

## From the Back Verandah

Here is the solution to Quizz Gig 1, which I set in Issue 25 (May 2001).

— Fizzgig

1. What was the stage name of John Simon Ritchie?

— Sid Vicious (1957-79), punk rock guitarist with the Sex Pistols.

2. Whose funeral took place in a medical school and consisted of a eulogy followed by the dissection of the corpse?

— Philosopher and father of Utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832).

3. Which political exile lived for a short time with painter Diego Rivera?

— Leon Trotsky (1879-1940), who fled Stalinist Russia in 1929. He and his family stayed with Rivera in 1937.

4. For what is Muhammed edh-Dibh best known?

— “Muhammed the Wolf” was the nickname of Ahmad el-Hamed, the Bedouin shepherd boy who in February 1947 clambered into a cave in the Judaeen desert, 25 km ESE of Jerusalem, and chanced upon two jars containing seven ancient Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts. These were the first discovered of what we now call the Dead Sea Scrolls.

5. Whose dead body was identified by a volume of Keats in his coat pocket?

— Poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). He drowned after his schooner capsized in the Gulf of Spezia, Italy.

6. Whom did Gandhi call “the highest moral authority” on account of his

religious tracts promoting peace through non-resistance?

— Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910). (One example is *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, 1894.)

7. Which literary figure once arrived in America proclaiming, “I have come to continue my search for naked women in wet mackintoshes”?

— Welsh poet and lush-about-town, Dylan Thomas (1914-53). The U.S. visit in question took place in 1950.

8. Name the lawyer and unsuccessful U.S. Presidential candidate who was described by H.L. Mencken in these words: “He was born with a roaring voice, and it had the trick of inflaming half-wits.”

— William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925). Shortly before his death he locked horns with Clarence Darrow in the Scopes “monkey trial”.

9. Regarding his work it was asked, “Where are their feet?” Who was he?

— Motion picture producer/director D. W. Griffith (1875-1948). Audiences heckled when he used close-ups.

10. Whose embalmed head was kept for 29 years by his widow in a red leather bag?

— Courtier, navigator, poet and tobacco and potato popularizer Sir Walter Raleigh (1554-1618), beheaded for various offences against King James I.

# BIKWIL

The Newsletter of Quiet Enthusiasms

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## Internet Follies

What is it that worries you most about the Internet?

censorship?  
 commercialisation?  
 computer viruses?  
 copyright infringement?  
 pornography?  
 privacy invasion?  
 technology haves and have-nots?  
 terrorist information?

As an Internet user for the last five and half years for email, news and humour, naturally, but particularly for research, I myself have been paying keen attention to another topic.

In brief, my interest can be encapsulated in this question: how

reliable is the information which you find on the Net?

Many of you will remember that I have mentioned a couple of times already in *Bikwil* the dangers of carte-blanche acceptance of everything you read on the Net. Well, along the way I've been collecting opinions and advice on the whole question of Net credibility, and my *Web Line* column in this issue brings together what I have learned so far.

Though longish, my material might be of interest not only to general Internet truth seekers, but also to students and educators, parents, aunties, grandfathers . . .

### Colophon

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*Back Issues Are Still Available*

*This makes me so sore it gets my dandruff up.*

*Samuel Goldwyn*

*Middle age is when you're sitting at home on Saturday night and the telephone rings and you hope it isn't for you.*

*Ogden Nash*

## Quintessential Quirky Quotes

*If all economists were laid end to end, they would not reach a conclusion.*

*George Bernard Shaw*

*Ask not what you can do for your country. Ask what's for lunch.*

*Orson Welles*

*Some mornings it just doesn't seem worth it to gnaw through the leather straps.*

*Emo Phillips*

method of creating models of the molecule's subunits. But when they showed their first DNA model of three inter-twisted helices to Wilkins and Franklin, Franklin was quick to point out its deficiencies — primarily that it was incompatible with her own diffraction data.

Crick established that the bases in DNA are always paired in the same way, but he and Watson at this point ignored Franklin's insistence on the correct location of the sugars. Meanwhile, Pauling had produced his DNA model. It too contained three twisted helices and was also clearly wrong.

