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ANNALS OF

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*The journal of record for inflated research and personalities*

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“When all other contingencies fail, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”—*Sherlock Holmes*

“Science is the belief in the ignorance of experts.”—*Richard Feynman*

# Anonymity, in Bulk

by Alice Shirrell Kaswell, *Improbable Research staff*

With some modern exceptions (see “How to Write 85,000 Books,” elsewhere in this issue of the *Annals of Improbable Research*) every book has a human author.<sup>1</sup> For whatever reasons, some of those books are published anonymously.

The late nineteenth century saw a massive effort to identify and list all the anonymous books and other literature published in at least one language. The result:

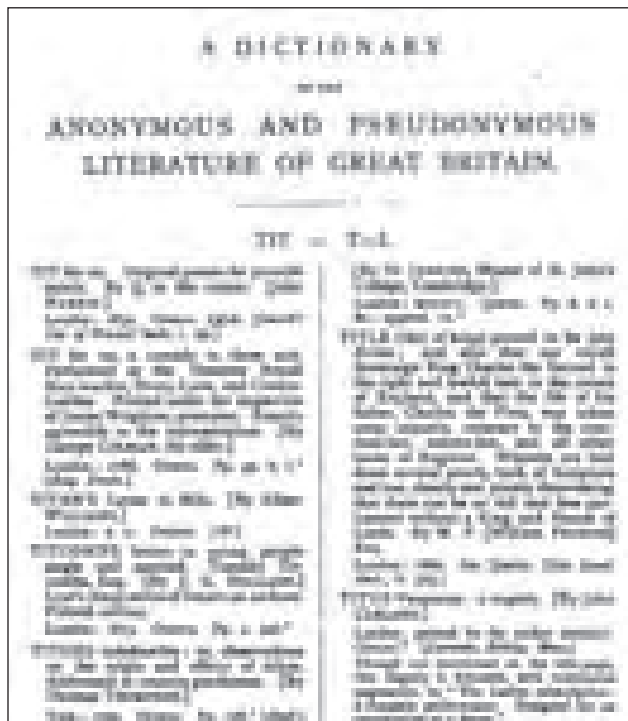
*A Dictionary of the Anonymous and Pseudonymous Literature of Great Britain, Including the Work of Foreigners Written in, or Translated into the English Language*, Samuel Halkett and John Laing, 1888, W. Paterson publishers, Edinburgh.

Catherine Laing continued the work after her father’s death. In an Editor’s Note in the fourth edition, in 1888, she wrote:

[The] strict rule laid down by the original projectors of the Dictionary, that no book should be considered anonymous or pseudonymous, if the author’s real name was made known anywhere throughout the work, imposed upon me the duty of carefully examining the books themselves in all such cases where the memoranda in my hands were defective, or where it was not clear that the books had already been so examined.... It need hardly be said that all this involved much expenditure of time.

### NOTE

1. Several groups say that certain books have authors who are other than human. However, in general, scholarly sources in many of those particular groups dispute the authorship of the books identified by scholars in many of the other groups as to whose books have human authors and whose do not. Space does not permit a full exploration of that issue on this page.



Part of a page from the book.

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The features marked with a star (\*) are based entirely on material taken straight from standard research (and other Official and Therefore Always Correct) literature. Many of the other articles are genuine, too, but we don't know which ones.



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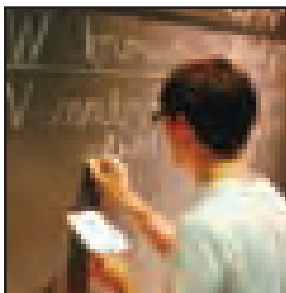
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## On the Front Cover



At the 2007 Ig informal Lectures, held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Mason Inman writes backwards on the blackboard. He did this while the audience was entering the lecture hall. Some audience members never realized that Inman was writing a complete list of the new Ig Nobel Prize winners. Photo: Kees Moeliker / Improbable Research.

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## On the Back Cover

Luxuriant Flowing Hair Club for Scientists (LFHCFS) men of the year Falk Schuch, Andreas Linsner and Kai Jung, preparing for a TV appearance in Amsterdam, May 20, 2006. Photo: Stephen Drew, Improbable Research. For a more extensive look at the LFHCFS and its members, see <http://www.improbable.com/projects/hair/hair-club-top.html>



## Coming Events

(see WWW.IMPROBABLE.COM for details of these and other events)

Ig Nobel Tour of the UK—March 2008

ASMS Annual Conf, Denver—June 1, 2008

Cheltenham Science Festival—June 7, 2008

Ig Nobel Prize Ceremony—October 2, 2008



# AIR Vents

*Exhalations from our readers*

## Another Letter that Quotes Dawkins

Burlei Rimsz's letter (AIR Vents 13:7) about my attitude toward hydrophilic molecules claims that I have revised my view of detergent chemistry. I can only quote my role model, Richard Dawkins, and say, "Like many scientists, I am delighted to acknowledge occasions when I have changed my mind, but this is not one of them."

*Anneke Valeros, Ph.D.  
Stupa, Greece*

## For Want of a Nail

Can anyone help me identify the metal used in the nails used to make the ladder used by the bearded gentleman in the middle of this photograph? I have been puzzling at this for a long time now, and decided it's time to ask for help.

*Tommy ("Thomas") Tompkins  
Metallurgist, retired  
Missoula, Missouri, USA*



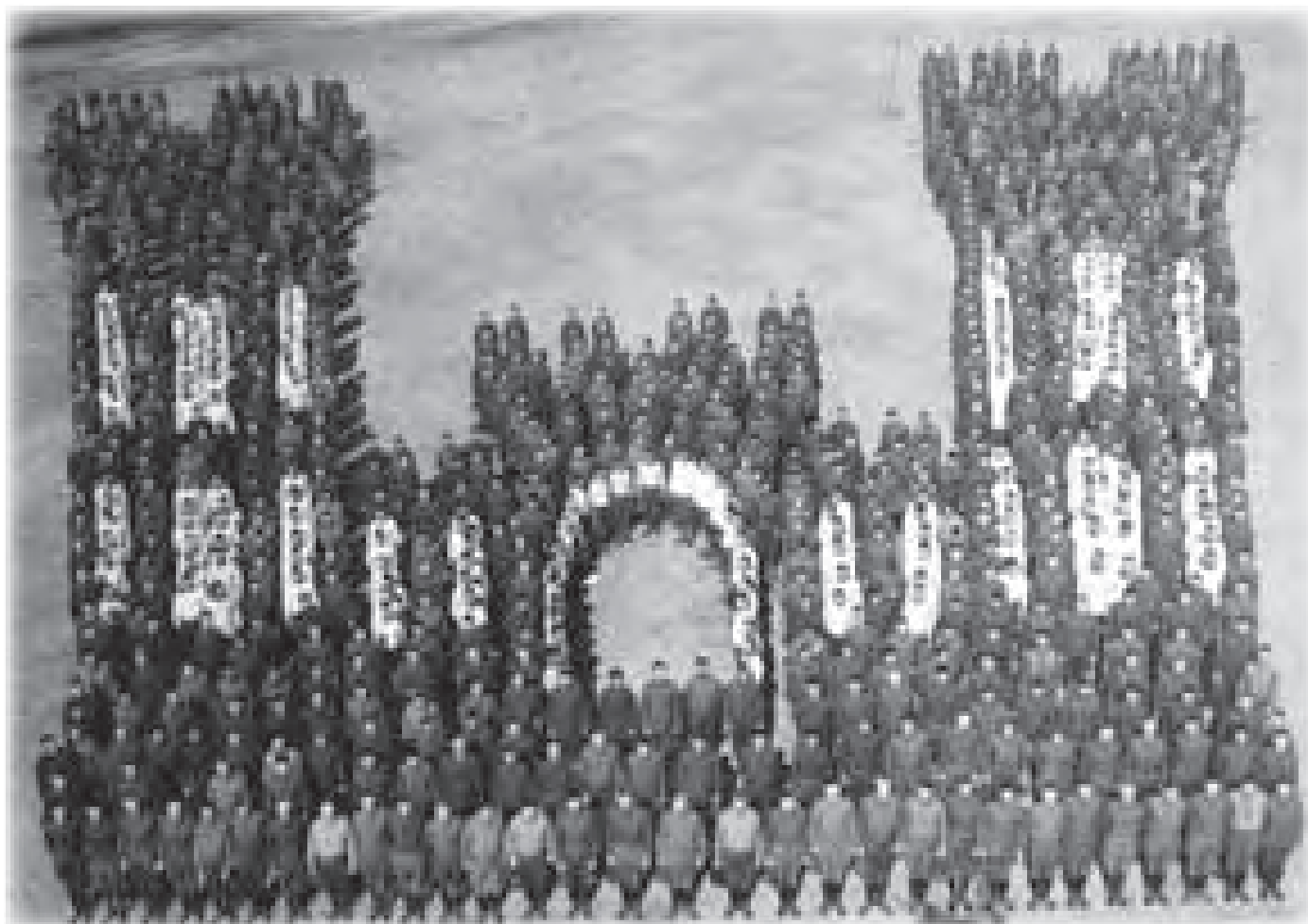
## Mel in a Panther

Over the course of the last year I read with fascination the series of letters, accompanied by the series of increasingly mutilated photographs, sent by Ramon Corbut,

Senior Archivist at the Archives of the Brothers of Historical Institute in Barcelona, Spain. I had the honor of meeting him at a dinner in Pisa several years ago. As fellow collectors of historical photographs of Mel, we had much mutual sympathy. Here is a photo I

have long found puzzling. Nay, maddening. The photo was taken in Corsica in the year 1919, and Mel is somewhere in one of the back rows. That much is documented beyond any doubt. But I and my colleagues have found it beyond our ability to identify exactly which of the people here he is. Mel's characteristic beard and supra-beard demeanor would in most cases make him stand out prominently. But such is not the case here. Can anyone help us pick out which of the people here is Mel?

*Kai Kivimäki  
Head Archivist  
Paasikivi Historical Archives  
Haapavesi, Finland*



## The Manner of Primitive Man

Enough with the quibbling [in a past issue of AIR?] about whether our ancestors would have suffered higher mortality rates from having mechanical 24-hour clocks at their disposal or from having electronic 24-hour clocks. We will never know for certain, will we? My position on this argument was summed up, long before my birth, in the poem “Ballade of Primitive Man” by the Scotsman Andrew Lang, who died in 1912, some years after he wrote the poem. I enclose a photograph of Lang, which was made at some point during his lifetime. Lang wrote:

He worshipp'd the rain and the breeze,  
He worshipp'd the river that flows,  
And the Dawn, and the Moon, and the trees,  
And bogies, and serpents, and crows;  
He buried his dead with their toes  
Tucked-up, an original plan,  
Till their knees came right under their nose,  
'Twas the manner of Primitive Man.

*Dr. Devindra Maas  
Ancud, Chile*

## His Feet Stink: A Mess Revealed

I am writing in reference to the letter headlined “His Feet Stink,” by T.P. D’Arcy that appeared in AIR Vents 14:1. Dr. D’Arcy wrote, “My feet stink. I have over the past 43 years conducted a series of experiments to establish that this is true....” I must inform you that that Dr. D’Arcy was not the first to write those words. They originally appeared in a study of pigeon behavior done by Sharon L. Browne, one of Dr. D’Arcy’s graduate students, who was quoting the pioneering Nottingham pediculist T.C. Romere. The full story is too complicated to go into here, but suffice it to say that Dr. D’Arcy has been placed on administrative leave, and is now under a physician’s care.

The photograph that Dr. Darcy sent you of the American Civil War Rear Admiral Andrew H. Foote was also taken from Ms Browne, whose monograph on Admiral Foote’s foot was suppressed by Dr. D’Arcy until recently; this, too is a story too complex for a brief note. Dr. D’Arcy’s allegations about Admiral Foote’s foot are

pure inventions; not only was Admiral Foote possessed of a full set of two feet, but he also was a celebrated pigeon fancier.

I hope this sets the record straight for your readers, though I fear some of them may find the matter little more than a baffling matrix of seemingly unrelated details.

