **HEARTY HELLO** to the cartoonists out there; you know who you are. But we can't help but single out **DYLAN GRAHAM**, **CHRIS ONSTAD**, **SHANNON WHEELER** and **STEVE CAREY**. And thanks to **LYNDON KENNEDY,** who took a chance on this insane project.

There are some acknowledgements of places necessary, too. **THANKS** to the Wisconsin Union, and especially **THE UNION TERRACE**. And to the bratwurst. All you bratwurst out there, keep being delicious. **THANKS** to Brattle Books in Boston. **WORD UP** to Culver's.

Thanks to the Flak interns, past and present; **YOU'RE INTERNING FOR A MAGAZINE WITH NO PAID EMPLOYEES**. Thank you **MADHU** and **LAVINA** and **MICHAEL** and **ALETHEA**. We love you for it. Ah, you readers are probably sitting around — just a little bit smug — knowing that you're next up. **WE HATE TO BE OBVIOUS**, but we owe you guys. Thanks. **WE'VE BEEN AT THIS FOR FIVE YEARS**; we're just warming up. You've made it fun.

THE CHRISTIE'S AUCTION
BY DAVID PROPSON

Sale Title
"Prostheses, Prophylactics and Periodontics (2000BC–2000AD)"

Location
New York, Rockefeller Plaza

Sale Date
TK

Lot Number
1

Creator
Tutankhamen: New Kingdom, Dynasty XVIII, ca. 1333 B.C.

Lot Title
PAPYRUS WAD

Estimate
120,000 – 180,000 US dollars

Lot Description
Mass of pulped papyrus, wrapped in linens near the mummy's wrist

Provenance
Private British Collection, 1920s
Gates Foundation, 1990s

Lot Notes
When Howard Carter discovered the tomb of Tutankhamen, he found, besides a checkers board and an ergonomic head rest, this rare wad. The mummy's teeth show signs of premature tooth decay, and X-rays reveal plaque deposits. The young king seems to have displayed, besides a yen for young Hebrews and midnight trysts in his unfinished tomb, a taste for portions of sacred scrolls sweetened in *miel*. His strange proclivity may explain the frayed and torn condition of most of the records from the time (Wilson, 1984).

Sale Title
"Prostheses, Prophylactics and Periodontics (2000BC–2000AD)"

Location
New York, Rockefeller Plaza

Sale Date
TK

Lot Number
2

Creator
Mohandas Gandhi; 1922

Lot Title
BREAKFAST, LUNCH, DINNER AND MORE

Estimate
4,000 US dollars

Lot Description
Extremely well-chewed betel leaf

Provenance
William Powell, 1950s
Manute Bol, 1980s
Calista Flockhart, 1990s

Lot Notes
It is well known that Gandhi, the great Indian leader, often fasted as a form of social resistance, in this instance for a five-day period in February 1922. It is little known, however, that was trying to quit smoking at the same time. In desperation, he depended greatly on this excessively sucked ball of betel. The leaf, traditionally an after-dinner mouth freshener and common cause of oral cancer, is also prescribed to treat stomach ailments. Rubbed on the temples, it relieves headaches; inserted in the rectum, it relieves constipation; used to agitate the nipples, it induces lactation. He was said to have used it in all these ways.

Sale Title
"Prostheses, Prophylactics and Periodontics (2000BC–2000AD)"

Location
New York, Rockefeller Plaza

Sale Date
TK

Lot Number
3

Creator
John Barrymore; Ethel Barrymore; 1930

Lot Title
CYRANO'S JOB

Lot Notes
Don't ask.

Estimate
40,000 US dollars

Lot Description
Putty nose worn by John Barrymore in Broadway production of "Cyrano de Bergerac;" dentition of his sister evident (molars at the tip).

Provenance
Steve Martin, 1980s
Gerard Depardieu, 1990s
Tom Green, 2000s

ONLINE

Christie's
christies.com

Sale Title
"Prostheses, Prophylactics and Periodontics (2000BC–2000AD)"

Location
New York, Rockefeller Plaza

Sale Date
TK

Lot Number
4

Creator
Roman; 1st Century B.C. (ostensible Follower of Democritus; 6th Century B.C.)

Lot Title
THE DODECAHEDRON OF DEMOCRITUS

Estimate
100,000 US dollars

Lot Description
Mold for production of 12-sided, candy-coated gum "ball"

Provenance
Vatican

Lot Notes
It is not a surprise the ancient Greeks invented the word "halitosis." Their athletes chewed garlic during athletic competitions, and their politicians and actors chewed dill during long debates. The search for a sweet-smelling alternative thus began early. The Epicurean Democritus believed the sugary flavor would tend to increase human happiness and that masticular exercise would release stress. In keeping with his atomic theory, he speculated the proper form could only be a polyhedron that could tile infinite space. After experiments with cubic (unwieldy) and tetrahedronal (painful) variations, he finally settled on this 12-sided form. He was not known to have produced these in any great quantity, however; this lot, thought through medieval times to be authentic, has been identified as a Roman artifact of the sort commonly used in preparation of sophisticated feasts (cf. Suetonious, Petronius).