Without asking her permission, Wilkins showed Watson and Crick one of Franklin's then unpublished photographs, which was crucial evidence for the helical structure. Very excited when he saw the picture, Watson built a model that incorporated two helices, paired bases, plus Franklin's sugar structure. Crick did calculations that showed that this model was feasible. Wilkins and Franklin produced X-ray diffraction calculations that confirmed the structure. On a visit to Cambridge, Linus Pauling agreed.

Rosalind Franklin has been described as an aloof loner, and according to Watson she and Wilkins got on each other's nerves. On the other hand, in the exclusively male scientific world she inhabited she was not even allowed into the Common Room where she could talk shop with her colleagues.

In *The Race for the Double Helix*, Mick Jackson wisely allows time for all the diverse personalities to be developed. Rosalind Franklin, in particular, is presented quite sympathetically, particularly at the end, where she accepts defeat so graciously.

The irony is that had she lived (she died at the untimely age of 37), she'd have almost certainly won the Big One for her vital contribution, but under its rules the Nobel Prize is never awarded posthumously. Four years after her death Watson, Crick and Wilkins did win the Physiology/Medicine Prize for their discoveries.

— TR

(This essay will be continued in the next issue.)

## *Flying over a Beach in Sumbawa*

How close they are:

Their red blooms straining  
on their stalks,

Reaching up like buoys fastened  
to the seabed with fishing line:

Some made simply from supermarket  
carriers and driftwood

others lovingly tailored  
from salvaged scraps of nylon.

They are a species of eye  
launched by the curious below

throwing their whole lives  
into the air

— Jason Clapham

[ Jason Clapham runs the Les Murray Web site (<http://www.lesmurray.org/>), and can be contacted at [jec@jasonclapham.net](mailto:jec@jasonclapham.net) ]

## A Word in Your Pink Shell-like

Mention by Fizzgig in the last issue (No. 27, September 2001) of Jonathan Swift has reminded me of a particular couple of coinages the great Anglo-Irish satirist is responsible for, but whose origins tend to be forgotten today.

Firstly, there's the expression *the Land of Nod*, meaning "sleep". He used in No. 214 of his *Polite Conversation* of 1738.

The full title of this droll work was, in characteristic 18th century style, *A Compleat Collection of Genteel and Ingenious Conversation, according to the most polite Mode and Method, now used at Court, and in the best Companies of England, in several Dialogues*.

*Polite Conversation* is often credited as the source of many a fine quote like the following three, (though some, I strongly suspect, are old sayings from long before Swift's time):

The sight of you is good for sore eyes

She's no chicken; she's on the wrong side of thirty, if she be a day

She looks as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.

Whatever the case with them, however, *the Land of Nod* is

Swift's own. Mind you, it is actually a pun on the Biblical passage in *Genesis*. iv. 16:

And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.

The second coinage by Swift will be very familiar to (and valued by) those of you using the Internet — the word *Yahoo*. Yes, this very common word for "lout" or "philistine" was an invention of Jonathan Swift's. He coined it for a race of degraded "brutes in the form of men" in the nowadays virtually ignored Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). The two quotes the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives run as follows:

(a) The Fore-feet of the Yahoo differed from my Hands in nothing else, but the length of the Nails, the Coarseness and Brownness of the Palms, and the Hairiness on the Backs.

(b) I told him, we had great Numbers [of Houyhnhnms] . . . [that] Yahoo-Servants were employed to rub their Skins smooth . . .

(For the record, the word *Houyhnhnms* is onomatopoeic for the sound of neighing, being another invention of Swift's to name the race of reason-endowed horse-beings who ruled over the Yahoos.)

— Harlish Goop

genetic information since 1944, but what it looked like, how its component parts fitted together and how it performed its hereditary function remained a mystery.

Across the Atlantic, several scientists were interested in the problem. Maurice Wilkins (b. 1916), a physicist working at King's College in London when he heard of Pauling's discovery, began to wonder whether DNA might have a helical structure too. His research method was to use the technique known as X-ray crystallography.