*Dr. Terri Seaton Maguire  
Clive, Cumbria, UK*



## Questioning Received Medical Wisdom

I was just browsing through the November–December (2007) issue of AIR, and noticed that HMO-NO’s new Rent-a-Leech™ program says that I will “get the best of both tradition and modernity, all in one beneficial, six-legged package.” But of course, leeches do not have legs. Would it be safe to assume, reading between the lines, that HMO-NO is pioneering the use of “leeches” that are actually mosquitoes, as a cost-cutting measure?

*Ben Haller  
Menlo Park, California, USA*

## Mite is Right?

We always read with great interest the transcriptions of the acceptance speeches of Ig Nobel prize winners (AIR 13:6). They are always both

entertaining and educational. In the November–December issue of your magazine, however, in 2007 Biology Prize winner Dr. Johanna van Bronswijk’s speech we found—what we hope for the well being of mankind—is a typographical error. We cite here from the transcription: “We are only one organism in the midst of millions in the dwelling community. In the seat you are using now, mice are following your sweat to the far sides of the cushions. “Although we lack in-depth knowledge of the indoor-environment in your part of the world, we strongly believe Dr. van Bronswijk must have said ‘mites’ instead of ‘mice.’

*Mahmood Haroon,  
Farooq Farooka and  
Zafarullah Lodhi, Editors,  
Pakistan Journal of Acarology  
Lahore*

# Improbable Research Review

*Improbable theories, experiments, and conclusions*

compiled by Dirk Manley, Improbable Research staff

## Dolphin-Assisted Therapy: More Flawed Data and More Flawed Conclusions

Loel Marino<sup>1</sup> and Scott O. Lilienfeld<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Neuroscience and Behavioral Biology Program, Emory University, USA  
<sup>2</sup>Department of Neurology, Emory University, USA

**ABSTRACT** Dolphin-Assisted Therapy (DAT) is a controversially popular method of treatment for autism and developmental disabilities by providing participants with the opportunity to interact directly with the aquatic animals. Researchers of DAT (Marino and Lilenfeld [2006] and Lilienfeld [2006]) concluded that there is no credible scientific evidence for the effectiveness of this intervention. In this review, we offer an update of the methodological status of DAT by re-

## Dolphin Disappointments

“Dolphin-Assisted Therapy: More Flawed Data and More Flawed Conclusions,” *Anthrozoös*, L. Marino and S. Lilienfeld, vol. 20, no. 3, 2007, pp. 239–49 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/089279307X224782>).

## Up, with Mathematics

“A Mathematical Theory of Climbing,” Piero Villaggio, *IMA Journal of Applied Mathematics*, vol. 72, no. 5, 2007, pp. 570–6 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/imamat/hxm029>). (Thanks to Tom Roberts for bringing this to our attention.)

The author explains:

Is it possible to develop a theory of climbing? The answer is no. Mountains are so different in quality of rock and geometry of their faces that any wall would require a specific theory on the best strategy for being climbed. For this reason, climbing schools, so precise in teaching belaying, rappelling and prusiking, are instead vague in instructing how one must progress along an irregular wall. This paper suggests a rough model for grasping this complex problem.

## Down, with Gravity

“Wheelchair Coasting Downhill is a Reliable Work Task,” Dennis G. O’Connell, Byron Russell, F.A. Acosta, Collen J. Queen, Mary K. Crowley and Nicolas Walsh, *Work*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2000, pp. 15–9.

## Left Out of Old Movies

“Declining Lefthandedness in Victorian England Seen in the Films of Mitchell and Kenyon,” I.C. McManus and Alex Hartigan, *Current Biology*, vol. 17, no. 18, September 2007, pp. R793–4. (Thanks to Diane McCarthy for bringing this to our attention.) I.C. McManus, who won the 2002 Ig Nobel Biology Prize for his study “Scrotal Asymmetry in Man and Ancient Sculpture,” here reports:

These Victorian data on arm-waving resolve several problems concerning the historical data on handedness and lateralisation, studying a behaviour that is unlikely to be subject to strong social coercion, and excluding response bias by examining actual behaviours rather than potentially biased questionnaire responses. Left-sided usage is not only lower in the Victorian sample, but in strong contrast to modern data, left-arm usage in the Victorian subjects increases with age.

## Declining left-handedness in Victorian England seen in the films of Mitchell and Kenyon

I.C. McManus and Alex Hartigan

Although left-handers currently form about 11% of the population, only about 3% of those born in 1850 were left-handed, a more than three-fold difference which requires explanation. Whether the difference results from social pressure for left-handers to become right-handed, artefacts resulting from responses to items that can occur when questionnaires are used, or perhaps a genuine mortality of left-handers in old environments [1–3], left-sided arm-waving, as observed in documentary film made between 1890 and 1905, and which correlates with left-handedness, occurs less

## A mathematical theory of climbing

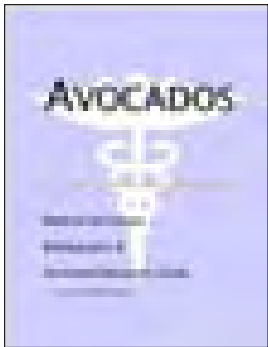
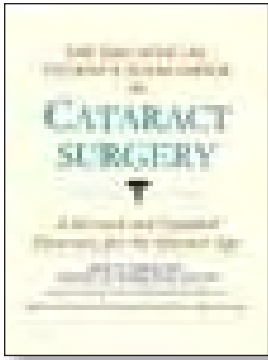
Piero Villaggio

Department of Applied Mathematics, Via Dardani 2, I-56126 Pisa, Italy

(Received on 1 September 2006; accepted on 22 January 2007)

Is it possible to develop a theory of climbing? The answer is no. Mountains are so different in quality of rock and geometry of their faces that any wall would require a specific theory on the best strategy for being climbed. For this reason, climbing schools, so precise in teaching belaying, rappelling and





# How to Write 85,000 Books

*A literary-technical tour de force, and the man behind it*

by Marc Abrahams, Improbable Research staff

Philip M. Parker is the world's fastest book author, and given that he has been at it only for about five years and already has more than 85,000 books to his name, he is likely the most prolific.

Philip M. Parker is also the most wide-ranging of authors. The phrase "shoes and ships and sealing wax, cabbages and kings" is not the half a percent of it. He has authored some 188 books related to shoes, ten about ships, 219 books about wax, six about sour red cabbage pickles, and six about royal jelly supplements.

To begin somewhere, let's note that Philip M. Parker is the author of the book *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Bathroom Toilet Brushes and Holders in the United States*. This book is 677 pages long, sells for \$495 and is described by the publisher as a "study [that] covers the latent demand outlook for bathroom toilet brushes and holders across the states and cities of the United States."

Philip M. Parker titles include the following (this is a hastily chosen few, so they are probably not his most colorful):

- *The 2007-2012 World Outlook for Rotary Pumps with Designed Pressure of 100 P.s.i. or Less and Designed Capacity of 10 G.p.m. or Less*
- *Avocados: A Medical Dictionary, Bibliography, and Annotated Research Guide*

- *Webster's English to Romanian Crossword Puzzles: Level 2*
- *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Golf Bags in India*
- *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Chinese Prawn Crackers in Japan*
- *The 2002 Official Patient's Sourcebook on Cataract Surgery*
- *The 2007 Report on Wood Toilet Seats: World Market Segmentation by City*
- *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Frozen Asparagus in India*

## Parker: Who?

Philip M. Parker is the INSEAD Chair Professor of Management Science at INSEAD, the international business school based in Fontainebleau, France.

## Parker: What?

Professor Parker is no dilettante. When he turns to a new subject, he seizes and shakes it till several books, or several hundred, emerge. About the outlook for bathroom toilet brushes and holders, Professor Parker has authored at least six books. There is his *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Bathroom Toilet Brushes and Holders in Japan*, and also *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Bathroom Toilet Brushes and Holders in Greater China*, and also *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Bathroom Toilet*

United States Patent		Patent No.	US 7,244,747 B2
Parker		Date of Patent	Sept. 4, 2007
(16)	METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR	6,811,000 A	6,811,000 A
(17)	Method: Philip M. Parker, (2006) Harvard U.S. Pat. No. 6,811,000 A	6,811,000 A	6,811,000 A
(17)	Method: Philip M. Parker, (2006) Harvard U.S. Pat. No. 6,811,000 A	6,811,000 A	6,811,000 A
(20)	App. No. 10/241,441	6,811,000 A	6,811,000 A
(22)	Filed: 1998.03.20	6,811,000 A	6,811,000 A

Professor Parker's patent was granted by the U.S. Patent Office.



Professor Philip M. Parker, author of more than 300,000 books. Photo courtesy of INSEAD.

*Brushes and Holders in India*, and also *The 2007 Report on Bathroom Toilet Brushes and Holders: World Market Segmentation by City*.

Amazon.com offers (on the day I am writing this) 85,761 books authored by Philip M. Parker. Professor Parker himself says the total is well over 200,000.

How is this all possible? How does one man do so much?

Professor Parker created the secret to his own success. He invented a machine that writes books. He says it takes about twenty minutes to write one.

### Parker: Why?

There arises the question, “Why?” The patent (U.S. #7266767), which describes a “method and apparatus for automated authoring and marketing” and which Professor Parker wrote in the traditional, pre-Parker, non-computerized way, answers this question.

The answer appears on page 16. Professor Parker quotes a 1999 complaint by the magazine *The Economist* that publishing “has continued

essentially unchanged since Gutenberg. Letters are still written, books bound, newspapers mostly printed and distributed much as they ever were.”

“Therefore,” says Professor Parker in this patent document, “there is a need for a method and apparatus for authoring, marketing and/or distributing title materials automatically by a computer.” He explains that “Further, there is a need for an automated system that eliminates or substantially reduces the costs associated with human labor, such as authors, editors, graphic artists, data analysts, translators, distributors, and marketing personnel.”

### Parker: How?

We asked Professor Parker how he manages this Herculean output. He replied:

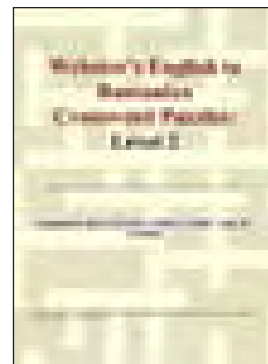
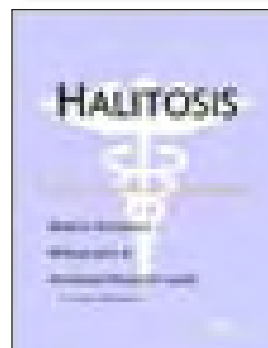
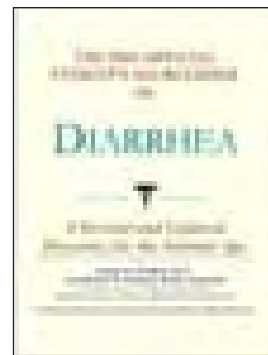
I started back in 1992 with the idea. Had a lot of failures, then succeeded in 2000 when I filed the patent. I have amassed huge linguistics databases (I am an avid dictionary collector, since I was 18), and have a background in mathematics, and computer programming, so I have approached this from a manage-

ment science perspective. Everything is organized by genre, and within genre by topic, and within topic by sub-topic, etc., for all languages. It is a matter of organization.

The book-writing machine works simply, at least in principle. First, one feeds it a recipe for writing a particular genre of book — a tome about crossword puzzles, say, or a market outlook for products, or maybe a patient’s guide to medical maladies. Then one hooks the computer up to a big database full of info about crossword puzzles or market information or maladies. The computer uses the recipe to select data from the database and write and format it into book form.