Sale Title
"Prostheses, Prophylactics and Periodontics (2000BC–2000AD)"

Location
New York, Rockefeller Plaza

Sale Date
TK

Lot Number
5

Creator
Italy; 1st Millenium A.D.;
(ostensibly Asia Minor, 3rd century A.D.)

Lot Title
THE WRAPPER OF ST. CHRISTOPHER

Estimate
80,000 US dollars

Lot Description
4.5" aluminum foil sleeve with wax paper lining

Provenance
Vatican

Lot Notes
The patron saint of travelers, besides helping wayfarers across rivers (until the institution of interboro tolls under the Bloomberg praetorship), was said to fly to the rescue of those lost, briganded or in need of sunscreen. Accordingly, he was said to be the first to have discovered the efficacy of Fletcherization in reducing the effect of changes in air pressure in higher atmosphere, as well as (to his chagrin) the capabilities of aluminum as a conductor of electricity. This wrapper, while one of many, was the most famous, said to cure big hair and Long Island accents. At the Second Vatican Council, the Church determined that some saints, including Christopher, had never in fact existed; this lot is believed to be a ninth-century forgery by an Umberto Eco character.

Sale Title
"Prostheses, Prophylactics and Periodontics (2000BC–2000AD)"

Location
New York, Rockefeller Plaza

Sale Date
TK

Lot Number
6

Creator
Jacques Alexandre Cesar Charles, 18th century

Lot Title
THE GOLDEN AGE OF BALLOONING

Estimate
65,000 US dollars

Lot Description
Distended gum bubble

Provenance
Robespierre, 18th century
Thomas Malthus, 19th century
Margaret Sanger, 20th century

Lot Notes
J.A.C. Charles, one of the most renowned scientists in France, who gave birth to the hydrogen balloon and countless other illegitimate inventions, had a bad 1783. Though he had long worked on his plan for an H2-filled airship, the upstart Montgolfier brothers had beaten him into the atmosphere with their own hot-air design. A compatriot in the colonies had saddled him with an excess of useless rubber. And he had his eye on a certain lady-in-waiting to the court of Louis XVI, a lady who certainly didn't have her eye on him.

A series of successes were followed by further setbacks. He had discovered a way to bind sugar to pieces of softened rubber, but could not convince anyone to try this (admittedly disgusting) concoction. He had managed to entice his lady into dinner, but she refused to consummate the relationship, saying she could not bear to bear a child to anyone other than her husband.

He took his maiden voyage in the balloon with such topics on his mind, and was taken away by the beauty of Paris and the surrounding countryside from the air. He floated upward and upward, becoming the first man to suffer the effects of oxygen deprivation at a high altitude. He became careless and giddy, neglecting to release the necessary gas to slow the balloon's ascent. He popped into his mouth what he thought was a fig, and began to chew with abandon. He looked up at the great globe above him and blew one to match. Upward and upward he went. Until, suddenly, he heard a pop, and a sharp pain in his ears, which brought him back to his senses.

The balloon was intact (though he had a headache). The bubble had not burst but slipped from his mouth, and it lay on the bottom of the basket, a thin cylinder sealed at one end. He picked it, rolled it back, and inserted his tongue into it again, testing his new conception. He steered his ship groundward, hastened back to his laboratory, and took his lady up the very next day.

Flak rakes in the plaudits…

"Lamenting the demise of Feed and Suck? Check out Flak for sharp writing and cultural commentary. Its staff works for free, so no one's getting laid off any time soon. Probably."

— shift magazine, the shiftlist

"… Outro dia vi uma revista bacana, a Flak."

— Penelópe Cotrim Nova, MTV Brasil

"Calling itself a 'noncomprehensive guide to everything,' Flak Magazine lives up to the billing."

— The Houston Chronicle

"… that bastion of hard-rockin' rockingness, Flak Magazine…"

— The Just So Review

… and journalism students at the University of Florida love it!

"Everyone realizes that this website is not boring or hard to understand because of the tone."

— A student

The [hockey-fight video review] used concrete language to get across its points. Concrete terms describe objects or actions that can be accessible to the senses. Words, such as pen, red, and walking are just a few examples of concrete terms."

— Another student

"Considering the fact that there was a mention of the Green Party, it is safe to assume that this magazine is pretty liberal."

— Yet another student