In 1951 Rosalind Elsie Franklin (1920-58) joined the laboratory as another X-ray crystallographer — not, as is sometimes thought, as Wilkins' subordinate, but as his peer. Though in her career she performed much other useful research, it is her investigations on DNA for which she deserves to be honoured, not only for the beautiful X-ray diffraction photographs she obtained, but also for her insight into their implications. While unconvinced about the whole DNA helical idea at first, Franklin extended the studies begun by Wilkins and gradually produced better and better high-resolution photographs.

The complexity of DNA remained a frustration, however, and with no lenses to focus X-rays as there are with light rays, mathematics must take the place of glass, sometimes involving calculating from models based on guesses. This is where Crick and Watson enter the story.

Francis Crick (also born in 1916) was a physics graduate student at Cambridge. As much as he would have liked to do DNA X-ray diffraction studies, English protocol kept him from competing with Wilkins and Franklin, though it did not prevent him thinking and talking non-stop about DNA. Indeed, thinking and talking and guessing were what Crick and Watson were best at — and this included gossiping and the picking of other people's brains — for they really preferred discussing other people's results to doing their own experiments.

James Watson, 12 years Crick's junior, had come from America as a postgraduate genetics student. Showing none of Crick's restraint he applied for work in X-ray crystallography, and was taken on at the same lab, where he gradually learned to do diffractions. Working together, Watson and Crick tried Pauling's

*A Night to Remember* (British, 1958) and *Titanic* (American, 1953 and 1997). And as comedian John Cleese and family therapist Robin Skynner point out in their *Life and How to Survive It*, while “Americans love you if you’re successful: it’s *failure* they *can’t* forgive”, for the English “[it’s] anything optimistic, full of hope, or uplifting that makes them uneasy”.

For *Threads*, producer/director Mick Jackson assembled a cast who at the time were virtual unknowns (Karen Meagher, Reece Dinsdale, Rita May, Nicholas Lane and Victoria O’Keefe). This in itself adds to the horrific realism by not distracting the audience with star actors.

Not only that, by concentrating in such a matter-of-fact way on the effects of radiation and nuclear winter and extending his story of increasing hopelessness and horror to three generations, he succeeds in making his sobering cautionary point far more compellingly than a movie with a hopeful ending could ever hope to achieve — much as we on this comfortable side of a global holocaust might desire it.

Unlike Stanley Kubrick with his big-screen masterpieces, Mick Jackson has specialised in producing and/or directing telemovies, some fictional, some based on fact. Another fictional one you may remember was the satire *A Very British Coup* (1988), developed for TV by Alan Plater from Chris Mullins’ novel and starring Ray McAnally and Alan MacNaughtan.

As regards Jackson’s “factual” movies, one of the best was *The Race for the Double Helix*, made in 1974 for the BBC with Jeff Goldblum as James Watson, Tim Piggot-Smith as Francis Crick, Alan Howard as Maurice Wilkins and Juliet Stevenson as **Rosalind Franklin**. The story of the discovery in 1953 of the structure of the DNA molecule is a riveting one and, considering the competitive nature of the search, Jackson’s docudrama title is quite appropriate.

First there was a team led by U.S. chemist Linus Pauling (1901-94), who in 1951 had discovered a three-dimensional spiral structure in proteins, and was now working on DNA. Deoxyribonucleic acid had been known as the chemical transmitter of

## The Azimuth Suite

[ From Her *Poems for Azimuth* ]

### I

Music: as scintillating as stars,  
joyful and affirming as dance,  
vivid with images of time and place,  
from dreamtime to ragtime,  
now it soars, now softly falls,  
tender with tones of love and of loss.

### II

Something so lovely as this,  
how can I enter it,  
dare interrupt the flow,  
become part of it?

Stay quiet. Listen. And wait.  
The sore heart closed against pain,  
in stillness can open again to receive.  
Beauty and peace in stillness are born.

### III

I wait in stillness and listen,  
and soft as my breath,  
with each inspiration,  
this sound, this cascade  
enters me, it enfolds me  
in textures of grace.

## Enormous Jabs of Pleasure

[ Memorable Moments in Music No. 4 ]

A great moment in music is reasonably perceived to be a live moment, but such a moment on film bears a unique, though paradoxical, organicity: we can continue to experience it in its imperfectly frozen essence. To me, the greatest such moment — and definitely a standout moment in music — is Judy Garland's legendary performance of *The Man That Got Away* in the 1954 remake of *A Star Is Born*.