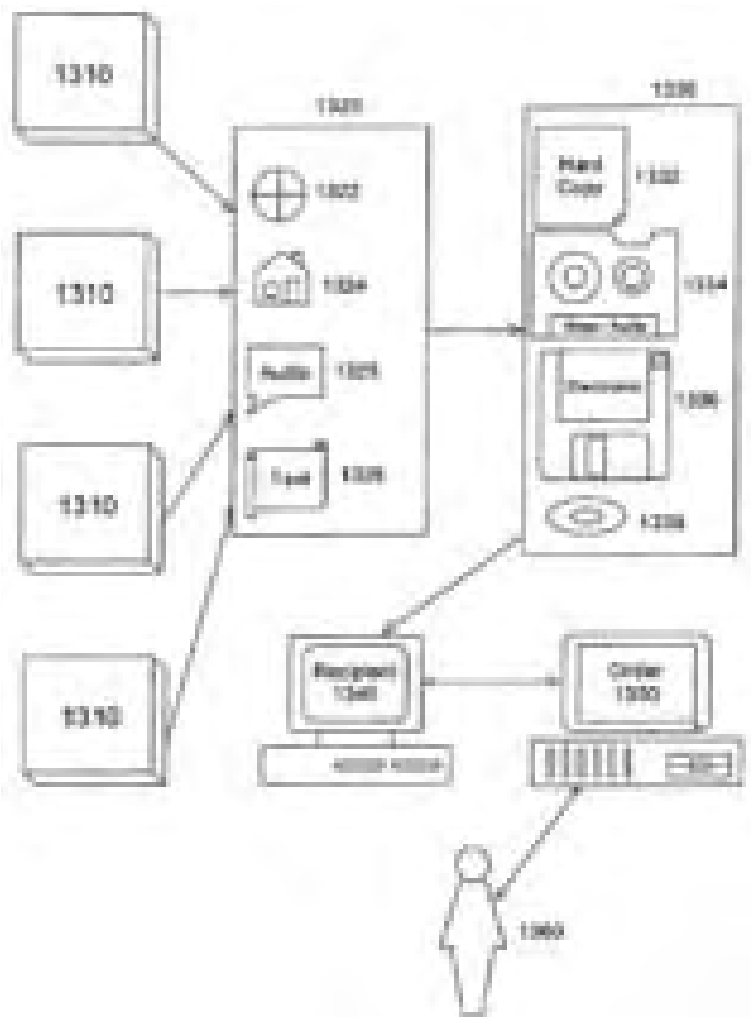
Professor Parker estimates that it costs him about 23 cents to write a new book, with perhaps not much difference in quality from what a competent wordsmith or an MBA or a physician might produce.

Nothing but the title need actually exist until somebody orders a copy, typically via an online automated bookseller. At that point, a computer assembles the book’s content and prints up a single copy.





Professor Parker's patent document includes this schematic overview of the automatic authoring process.



This graphic overview shows the human consumer in the context of the automatic authoring process.

## Best-Selling Books

Among Professor Parker's best-selling books (as ranked by Amazon.co.uk) one finds surprises.

His fifth-best seller is *Webster's Albanian to English Crossword Puzzles: Level 1*.

No. 6: *The 2007 Import and Export Market for Ferrous Metal Waste and Scrap Excluding Waste and Scrap of Cast Iron and Alloy Steel in United Kingdom*.

No. 21: *The 2007 Import and Export Market for Seaweeds and Other Algae in France*.

No. 25: *Oculocutaneous Albinism—A Bibliography and Dictionary for Physicians, Patients, and Genome Researchers*.

No. 44: *The 2007 Import and Export Market for Fresh or Chilled Whole Fish in Lithuania*.

*The 2007-2012 Outlook for Chinese Prawn Crackers in Japan*, mentioned above, is Professor Parker's 66th-best seller.

In the 93rd spot comes *The 2007 Report on Cat Food: World Market Segmentation by City*.

Rounding out the list, at number 100, is *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Edible Tallow and Stearin Made in Slaughtering Plants in Greater China*.

Professor Parker is also enthusiastic about books authored the old-fashioned way. He has already written three of them.

The books are in a way just the beginning. Professor Parker also plans to use the same method to produce video programs—thousands upon thousands of them—and video games. He tells us:

If I am lucky, this will allow the creation of content (educational material, books, software, etc.) for languages (or for subject areas) that simply do not have enough speakers, or economies that can support traditional publishing or content creation. For example, in health care, some diseases have fewer than 1,000 people who get the disease worldwide per year. Of those, only 1 or 2 might

want a reference book. Using this method, the break even for a book is 1 copy, with no inventory cost (all books are either printed on demand, or distributed via ebook). Some languages have only 100,000 speakers, so no “Hollywood” producer would envisage creating programming to such a narrow audience, etc. This approach allows for this level of production (I am starting with an educational game show, and 3D personal computer games).

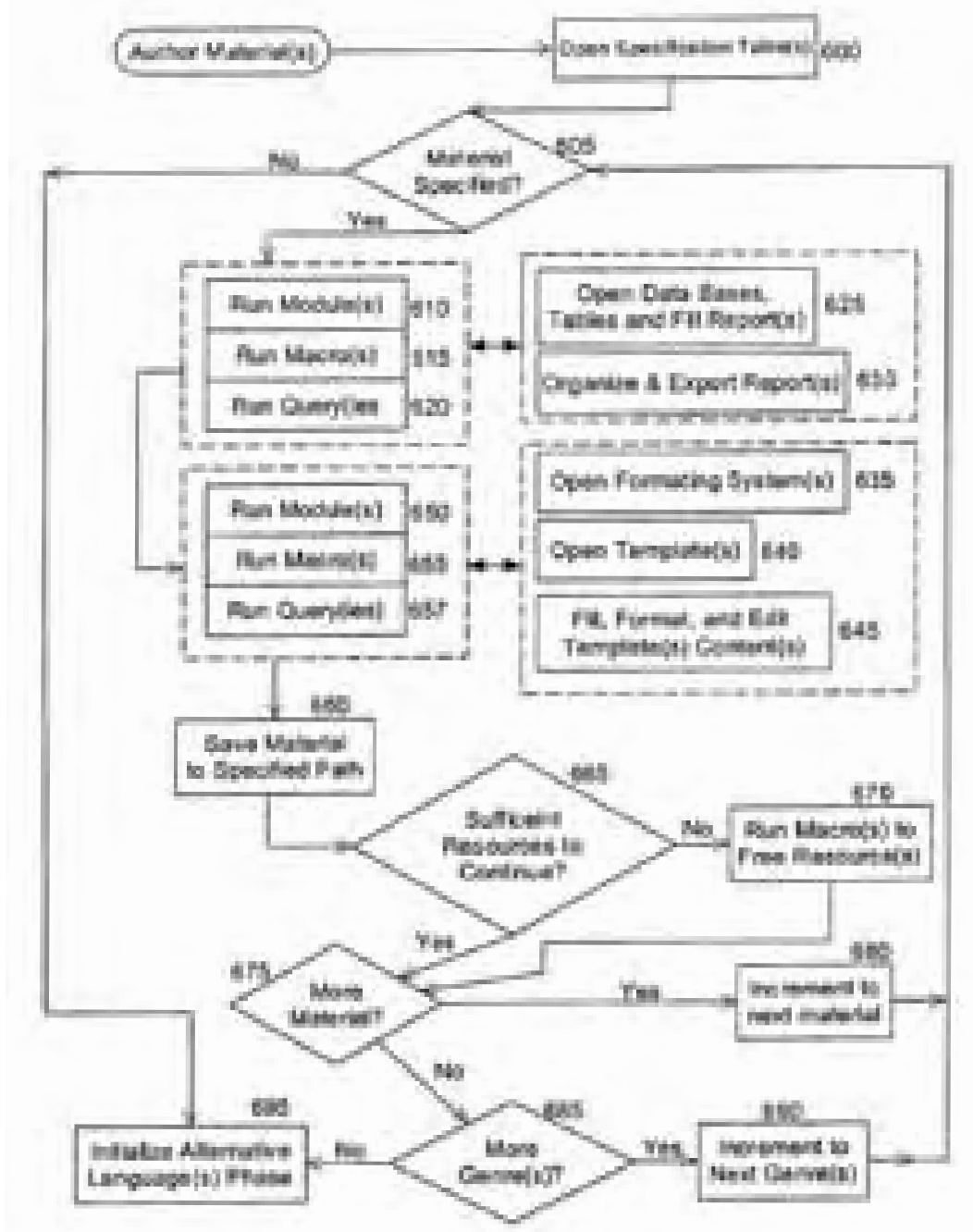
## For More Parker

For a vivid introduction to Professor Parker and some of his works, see the video he has put online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SkS5PkHQphY>.

For a few more of Professor Parker’s memorable books, see the article “May We Recommend: Parker Titles,” elsewhere in this issue of the *Annals of Improbable Research*. Also elsewhere in this issue is “Dr. Parker’s Latent Library and the Death of the Author,” a discussion of the philosophical implications of Professor Parker’s accomplishments.

*(Thanks to Peter Carboni for bringing the first toilet brush outlook book to our attention, and to Chris McManus for alerting us to the several hundred medical books.)*

*This flowchart, part of the patent document, discloses a further level of detail for parts of the process.*



# Dr. Parker's Latent Library and the Death of the Author

*A philosophical inquiry*

by Chris McManus  
University College London  
2002 Ig Nobel Biology Prize winner (for his study  
"Scrotal Asymmetry in Man and Ancient Sculpture")

The death of the author has been a fundamental constant of post-modern literary criticism ever since Roland Barthes' essay of 1967. Now an economist, Professor Philip M. Parker, has turned the entire question on its head. The really interesting question about someone who has been described as "the most prolific author in history" now concerns the trickier question of whether, in any meaningful sense, this author—or what Barthes would call a "scriptor"—has ever actually been alive.

Books used to be simple things. An author writes, a printer prints, a bookseller sells and a reader then reads what the author wrote, the printer printed and the bookseller sold. Such a description is worlds away from the 142,152\* titles which Parker and his ICON Publishing Group have published. Even if the 47-year-old Professor Parker had written solidly, 12 hours a day, 365 days a year, for the past 20 years, he would have had to produce a new title every 37 minutes to create such an oeuvre. Such productivity is over two orders of magnitude greater than that of the *Guinness Book of Records'* most prolific author, the South African writer Mary Faulkner (1903-1973), whose 904 titles hardly begin to compete with Parker.

Not that it can be said that any of Parker's books have been "written" in any usual sense of the term. Instead we find



*Roland Barthes, author of the 1967 essay "The Death of the Author." Painting by Nan Swift, Improbable Research staff.*

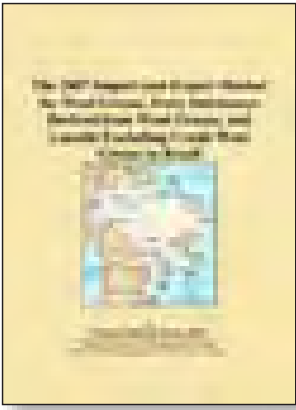
thousands upon thousands of books that indeed have Parker's name on the cover, but the author not only can never have written, but in all likelihood can never have read them all (and if each book takes just 37 minutes to read, then it would take 20 years, 12 hours a day—you get the idea!). More problematic, in most or perhaps even nearly all cases these books seem never to have been printed, seen by their ostensible publisher, or seen by a single reader. Maybe there are even titles that have never been clicked upon on Amazon.com. Now that really is post-modern.

## The Question of Existence

Do Parker's books exist then? Perhaps, as Jean Baudrillard would have put it, "These books did not take place." Let's take at random one of Parker's typical exotic and yet utterly paradigmatic titles, *The 2007 Import and Export Market for Wool Grease, Fatty Substances Derived from Wool Grease, and Lanolin Excluding Crude Wool Grease in Brazil*. Nowhere on Amazon is there any sign that anyone has ever bought this (never mind added it to their Wedding Registry or Wish List). Neither is it in any university or other library that I can find. If you want the book (and for a mere 28 paperback pages it is expensive at \$56.00) then, and it seems only then, will a computer program be activated, a text generated, a printer will start printing, a binding will be attached and a paperback volume will emerge ready to be read. But did *The 2007 Import and Export Market for Wool Grease* [and so forth] exist until that moment? There lurks a philosophical conundrum. As with the tree that falls to the ground in a lonely forest, unheard by any sentient being, can it be said to make a sound? Or in the koan's 21st century form, if such a title evokes from Google the response "did not match any documents," does it exist?



*The logo of Amazon.com, the online bookselling company whose very nature is entwined, philosophically, with questions raised by Philip M. Parker's reinvention of the idea of authorship.*



## The Question of Value

A few thought experiments show the plurality of potential problems lurking here. Could I, for instance, register millions of titles of possible books with Amazon, stating that they are available if readers want them, but not actually provide any of them until someone coughs up their \$56? More specifically, could I register as titles, *The {n} Import and Export Market for Wool Grease, Fatty Substances Derived from Wool Grease, and Lanolin Excluding*

*Crude Wool Grease in Brazil*, where {n} takes all possible values from 2009 to 3000? And can I count all of these titles as part of my scholarly output?