The scene that film critic David Denby once referred to as a great moment in American film is that and more. Norman Maine (James Mason) searches for Esther Blodgett (Garland), and finds her jamming with her band after-hours in an otherwise deserted club on Sunset Boulevard. The chairs are stacked on the tables, and the lights are very low. The boys in the band are playing softly, and when Danny (Tommy Noonan) tells Esther to "take it from the top," we hear the now-famous muted trombone introduction to the Arlen-Gershwin classic. When Esther is finished, Norman tells her that listening to

her gives him "little jabs of pleasure", and compares the experience to watching a great prizefight or a great dancer.

A little history is in order here. Much of the George Cukor-directed film (produced by Garland's husband, Sid Luft) had already been shot when Warner Bros. decided to start all over, using CinemaScope. In his biography of Garland, *Get Happy*, Gerald Clarke explains that the early CinemaScope process was flawed. The cameras could capture a wide screen, but they didn't have much flexibility in coming in for zooms and clasps. Intimate scenes like the one in the club were difficult to shoot.

There were several costume considerations. In John Fricke's book on Garland, there is a photo of the star in one of the rejected costumes: A-line skirt, big belt, short-sleeved blouse with the first two buttons unbuttoned. The final selection, of course, was the dark blue, fitted dress with three-quarter sleeves, a big white collar and a printed tie —

*Inferno*, 1974). We were therefore considered ready for a couple of feature films that concentrated, not on politicians' ability or inability to stop global thermo-nuclear war, but on the calamitous effects of such a conflict.

Softened up we may have been by the exploits of Lancaster, Hackman, Heston and McQueen as they dealt with catastrophe, but no one, I'd say, was really prepared mentally or emotionally for what appeared on our TV screens in the mid to late 80s. Here in Australia we were subjected to both controversial nuclear war aftermath movies in the one year, namely the American *The Day After* and the British *Threads*. Both were developed specially for television, and both were disturbing presentations, devastating in their joint impact.

*The Day After* (1983) is set in the Kansas town of Lawrence after a Russian nuclear bomb explodes there, and traces the tribulations of several families. The cast includes Jason Robards, JoBeth Williams, John Lithgow and Amy Madigan. In similar vein, *Threads* (1984) portrays events that lead up to and follow a nuclear war. It follows two families in the working-class

Yorkshire town of Sheffield whose son and daughter are about to get married.

While *The Day After* has its catastrophic and poignant moments, it seems too heroic or optimistic or glamourised or . . . something. Sanitised, perhaps? Certainly Hollywoodised. I saw it before I saw *Threads* and quite appreciated it at the time, but once having sat through the heart-breaking and sometimes stomach-turning *Threads*, I knew which for me was by far the superior film.

How can I forget its chilling, unrelenting bleakness? How can I ever fail to remember the sight of people toiling miserably in the fields after the nuclear winter has set in? How can I ever put out of my mind that shattering childbirth scene with which *Threads* concludes?

Maybe I'm generalising, but I believe that the presentation difference has to do with how Americans and the English are sometimes incompatible in their worldview and how they instinctively portray this on film. We have only to look at movie versions of the *Titanic* story to see this dissimilarity of approach —

*Fail-Safe*. Basing his script on Peter George's novel *Red Alert*, Kubrick found, however,

. . . while trying to flesh out the screenplay, that he was continually forced to leave out things "which were either absurd or paradoxical in order to keep [the screenplay] from being funny; and these things seemed to be close to the heart of the scenes in question." (*Baseline* and Gene D. Phillips in *Stanley Kubrick: A Film Odyssey*)

In collaboration with Peter George and screenwriter Terry Southern (*The Loved One*, *Barbarella*, *Easy Rider*), Kubrick instead devised a hilarious, clever script that as far as I'm concerned does not seem passé or forced all these years later. Part of the reason being, of course, the inspired performances of the cast, who were encouraged to improvise.

Hard to disregard, for example, are George C. Scott, Keenan Wynn, James Earl Jones and Slim Pickens in their memorably bizarre roles as General "Buck" Turgidson, Colonel "Bat" Guano, Lieutenant Lothar Zogg and Major T.J. "King" Kong, respectively.

Great names, aren't they? Especially Buck Turgidson, who is a sexual profligate, and just the

opposite of another U.S. General, Jack D. Ripper (played by Sterling Hayden), who keeps reminding us that he stays away from women in order to preserve his "precious bodily fluids".

It is Sellers, however, who steals the show, Strangelove's battle with that mechanical arm of his being worth the price of admission on its own, according to *Baseline*.

One interesting sidelight. Believe it or not, at one point Kubrick & Co. had scripted the final scene of *Dr. Strangelove* as a magnificent drawn-out custard pie fight in the War room. In fact, a week was spent filming it. In the end, however, Kubrick decided on the climax we know and love today — nuclear bombs exploding all over the planet, the voice of Vera Lynn singing *We'll Meet Again* and Peter Sellers (as Strangelove) hysterically demonic in his delivery of the last gem of a line.

By the time twenty years had passed since *Dr. Strangelove*, the public had been energized by a string of large-budget disaster movies (*Airport*, 1970; *The Poseidon Adventure*, 1972; *Earthquake*, 1974; *The Towering*

an Esther Blodgett dress if ever there were one.

One wonders how much more devastating the scene would have been in black and white, but it is good enough in color. *The Man That Got Away*, arguably the greatest torch song ever written, is heartbreaking to listen to. When you watch Garland's performance in the film, however, you see more of an ironic interpretation. She smiles a lot; she is visibly pleased with the strength of her own performance. At one point, she is framed by shelves of bar glasses in the back, and — on the left — the startling appearance of brass and wind instruments, which are raised in a counterpoint to her performance. When Garland sings "Good riddance, Good-bye", she makes a dismissive gesture toward the orchestra, and the trumpets, trombones and saxophones are just as suddenly withdrawn.

Twice, the singer does the trademark Garland hand-through-the-hair gesture, and her movements range from elocutionary to Vaudevillian. When the song is over, she winks. In a lesser artist, these movements would have been over the top,

but when Garland executes them, they are perfect.

Hollywood legend has it that vocal arranger Hugh Martin argued fiercely with Garland over her interpretation of the song, and we can only make an educated guess that Garland won the argument. It is, in fact, absurd to think that anyone anywhere would have argued with Judy Garland over the vocal interpretation of *any* song.

A lot of credit for the stunning effect of *The Man That Got Away* scene, which occurs early in the film, must go to Harold Arlen and Ira Gershwin, for the song itself is haunting. The orchestral arrangement by Skip Martin, with its seductively driven coda, is brilliant. And then there is Judy Garland herself, whom we cannot—and should not—totally separate from Esther Blodgett or Vicki Lester.

By the time Garland made *A Star Is Born*, she was ravaged by alcohol and drugs, most of her romantic dreams had "all gone astray," and she was dealing with the consequences of her own substance-driven behaviors. She still had her marvelous sense of humor, which she never

lost. In the film, she is Everywoman, with layers of skin peeled off. Her otherworldly voice takes possession of her body and suffuses it with a strength that makes her appear physically powerful. She is the perfect vessel for the perfect song.

*A Star Is Born* became a victim of the worst type of Hollywood abuse. Despite glowing critical acclaim for the film, Harry Warner—secretly, and at the last minute—cut twenty-seven minutes from the three-hour movie, thinking he could get a better box office return with a shorter product. Judy Garland was nominated for a Best Actress Oscar, but lost to Grace Kelly, for her role in *The Country Girl*. Perhaps even more outrageous, *The Man That Got Away*, nominated for Best Song, lost to the insipid *Three Coins In a Fountain*. *A Star Is Born* did not even receive a Best Picture nomination, and Cukor wasn't nominated as Best Director. The popularity-driven Academy Awards are never much of a gauge of what is good in film, but the 1954 travesties have gone down in film history as especially low moments.

Fortunately, in 1983, *A Star Is Born* was given new life.