## Hazards

What if Parker's program goes wrong (and software bugs are one of the few certainties of our world)? Who would be responsible if, instead of generating a lucid account of wool grease and lanolin, the program errs and some unfortunate lanolin expert inadvertently receives between his paperback covers some random text, such as 28 pages of Victoria Beckham's *That Extra Half an Inch: Hair, Heels and Everything in Between*? Would Parker or his program then claim to be the author of that as well? Does Parker check every book before it is dispatched, ever vigilantly watching for glitches? What if a software glitch results in 28 pages endlessly repeating the immortal words, "and yes I said yes I will Yes"? Caveat emptor, inevitably, but perhaps also, author beware! What are the limits of the author's responsibility? Does he, as so many authors do, "assert his moral right", etc., or does he perhaps have no moral rights? What if the book should—we are but speculating, of course—contain a libelous account of the President of Brazil, which would then be gossiped about and disseminated throughout grease-speaking circles all over the Amazon region? Would Parker be responsible for that? And how might Parker avoid an inadvertent fatwa through software error, when one of his books perhaps talks of the burgeoning market for pig products in certain countries where pigs should be vanishingly scarce?

## Unstoppability?

These problems would not even disappear with the actual death of the supposed author, for Parker (or rather his programmatic instantiation) could presumably continue to produce ever further volumes long after his demise. How



*Professor Philip M. Parker, author of surprisingly (and perhaps uncountably) many books. Photo courtesy of INSEAD.*

will copyright laws cope with such works? And does Parker perhaps have another program, at this moment on the digital stocks, for generating interviews with his posthumous self? Will those interviews perhaps interact with yet further Parkersoft products generating the verbose products of an infinitude of virtual journalists, together producing a million-fold computer-generated articles for an exponentially increasing number of latent, specialist journals, devoted to such specialist markets as the Brazilian grease industry, each number commenting and speculating endlessly on the past, present and future of almost anything Brazilian and greasy except, it need hardly be said, that pariah of the aficionados, crude wool grease? Perhaps the one certainty is that Google's web-crawlers will cope, if necessary, by buying up ICON Publishing Group. O Douglas Adams, thou shouldst be living at this hour!

## Note

\* Some sources say Professor Parker's total now exceeds 200,000. The question "How many books has Philip M. Parker written?" deserves to be addressed in a separate essay, or perhaps in a numerous series of essays. The question "How many books will Philip M. Parker write?" may be unanswerable, except by time but possibly not even with that.

# Parker's Bird Books

by Kees Moeliker  
Curator of Birds

Natuurhistorisch Museum Rotterdam, The Netherlands

2003 Ig Nobel Biology Prize winner (for documenting the first scientifically recorded case of homosexual necrophilia in the mallard duck)

Professor Philip M. Parker's collection of books on birds—like his nearly innumerable other series on other subjects—appears to be comprehensive and detailed almost beyond imagining.

## Egging It On

Consider his treatment of eggs (to take a single topic from among the many that relate to birds).

The basic entity “egg” is included in 201 intriguing book titles (as of January 25, 2008), including Professor Parker's recent *The World Market for Unshelled Birds Eggs Excluding Dried Eggs: A 2007 Global Trade Perspective*, of which the author says in the introductory chapter:

Which countries are supplying unshelled birds' eggs excluding dried eggs?...How much do the imports



of unshelled birds' eggs excluding dried eggs vary from one country to another?... Which countries supply the most exports of unshelled birds' eggs excluding dried eggs?

Once you know the answers to those questions, your newly-inflamed curiosity will force you to dig into *The 2007 Import and Export Market for Unshelled Birds Eggs Excluding Dried Eggs in Denmark* and its equivalents that cover—to mention but one example—Slovakia.

A scientific novelty can be found in *The 2007-2012 World Outlook for Frozen and Liquid Whole Eggs* (it was news to me, an ornithologist, that whole eggs can be liquid), not to be mistaken for the detailed survey *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Frozen or Liquid Mixed Eggs in India*. Undoubtedly of equal importance is *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Whole and*

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(selected at random from amongst our subscribers)

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New Delhi, India

### Women's Health

Andrea Dunaif, Northwestern U.

JoAnn Manson, Brigham & Women's Hosp.

### A Guide to the Stars

\* Nobel Laureate  
\*\* world's highest IQ  
\*\*\* convicted felon  
\*\*\*\* misspelled  
\*\*\*\*\* sibling rivalry  
\*\*\*\*\* six stars  
\*\*\*\*\* Ig Nobel Winner

*Parts of Egg-Producing Hens and Fowl in India*, and the corresponding volume dealing with whole and parts of egg-producing hens and fowl in Poland.

Not really related to birds, but similar in scope is *The 2007-2012 World Outlook for Chocolate Easter Eggs* and its companion, though basically much different, *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Chocolate-Shell Easter Eggs in India*.

Titles dealing with “fresh, preserved, or cooked birds eggs in shells” are available for almost any country. The same goes for Parker’s work on free-range and/or battery eggs. Once you dig into this matter, don’t overlook his *The 2007-2012 World Outlook for Farm Turkey Waterers, Mechanized Egg Graders, and Egg Washers*, which is, as usual, based on “macroeconomic and trade models [and] a variety of key historical indicators and econometric models.”

## The Non-Egg Bird Books

The vast majority of Parker’s bird books deal with topics other than eggs. Here are just a few thoughts about them.

The series on “cleaned or treated bird skins, feathers, and down including powder and wastes thereof” and in fact many, many other Parker books, come in the following standard varieties:

- *The 2007 Import and Export Market for [you name it]*
- *The 2007-2012 Outlook for [you name it] in [name any country]*
- *The 2007-2012 World Outlook for [you name it]*
- *The World Market for [you name it]: A 2007 Global Trade Perspective*



Most puzzling, to me, is *Live Poultry Weighing Up to 185 Grams (6.53 Ounces): A 2007 Global Trade Perspective*. A quick search through the standard reference work HBW (*Handbook of the Birds of the World*) did not yield many lightweight members of the superorder Galloanserae (fowl), unless maybe chicks or some species of quail are concerned.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Parker poses for us some of his favorite questions:

- “Which countries are supplying live poultry weighing up to 185 grams (6.53 ounces)?”
- “How much do the imports of live poultry weighing up to 185 grams (6.53 ounces) vary from one country to another?”
- “Which countries supply the most exports of live poultry weighing up to 185 grams (6.53 ounces)?”

To my regret, Parker’s work on ducks is (as of January 25, 2008) limited to 19 titles only, covering ducks of the world, Greater China, United States, Japan and India. Clearly he has to catch up on this subject. For those who can’t wait, I recommend the basic *The 2007-2012 World Outlook for Whole and Parts of Ducks* (paperback, US \$795) and the related volume dealing with Japan only, in which professor Parker states:

This study covers the latent demand outlook for whole and parts of ducks across the prefectures and cities of Japan. [...] Using econometric models, which project fundamental economic dynamics within each prefecture and city, latent demand estimates are created for whole and parts of ducks.

## Reference

1. “Effects of Selection for Four Week Body Weight on Slaughter, Carcass, and Abdominal Fat and Some Organ Weights and Blood Serum Parameters in Japanese Quail,” *Turkish Journal of Veterinary and Animal Science*, L. Türkmüt, Ö. Altan, I. Oguz and S. Yalçın, vol. 23, 1999, pp. 63–8.

## AIR Teachers’ Guide

Three out of five teachers agree: curiosity is a dangerous thing, especially in students. If you are one of the other two teachers, AIR and mini-AIR can be powerful tools. Choose your favorite hAIR-raising article and give copies to your students. The approach is simple. The scientist thinks that he (or she, or whatever), of all people, has discovered something about how the universe behaves. So:

- Is this scientist right—and what does “right” mean, anyway?
- Can you think of even one different explanation that works as well or better?
- Did the test really, really, truly, unquestionably, completely test what the author thought he was testing?
- Is the scientist ruthlessly honest with himself about how well his idea explains everything, or could he be suffering from wishful thinking?
- Some people might say this is foolish. Should you take their word for it?
- Other people might say this is absolutely correct and important. Should you take their word for it?

*Kids are naturally good scientists. Help them stay that way.*

# May We Recommend: Parker Titles

*A few highlights from the world's most prolific book writer*

*Compiled by the Improbable Research staff*

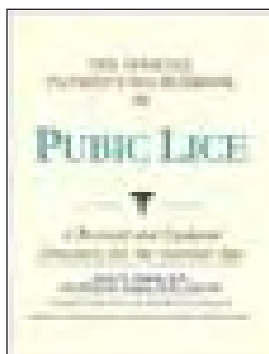
Here are a few of the more than 85,000 (or perhaps more than 200,000) books authored by Professor Philip M. Parker and his book-writing machine.

(For details of how Professor Parker did and does it, see "How to Write 85,000 Books," elsewhere in this issue of the *Annals of Improbable Research*.)

- *The World Market for Parts and Accessories of Dolls Representing Humans: A 2007 Global Trade Perspective*
- *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Consumer Non-Riding Dual-Stage Snow Throwers and Snow Blowers Excluding Attachment Type in India*
- *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Year-Round Unitary Single Package and Remote-Condenser Air Conditioners with at Least 640,000 BTU Per Hour Excluding Heat Pumps in Japan*
- *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Disposable Diapers, Sanitary Napkins, Tampons, Training Pants, and Incontinent Pads Made from Purchased Sanitary Paper Stock or Wadding in Greater China*
- *The 2007-2012 World Outlook for Hip-Hop Ringtones*



- *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Adult-Size Completely Lined and Trimmed Steel Burial Caskets and Coffins Excluding Stainless Steel Burial Caskets and Coffins in India*
- *The 2007 Report on Killing Floor Offal, Scrap, and Bones Made in Slaughtering Plants: World Market Segmentation by City*
- *The Official Patient's Sourcebook on SPASMODIC DYSPHONIA*
- *The Official Patient's Sourcebook on DIARRHEA*
- *FLATULENCE: A Bibliography, Medical Dictionary, and Annotated Research Guide to Internet References*
- *HALITOSIS: A Bibliography, Medical Dictionary, and Annotated Research Guide to Internet References*
- *The Official Patient's Sourcebook on Pubic Lice: A Revised and Updated Directory for the Internet Age*
- *Executive Report on Strategies in Barbados*
- *The 2007 Import and Export Market for Dried, Unshelled Birds Eggs in Denmark*
- *The 2007 Import and Export Market for Unshelled Birds Eggs Excluding Dried Eggs in Denmark*



## Reviews

A few (proportionally speaking) of Professor Parker's titles have garnered reviews on Amazon.com. Though some of the reviewers seem to have actually read the books, their reviews tend to be appreciative. Just to give you a wee taste, here are snippets from three book reviews by a reviewer who signs him- or her-self Oink Trotter "Razorback" Sty:



*The 2007-2012 World Outlook for Pickles*, by Philip M. Parker.

**5.0 out of 5 stars. It doesn't get better than this.**

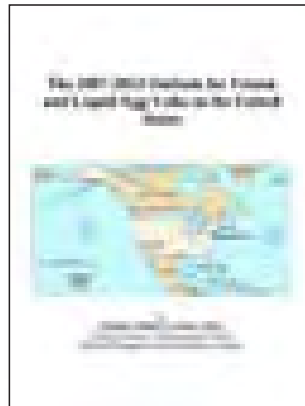
Easily Parker's best. This tale entwines you in a world of gherkins, small onions and unidentifiable yellow cubed vegetables. Whether you like it coarse or fine, you wont fail

to be sucked into this madcap world of sandwich condiments. WARNING: this book will make you a little peckish.

And what of the world outlook for pickles up to 2012? Well I don't want to spoil the plot for you, but lets just say there is a bigger link between Branston pickle and the Mayan calendar than you could imagine.

pace of the action just keeps you hooked from the beginning. If you are more interested in unsmoked bacon, I would say give this a try, you'll be converted forever. The reason I only gave 4 stars, however, is I thought the story lacked a bit of sauce.

I will be buying copies of this for all of my family this christmas.



*The 2007-2012 Outlook for Frozen and Liquid Egg Yolks in the United States*, by Philip M. Parker.

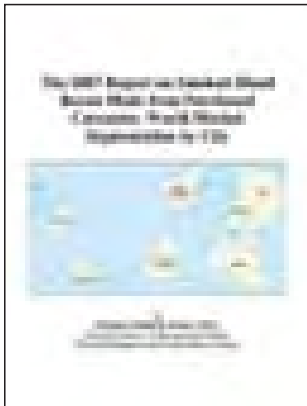
**5.0 out of 5 stars. Parker does it again.**

In his hotly anticipated follow up to *The 2007 Report on Smoked Sliced Bacon Made from Purchased Carcasses: World Market Segmentation by City*, Parker does

not end up with egg on his face as the complicated plot leaves one's head fried with delight. Much of the story seems to be poached from earlilier works, and the scrambled literary style overcomplicates an already deep, and philosophical tale, but overall this is a well laid follow up.

My biggest gripe would be the lack of mention of the albumen, but hopefully this will be cleared up in the widely anticipated *The 2008 Import and Export Guide to Meringues and Meringue Based Deserts [sic] in Papua [sic] New Guinea*.

Recommended holiday reading.



*The 2007 Report on Smoked Sliced Bacon Made from Purchased Carcasses: World Market Segmentation by City*, by Philip M. Parker.

**4.0 out of 5 stars. A future bestseller.**

This really was an inspiring read. Although the plot is initially hard to follow, the



# Writing Research Review

*A breezy look at research on writing and reading*

*compiled by Tenzing Terwilliger, Improbable Research staff*

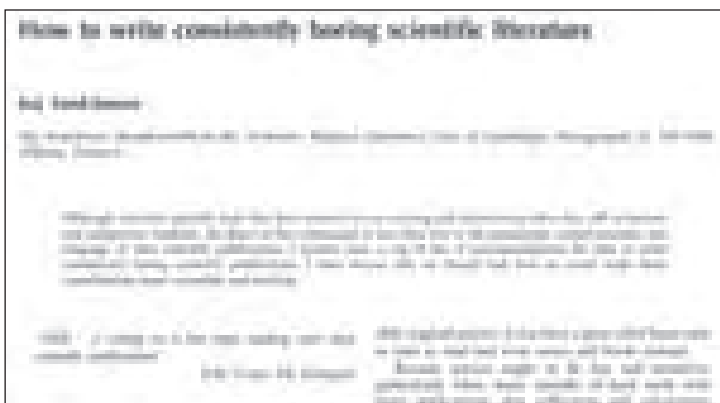
Researchers who research writing write about it. Many of them do, anyway. Here are some of their published studies.

## The Secret of Boring Scientific Literature

“How to Write Consistently Boring Scientific Literature,” Kaj Sand-Jensen, *Oikos*, vol. 116, no. 5, May 2007, pp. 723–7. (Thanks to Morten Ryhl-Svendsen for bringing this to our attention.) The author is at the University of Copenhagen.

Because science ought to be fun and attractive, particularly when many months of hard work with grant applications, data collections and calculations are over and everything is ready for publishing the wonderful results, it is most unfortunate that the final reading and writing phases are so tiresome.

I have therefore tried to identify what characteristics make so much of our scientific writing unbearably boring



## Great Writing by Mathematicians

“Stylizing Rigor; or, Why Mathematicians Write So Well,” Alex Csiszar, *Configurations*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2003, pp. 239–68 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/con.2004.0018>). The author explains that:

Before bothering about whether a mathematician is telling the truth, an audience needs to judge whether it is a truth worth listening to, and indeed, what worth is in the telling at all. Most mathematicians work with ideas that have no point of reference, not even via potential technological application, in most people’s lives. And the claims that mathematicians make are usually not intelligible to anyone but the expert in a particular subfield of mathematics...

## Spirited Writing

“Prevalence of Articles with Honorary Authors and Ghost Authors in Peer-Reviewed Medical Journals,” A. Flanagin, L.A. Carey, P.B. Fontanarosa, S.G. Phillips, B.P. Pace, G.D. Lundberg and D. Rennie, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, vol. 280, no. 3, July 1998, pp. 222–4 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1001/jama.280.3.222>). The authors conclude that:

A substantial proportion of articles in peer-reviewed medical journals demonstrate evidence of honorary authors or ghost authors.

## Extra-Spirited Writing

“Threatening and Otherwise Inappropriate Letters to Members of the United States Congress,” P.E. Dietz, D.B. Matthews, D.A. Martell, T.M. Stewart, D.R. Hrouda and J. Warren, *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, vol. 36, no. 5, September 1991, pp. 1445–68.

The authors examine the characteristics of threatening and otherwise inappropriate communications sent to members of the U.S. Congress by a sample of 86 subjects... Comparisons between 43 subjects who pursued encounters with members of Congress and 43 who did not revealed 17 factors associated with such pursuit. In this population, threateners were significantly less likely to pursue an encounter than inappropriate letter writers who did not threaten, regardless of the type of threat or the harm threatened. Inappropriate letters to members of Congress are compared with those directed to Hollywood celebrities.





*At the conclusion of the 2007 Ceremony, the winners and Nobel Laureates and mini-opera performers gather at center stage for a pointless opportunity. Some of them are visible here. Photo: Alexey Eliseev / Improbable Research.*

# *You Are Invited to the* **Ig**

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*Details at* [www.improbable.com/ig](http://www.improbable.com/ig)

# How to Write an Interdisciplinary Research Paper: Planning for Retirement by Solving Time Travel Paradoxes Using Open Book Management in Nearby Disk Galaxies

By Eric Schulman<sup>1,2</sup>, Eric Schulman<sup>3,4</sup>, Eric Schulman<sup>5</sup>, and Eric Schulman<sup>6</sup>

## The Authors



Figure 1. Eric Schulman, nearby disk galaxy expert



Figure 2. Eric Schulman, open book management expert



Figure 3. Eric Schulman, time travel paradox expert



Figure 4. Eric Schulman, retirement planning expert

## Introduction

Saving for retirement can be an arduous task. The galactic fountain model predicts that energetic stellar winds and supernovae in OB associations produce superbubbles containing hot gas that breaks out of the galactic disk, cools radiatively as it rises upward, and recombines and returns to the disk ballistically. Time travel has occurred when the separation between the time of departure and the time of arrival does not equal the duration of the journey. Open book management theories include teaching employees the rules of the game, giving them the information needed to play the game, and making sure that they share in the risks and the rewards.

## Methodology

The most popular and widespread methods for obtaining a nest egg are in stocks and bonds. The hot gas was observed with X-ray telescopes, while the cool returning neutral hydrogen was observed through 21-centimeter emission from high-velocity clouds. There are three major paradoxes within time travel: reverse causation, casual loops, and the time traveler's ability to alter the past. In modern day Corporate America, this unpretentious set of principles applies to every business.

## Results

Both equities offer a wide array of sectors in which to put your money and can be extremely profitable when playing the market correctly. High-resolution X-ray images of M33 revealed two possible superbubbles, while sensitive 21-centimeter observations found high-velocity neutral hydrogen in 10 of 14 nearby disk galaxies. It does not matter if getting into the time machine produces arrival in the past, because the personal time of the traveler does not depend on the external time. Employees can be taught to play this game, but they are also required to have the information needed in order to play successfully.

This entails trading when you have a liquid derivative in the height of demand or conversely obtain the derivative at the beginning of the ascent. Galaxies with high-velocity neutral hydrogen have more dust-enshrouded far-infrared sources and an average star formation rate an order of magnitude larger than galaxies without it. Time travel can still occur without the existence of causal loops, and their removal eliminates a major paradox. Information should not be something that is used as a method of domination or power.

These two types of savings plans are geared for investors who plan to continue making money for an elongated period of time and can afford to take a loss and recover. Both of these results are expected if a substantial fraction of the high-velocity clouds are produced in galactic fountains. The second, and far more satisfying and clever resolution of this dilemma, comes with the possibility of branching timelines. Open book management is not for everyone, but for a radical change, it may be just what a company needs.

<sup>1</sup>Alexandria, Virginia; <sup>2</sup>The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan; <sup>3</sup>Johnson & Wales University, Providence, Rhode Island; <sup>4</sup>Saint Leo University, Saint Leo, Florida; <sup>5</sup>Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts; <sup>6</sup>Economic Analysis Group Ltd., Washington, DC

## Discussion

As Figure 5 shows, it is of vital importance when planning for retirement to ensure that employees have all the information necessary to support managers when they use high-velocity gas to go back in time in order to kill their grandfathers, thus creating a new temporal branch in which hands-on training leads to increased profits from the recirculation of the galactic fountain in nearby disk galaxies and therefore a steady star formation rate later in life when your risk should be lower.

## Conclusion

In this paper we conclusively demonstrated the utility of planning for retirement by solving time travel paradoxes using open book management in nearby disk galaxies.

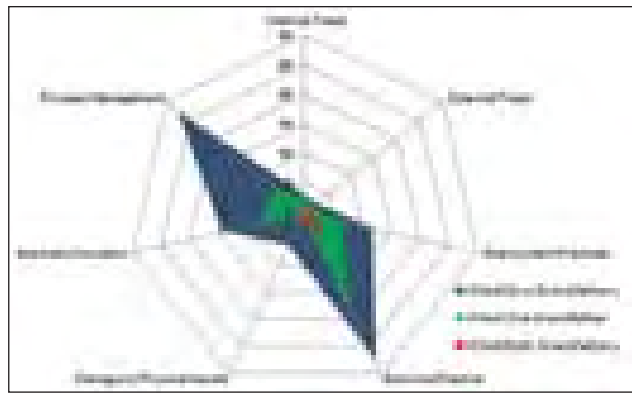
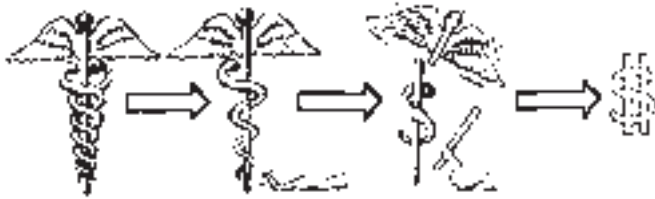


Figure 5. The operational risk in each of the Basel II event type categories measured in solar masses per galaxy per year as a function of the number of grandfathers killed after having gone back in time.

# HMO-NO News



Health care advice to pass on to your patients



## Digestive Remedy!

In medicine, sometimes simple is best. Almost everyone has digestive woes or one sort or another. Our experience shows that most remedies, short of removing the stomach and colon, fall short of perfection. One simple treatment that produces effects is **HMO-NO's Belt Therapy**.<sup>TM</sup> Under our **Belt Therapy** regimen, delivered weekly,\* our physician assistants will alternately tight, tight, tighten and loose, loose, loosen your belt,\*\* for 25-minute intervals. At the end of each session, your relief will be palpable.

\* Note: Also available in daily and monthly versions. May incur additional fees.

\*\* Note: Belly circumference changes, on average, by 50%. Tightening fees apply. Loosening fees apply. Belts are available for rental usage, at additional charge.

**HMO-NO** The very final word in health care

# Hard Looks at Doctors' Handwriting

compiled by Tenzing Terwilliger, *Improbable Research* staff  
with instructive illustrations from the book *Penmanship, Theoretical and Practical*,  
Illustrated and Explained by Benjamin Franklin Foster, Souter and Law, London, 1843.

Doctors often find themselves the butt of jokes about their supposedly horrendous, illegible handwriting. These four studies suggest that, except in one department in one hospital in Indianapolis, Indiana, the reputation may be deserved.

## Legible Handwriting in Indiana

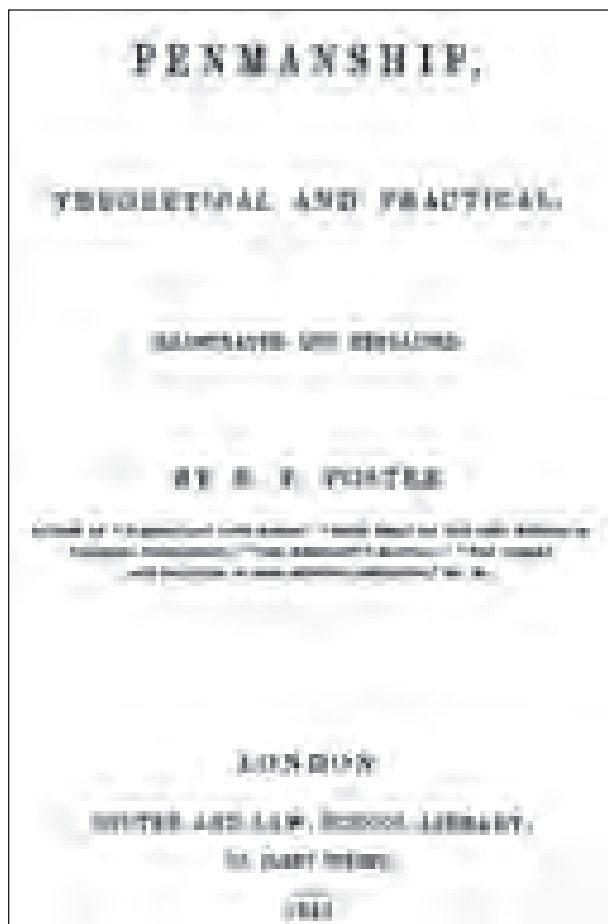
"Deciphering the Physician Note," E.A. Kozak, R.S. Dittus, W.R. Smith, J.F. Fitzgerald and C.D. Langfeld, *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, vol. 9, no. 1, January 1994, pp. 52–4 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF02599144>). The authors, at Indiana University School of Medicine, Indianapolis, explain:

Objective information about legibility of physician handwriting is scant. This retrospective chart review compared handwritten general medicine clinic chart notes from internal medicine faculty and housestaff with their typed counterparts.



*The hand played a key role in penmanship in 1843. It still does.*

The written counterparts took 11 seconds (46%) longer to read and 5 seconds (11%) longer to answer comprehension questions. The authors' comprehension measure (developed specifically for ambulatory clinic notes) was only slightly higher for typed notes. The legibility of physician handwriting is not as dismal as assumed; physicians can effectively communicate on paper.



## Illegible Handwriting in Scotland

"Reputation and the Legibility of Doctors' Handwriting in Situ," G.A. Cheeseman and N. Boon, *Scottish Medical Journal*, vol. 46, no. 3, June 2001, pp 79–80. The authors, at the Royal Infirmary in Edinburgh, report:

Our study evaluates if doctors deserve their reputation and investigates how legibility is affected by the time taken to write. Sets of in-patient hospital notes were selected at random. The first written entry by a doctor and a nurse in the current admission were analysed. In addition to this, 10 doctors and 10 nurses, unaware of the true nature of the study, wrote out lists of words and the time taken to do the task was recorded. The doctors' handwriting was significantly less legible and they wrote significantly quicker. However a small minority of the doctors was responsible for the majority of illegible words written by that group.

*Instruction in how to write legibly has been available to doctors since at least as early as 1843, when this book appeared in London, and possibly earlier.*

## Illegible Handwriting in Australia

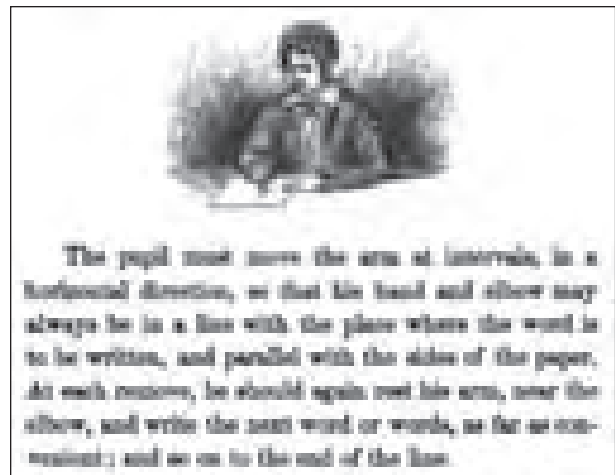
“The Facts on the Legibility of Doctors’ Handwriting,” H. Goldsmith, *Medical Journal of Australia*, vol. 2, no. 12, September 18, 1976, pp. 462–3. The author writes:

A large number of people, both doctors and others, were tested. The handwriting of each participant was graded and four different statistical tests were performed on the results. In all of these tests the doctors’ handwriting came out significantly worse. Thus the only conclusion which could be established from these results was that doctors’ handwriting is indeed less legible than others.

## Illegible Handwriting in Texas

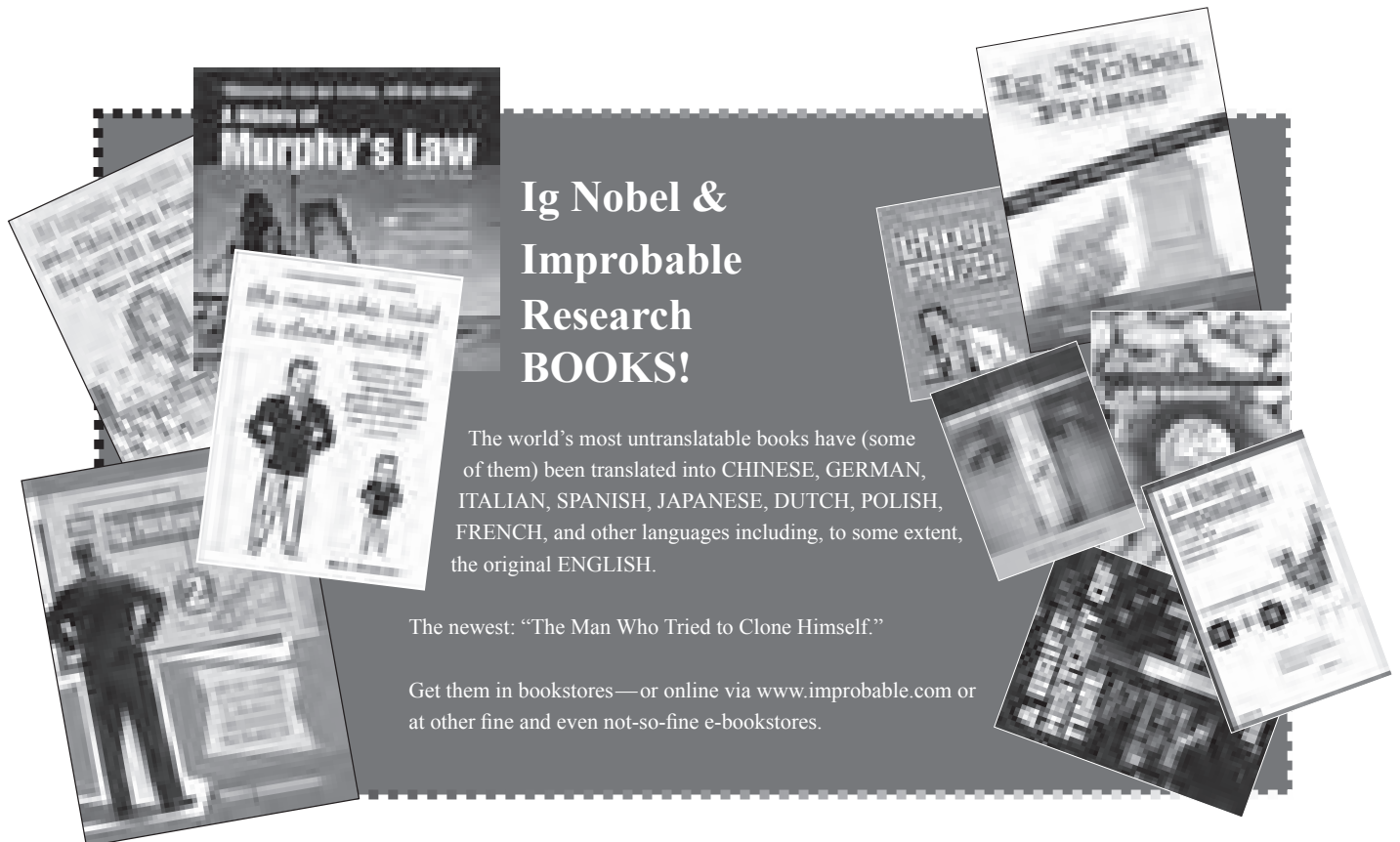
“Legibility and Completeness of Physicians’ Handwritten Medication Orders,” E.H. Winslow, V.A Nestor, S.K. Davidoff, P.G. Thompson and J.C. Borum, *Heart and Lung*, vol. 26, no. 2, March–April 1997, pp. 158–64 ([http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0147-9563\(97\)90076-5](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0147-9563(97)90076-5)). The authors, at Presbyterian Hospital of Dallas, Texas, report:

**OBJECTIVE:** To assess handwritten medication orders for legibility and completeness, legibility of physician signatures, and presence of date and time the orders were written. **SETTING:** Three patient care units in one hospital in Texas. **METHODS:** Six experienced nurses evaluated medication



*The advice given in 1843 is still useful to physicians, yet many fail to follow it.*

orders and signatures for legibility using a rating scale developed for the study... **RESULTS:** Twenty percent of the medication orders and 78% of the signatures were illegible or legible with effort. Twenty-four percent of the medication orders were incomplete. Date was omitted on 18% of the medication orders, and time was missing on 58%.



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# Possible Consequences of Writing Poetry

compiled by Tenzing Terwilliger, Improbable Research staff

Poets, since ancient days, have suffered (and in some cases, also celebrated) a reputation for being sufferers. Several researchers have tried to assess how, what and whether poets suffer. These four studies present compelling evidence for or against the prevailing beliefs.

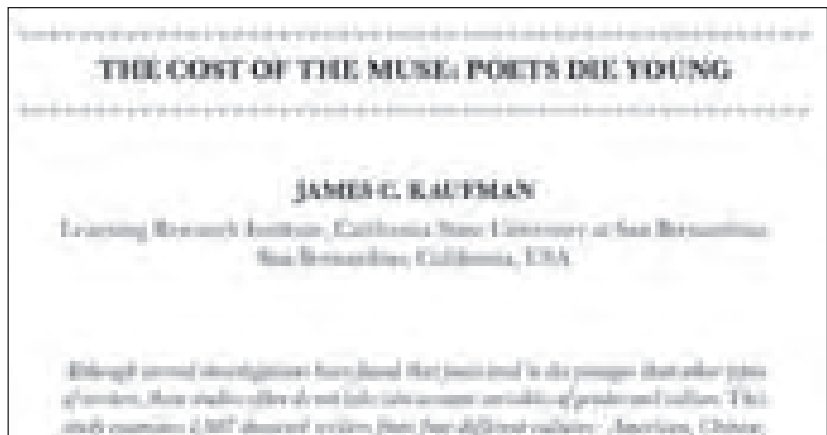
## Possible Pathology for Poets

“Poetry or Pathology? Jesuit Hypochondria in Early Modern Naples,” Yasmin Haskell, *Early Science and Medicine*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2007, pp. 187–213 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/157338207X194686>). The author, at the University of Western Australia, Crawley, explains:

In their didactic poems on fishing and chocolate, both published in 1689, two Neapolitan Jesuits digressed to record and lament a devastating ‘plague’ of ‘hypochondria’. The poetic plagues of Niccolò Giannettasio and Tommaso Strozzi have literary precedents in Lucretius, Vergil, and Fracastoro, but it will be argued that they also have a real, contemporary significance. Hypochondria was considered to be a serious (and epidemic) illness in the seventeenth century, with symptoms ranging from depression to delusions. Not only did our Jesuit poets claim to have suffered from

it, but so did prominent members of the ‘Accademia degl’ Investiganti’, a scientific society in Naples that was at odds with both the religious and medical establishments.

*Yasmin Haskell, author of “Poetry or Pathology? Jesuit Hypochondria in Early Modern Naples.” Painting by Nan Swift, Improbable Research staff.*



## Possible Immunity for Poets

“Poetry Writing and Secretary Immunoglobulin A,” G. Lowe, J. Beckett, and G. Lowe, *Psychological Reports*, vol. 92, no. 3, part 1, June 2003, pp. 847–8 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.2466/PRO.92.3.847-848>). The authors, who are at the University of Hull, U.K., explain that:

17 healthy students provided saliva samples for Immunoglobulin A (s-IgA) assay before and after sessions of either writing poetry or reading magazines (control). Levels of s-IgA increased after the poetry-writing sessions but not after reading.

## Possible Death for Poets

“The Cost of the Muse: Poets Die Young,” J.C. Kaufman, *Death Studies*, vol. 27, no. 9, November 2003, pp. 813–21 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/713842357>). The author, at California State University at San Bernardino, explains:

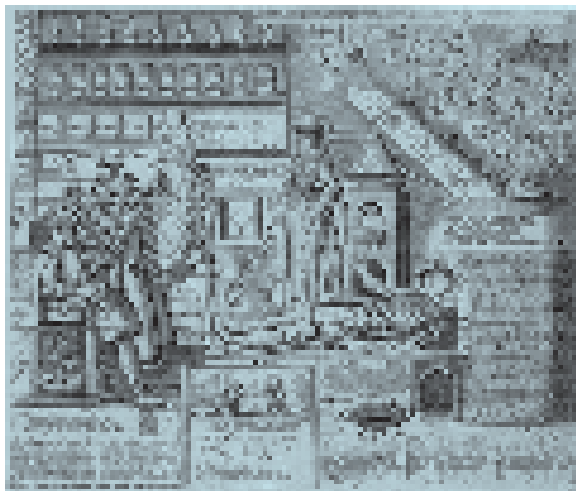
This study examines 1,987 deceased writers from four different cultures: American, Chinese, Turkish, and Eastern European. Both male and female poets had the shortest life spans of all four types of writers (fiction writers, poets, playwrights, and non-fiction writers), and poets had the shortest life spans in three of the four cultures (and the second shortest life span among Eastern European writers). Possible reasons for the poet’s shorter life span are then discussed.



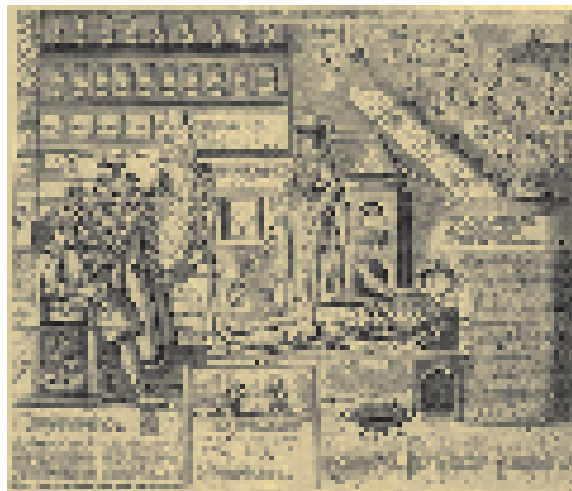
# Puzzling Solutions

## *Solution to Last Month's Puzzler*

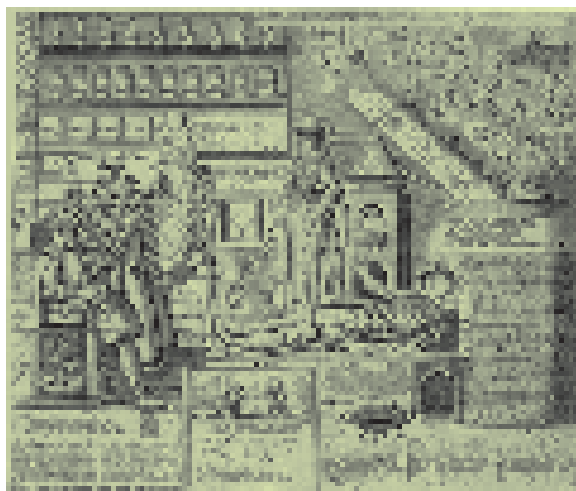
*by Emil Filterbag, Improbable Research staff*



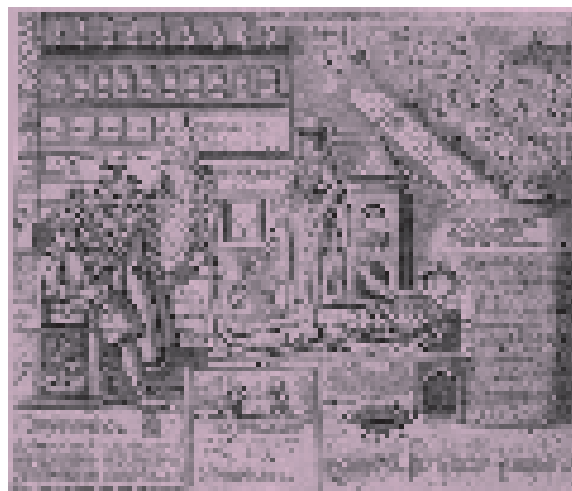
**Answer:** It's in the third jar from the left.



**Answer:** It's in the fifth jar from the left.



**Answer:** It's in Madame Scornful-Beauty's hat.



**Answer:** It's in Professor Heatedly-Recumbent's left shoe.

# Plucked from Obscurity: Killer Clothes

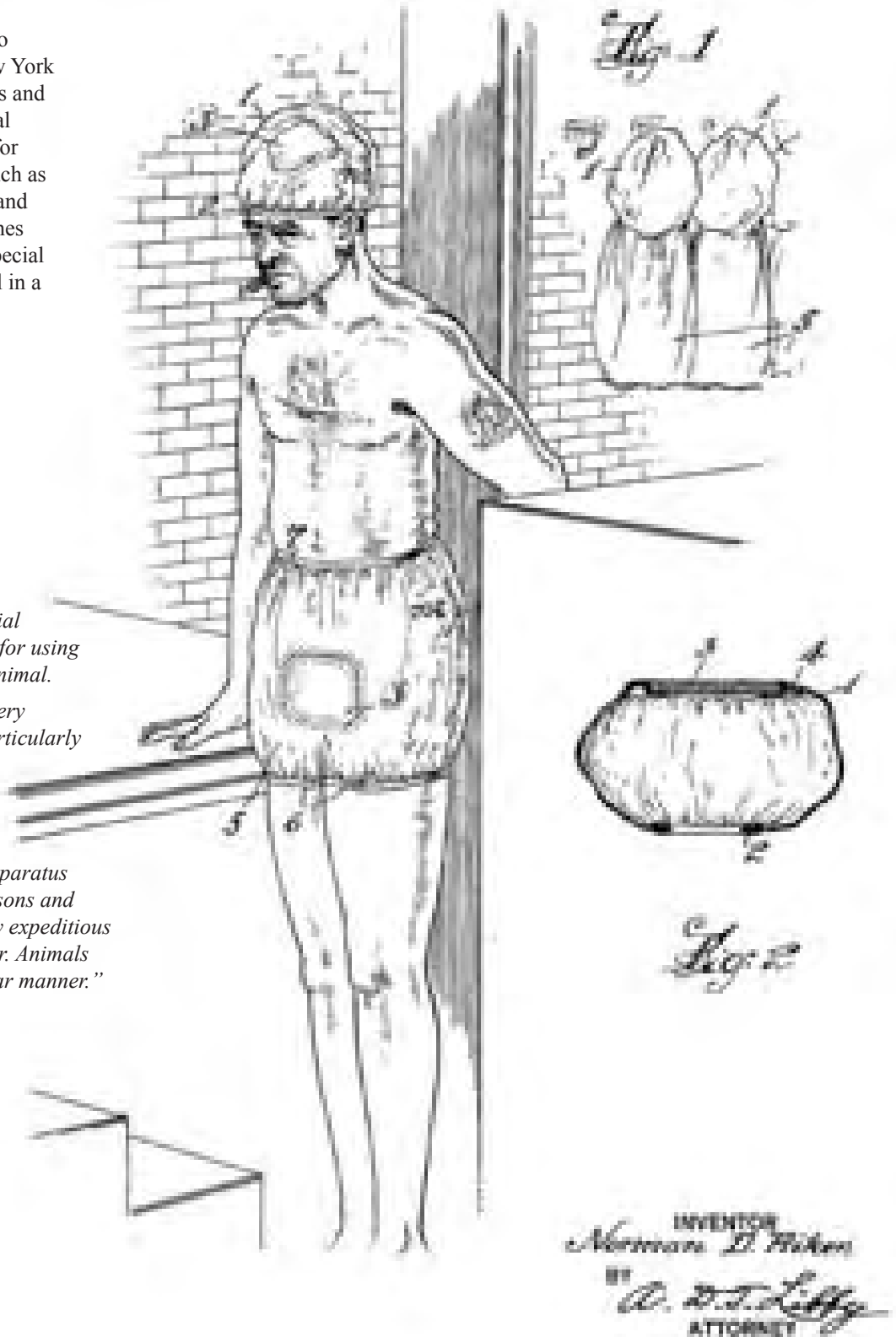
*Inventive, yet under-publicized devices*

*by Marina Tsipis, Improbable Research staff*

U.S. patent #2033357 was granted to Norman D. Riker of Plandome, New York on March 10, 1936 for an “apparatus and process for killing human and animal vermin.” It is intended, he writes, “for killing human and animal vermin such as *Pediculus capitis*, *Pediculus pubis*, and *Pediculus corporis*.” Mr. Riker clothes the infested human or animal in a special garment which bathes the individual in a pest-killing chemical solution.

*Norman D. Riker invented this special “gas-tight” clothing, and a method for using it to kill vermin on a person or an animal.*

*In his patent, Riker writes that “It very frequently happens that persons, particularly men, coming into hospitals, night lodging houses, and missionary settlements, are infested with vermin..., and it is the principle object of my invention to provide apparatus and a process for treating these persons and exterminating the vermin in a highly expeditious and not at all uncomfortable manner. Animals may be treated in a somewhat similar manner.”*





# Bends on the Learning Curve

*Improbable ideas and explanations collected from classrooms*

by Richard Lederer

Here are some biological discoveries described by students in their homework and tests:

- When a boy reaches puberty, he says good-bye to his boyhood and looks forward to his adultery.
- Food is taken into the mouth and masturbated.
- Many young girls are getting pregnant every day.
- A disease associated with smoking is premature death.
- I feel that if you are going to have sex with your boyfriend or husband, you should use some kind of conception.

Please send your best specimens, together with sources whenever possible, to:

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*Items that merit a trip to the library*

compiled by Stephen Drew, Improbable Research staff



## The Color of Odors

Gil Morrot

Unité de Biochimie Biophysique et Analytique, Centre INRA de Montpellier, Montpellier, France

and

Frédéric Brochet and Denis Dubourdieu

Faculté d'œnologie de l'Université de Bordeaux 2, Talence, France

Published online August 28, 2001

The interaction between the vision of colors and odor determination is investigated through lexical analysis of experts' wine tasting comments. The analysis shows that the colors of a wine are, for the most part, represented by objects that have the color of the wine. The assumption of the existence of a perceptual illusion between color and color is confirmed by a psychological experiment. A white wine artificially colored red with an odorless dye was olfactively described

### Wine: Experts Turn Red

"The Color of Odors," Gil Morrot, Frédéric Brochet and Denis Dubourdieu, *Brain and Language*, vol. 79, no. 2, November 2001, pp. 309–20 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1006/brln.2001.2493>). (Thanks to Marielle Retton for bringing this to our attention.) The authors, at Centre INRA de Montpellier, France and at the Université de Bordeaux,

The interaction between the vision of colors and odor determination is investigated through lexical analysis of experts' wine tasting comments.... A white wine artificially colored red with an odorless dye was olfactively described as a red wine by a panel of 54 tasters.

### Rabbits and Carrots: The Plot Thickens

"Hyperstotic Polyarthropathy in a Rabbit: Suspected Case of Chronic Hypervitaminosis A From a Diet of Carrots," J.L. Frater, *Australian Veterinary Journal*, vol. 79, no. 9, 2001, pp. 608–11. (Thanks to Wendy Cooper for bringing this to our attention.)

### Clink Dream Meals

"Food Fantasies of Incarcerated Drug Users," G. Weiss, *International Journal of Addictions*, vol. 17, 1982, pp. 905–12.

We welcome your suggestions for this column. Please enclose the full citation (no abbreviations!) and, if possible, a copy of the paper.

### Every Day

Read something new and improbable every weekday on the Improbable Research blog, on our web site:

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# Boys Will Be Boys

Research by and for adolescent males of all ages and sexes

compiled by Katherine Lee, Improbable Research staff

## A Trickle of Interest

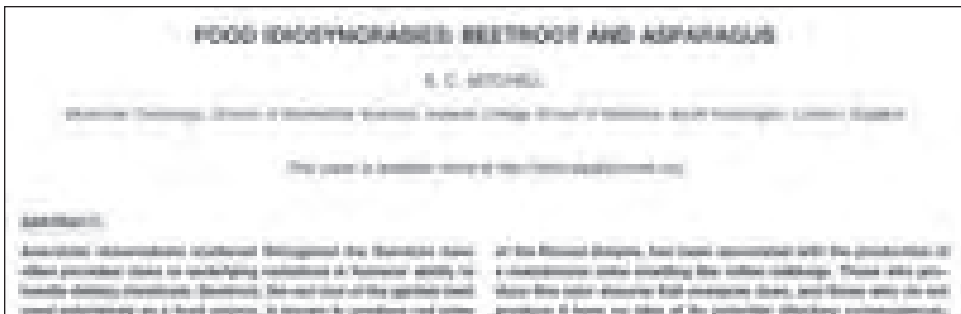
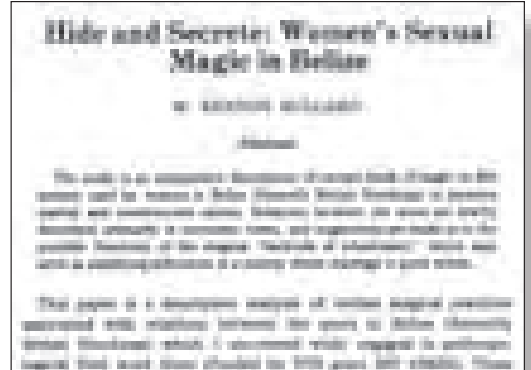
“Food Idiosyncrasies: Beetroot and Asparagus,” S.C. Mitchell, *Drug Metabolism and Disposition*, vol. 29, no. 4, part 2, 2001, pp. 539–43. (Thanks to Danny O’Hare for bringing this to our attention.) The author, at Imperial College School of Medicine, London, reports:

Anecdotal observations scattered throughout the literature have often provided clues to underlying variations in humans’ ability to handle dietary chemicals. Beetroot, the red root of the garden beet used extensively as a food source, is known to produce red urine in some people following its ingestion, whereas others appear to be able to eat the vegetable with impunity. Asparagus, a vegetable whose young shoots have been eaten as a delicacy since the times of the Roman Empire, has been associated with the production of a malodorous urine smelling like rotten cabbage. Those who produce this odor assume that everyone does, and those who do not produce it have no idea of its potential olfactory consequences. These two examples, where the population appears divided in its ability to process food products or more precisely the chemicals contained within them, are reviewed in detail in this article.

## Squat On a Pot

“Hide and Secrete: Women’s Sexual Magic in Belize,” M. Kenyon Bullard, *The Journal of Sex Research*, vol. 10, no. 4, November 1974, pp. 259–65. The author reports:

Women introduce into various food substances their own bodily secretions. Such terms as “coco soup” and “sweat rice” refer to these preparations. Women will squat over a pot of steaming rice and wait for the resulting perspiration to fall into the rice. Or they will rinse a cloth used to absorb the menstrual flow and use the resulting water in making soups where the liberal use of spices and seasonings disguises the nature of the principal ingredient. Finely cut up pubic hair is another possible addition. Water used to wash the genital area (a separate part of bathing done daily before retiring by women) is also used for cooking.



## Ear-Rectal Link in Boars: New Evidence

“Continuous Monitoring of Ear Temperature in Boars,” J. Bekkering and S. Hoy, *Deutsche Tierärztliche Wochenschrift*, vol. 114, no. 1, January 2007, pp. 16–9. (Thanks to David S. Gottfried for bringing this to our attention.) The authors, who are at Justus Liebig University of Giessen, Germany, report that:

## Sad, Misunderstood Prostate

“The Sad, Misunderstood Prostate: Understanding Perceptions and Reality,” M.T. Rosenberg, *International Journal of Clinical Practice*, vol. 60, no. 10, October 2006, pp. 1148–9 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1742-1241.2006.01132.x>). (Thanks to Marie Diamond for bringing this to our attention.)

the coefficient of correlation between skin and rectal temperature was low. Thus, the measurement of the skin temperature at the ear cannot be used as a significant or safe parameter for predicting the rectal temperature and so with the health status of the animal.

## Hypothesis About Protrusions

“Hypothesis for the Evolution of Human Breasts and Buttocks,” John G.H. Cant, *American Naturalist*, vol. 117, 1981, pp. 199–204. The author, at the University of Colorado, points out that:

Humans have been interested in breasts and buttocks, in one way or another, for a long time.

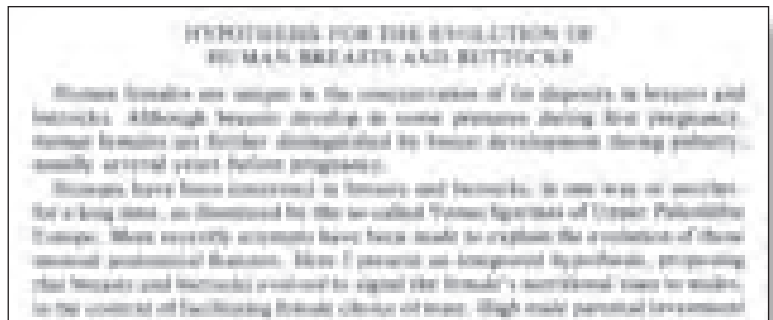
## Structured Management Approach to Small-Structure Complaint

“Structured Management and Counseling for Patients with a Complaint of a Small Penis,” Hussein Ghanem, Rany Shamloul, Fathy Khodeir, Hany ElShafie, Amr Kaddah and Ihab Ismail, *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, vol. 4, no. 5, September 2007, pp. 1322–7 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-6109.2007.00463.x>). (Thanks to Kristine Danowski for bringing this to our attention.)

## Death by Vegetable

“Fatal Air Embolism During Female Autoerotic Practice,” Bernard Marc, Aly Chadly and Michel Durigon, *International Journal of Legal Medicine*, vol. 104, no. 1, January 1990, pp. 59–61 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF01816487>). The authors, at Hôpital Raymond Poincaré in Garches, France, report:

We report a case of air embolism in a 40-year-old non-pregnant woman subsequent to vaginal insertion of a foreign body (carrot) for an autoerotic purpose.... As such risks may often be encountered and as, to our knowledge, no similar case has previously been reported, we may speculate if such air embolisms are underdiagnosed or dissimulated by the partners when questioned by the medical rescue teams.



## Pointing the Finger

“The Law of Unintended Consequences: The Joint Commission Regulations and the Digital Rectal Examination,” Bruce D. Adams, Keri Jo A. McHugh, Scott A. Bryson and Joanne Dabulewicz, *Annals of Emergency Medicine*, vol. 51, no. 2, February 2008, pp. 197–201 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.annemergmed.2007.07.022>). The authors, who are based at various U.S. military medical facilities, explain:

The Joint Commission (TJC) recently issued stringent regulations about quality control testing of waived laboratory tests.... [This] policy was negatively and unintentionally associated with physician examinations, most notably the performance of a digital rectal examination. Institutional regulations designed for patient safety may unintentionally influence patient care. Economists describe this paradoxical phenomenon as the Law of Unintended Consequences. The costs and benefits of such policies should be analyzed before implementation and enforcement of new medical regulations.



# Soft Is Hard

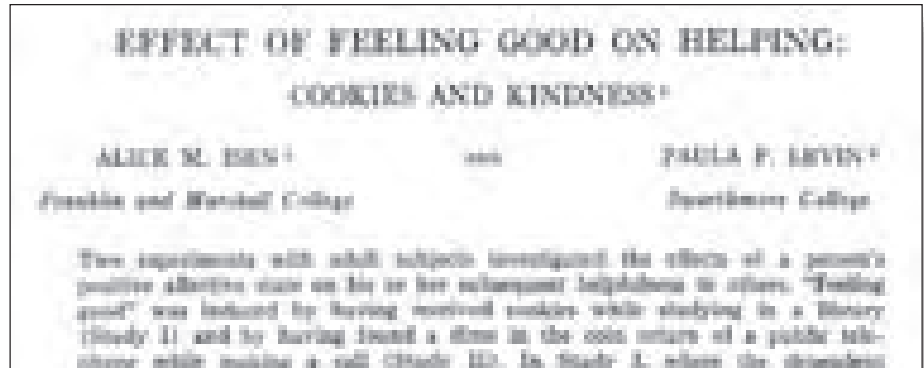
Further evidence why the “soft” sciences are the hardest to do well

compiled by Alice Shirrell Kaswell and Bissell Mango, Improbable Research staff

## Goodness and Cookies

“Effect of Feeling Good on Helping: Cookies and Kindness,” Alice M. Isen, and Paula F. Levin, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 21, no. 3, March 1972, pp. 384–8 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0032317>). The authors, who are respectively at Franklin and Marshall College and at Swarthmore College, explain that they:

Investigated the effects of a person’s positive affective state on his or her subsequent helpfulness to others. “Feeling good” was induced (a) in 52 male undergraduates by having received cookies while studying in a library (Study I), and (b) in 24 female and 17 male adults by having found a dime in the coin return of a public telephone (Study II)... In Study II, the dependent measure was whether Ss spontaneously helped to pick up papers that were dropped in front of them. On the basis of previous research, it was predicted that subjects who were thus made to “feel good” would be more helpful... Results support the predictions.



## The Right Way to Weep

“The Perception of Crying in Women and Men: Angry Tears, Sad Tears, and the ‘Right Way’ to Weep,” L.R. Warner and S.A. Shields, in *Emotion Recognition Across Social Groups*, U. Hess and P. Phillipot (eds.), Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 92–118. (Thanks to David Derro for bringing this to our attention.) The authors are at Pennsylvania State University.

## Does Food Quality Really Matter?

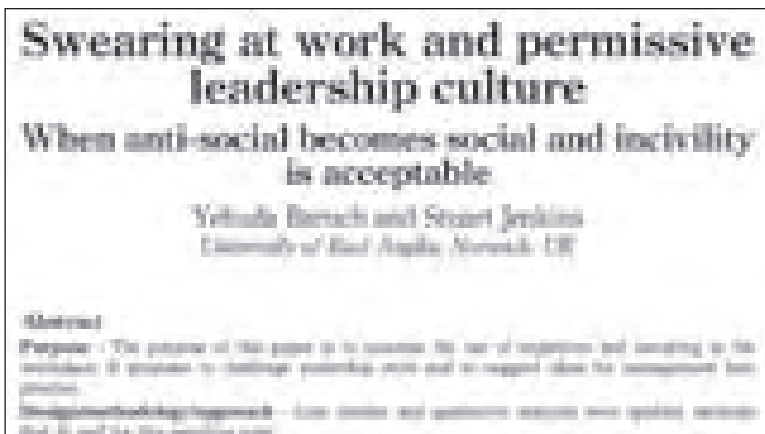
“Does Food Quality Really Matter in Restaurants? Its Impact On Customer Satisfaction and Behavioral Intentions,” Young Namkung and SooCheong Jang, *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2007, pp. 387–409 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1096348007299924>). (Thanks to Eric Tionis for bringing this to our attention.) The authors, at Purdue University, report:

The primary objective of this study was to investigate how food quality is perceived in relation to satisfaction and behavioral intentions in mid- to upscale restaurants... With a structural equation modeling technique, this study shows that overall food quality significantly affects customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions and also revealed that the relationship between food quality and customer behavioral intentions is mediated by satisfaction.

## Swearing at Work

“Swearing at Work and Permissive Leadership Culture: When Anti-Social Becomes Social and Incivility is Acceptable,” Yehuda Baruch and Stuart Jenkins, *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, vol. 28, no. 6, 2007, pp. 492–507 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/01437730710780958>). (Thanks to Nina-May Haydon for bringing this to our attention.) The authors, at the University of East Anglia, explain that:

The purpose of this paper is to examine the use of expletives and swearing in the workplace.... This paper identifies the relevance, and even the importance, of using non-conventional and sometimes uncivil language in the workplace.





Proto-Professor Algarth Zag, pioneer in fire research.

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