Footage that Warner had destroyed was restored, and the footage that resisted restoration was replaced with still photographs. I was fortunate enough to see a premiere of the restored version at New Orleans' grand old Saenger Theater, with its giant screen and outlandishly ornate ceilings and balconies. When the Sunset Boulevard club scene appeared on the screen and Garland sang *The Man That Got Away*, I was a mass of deep breathing and taut muscles. Never having seen Garland live, I drank in every facial twitch, every eye opening, every vibrating phrase.

There are many great musical moments in film, and several of them feature Judy Garland. But for me, there will probably never be one with the combination of intimacy, simplicity and primitive power of *The Man That Got Away*. For a few minutes, Judy Garland owns a piece of your very soul, and you are completely satisfied to give it up to her.

— Diane Dees Tobiason

[ Diane Dees Tobiason runs a Web site called The Princess Cafe (<http://www.princesscafe.com/Cafe/Welcome/index.html>), and can be contacted at [deestob@aol.com](mailto:deestob@aol.com) ]

## Dr. Strangelove and Friends

[ *Stepping Stones* No. 2 ]

Younger *Bikwil* readers, when asked to name their favourite performance of Peter Sellers (1925-80), might immediately think of his film appearances and so nominate Inspector Clouseau (1964, 1975, 1976, 1978 and 1982) or Chance, the mentally retarded main character in *Being There* (1979), or perhaps the bumbling actor from New Delhi in *The Party* (1968). On the other hand, elderly fans of *The Goons* (1951-9) will be well aware of the diversity of roles Sellers played in that radio show, and might be hard put to choose between them. Apart from his four regular parts (The Hon. Hercules Grytpype-Thynne, Major Denis Bloodnok, Henry Crun and Bluebottle), Sellers could turn his talented voice to any outlandish minor character that Spike Milligan and his cohort writers could dream up. In *The Canal* and *The Phantom Head-Shaver of Brighton*, for example, he played six roles, while in *The £50 Cure* he performed a total of nine.

When he moved into big-release movies, Sellers occasionally took on multiple parts in that medium too, notably in the hugely popular *The Mouse That Roared* (1959). No wonder, then, that producer/director Stanley Kubrick was keen to sign him up for three roles in his black-and-white classic *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). Sellers played the title role (the mad wheelchair-bound German inventor of The Bomb, with an artificial arm that's always about to rise of its own accord into a Nazi salute), Group Captain Lionel Mandrake (a British Air Force liaison officer) and Merkin J. Muffley (the U.S. President).

Described in *Baseline's Motion Picture Guide Review* as "one of the finest, funniest, most intelligent black comedies ever made", *Dr. Strangelove* was in actual fact originally intended to have a straight dramatic plot like that of another 1964 anti-cold-war movie

understand what leads people to believe what they find on the Web. To this end they are conducting ongoing quantitative research on several aspects of Web credibility. Some of their fascinating research they publish on their site, *Stanford Web Credibility Research*.

Finally, I should mention a site dedicated to the fundamental skills of “reading and writing ideas as well as words”—*Critical Reading*, put together by Dan Kurland. It is his mission to show students “how to recognize what a text says, what a text does, and what a text means, by analysing choices of content, language and structure”. His pages, in other words, set out to show what to look for and how to think about what you find.

All these commentators may conveniently be summarised as follows:

#### Internet sites referred to above:

<http://urbanlegends.miningco.com/library/blhoax.htm>  
<http://www.thelearningsite.net/cyberlibrarian/searching/ismain.html>  
<http://thorplus.lib.purdue.edu/~techman/evaluate.htm>  
<http://www.library.cornell.edu/okuref/webeval.html>  
<http://www.agora.qc.ca/textes/floridi2.html>  
<http://www.vanguard.edu/rharris/evalu8it.htm>  
<http://www.du.edu/~emelbye/pervoice/websiteeval.html>  
<http://www.vuw.ac.nz/~agsmith/evaln/evaln.htm>  
<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachinbgLib/Guides/Internet/Evaluate.html>  
<http://www.webcredibility.org/>  
<http://www.criticalreading.com/>

Verify the authority and trustworthiness of the author (organisational affiliation, position in an organization, availability of contact information)

Assess the temperateness of the opinions offered (balance, objectivity)

Try to find other sources that support the author’s viewpoint (i.e. apart from those that merely quote it)

Make sure that any source quoted can be corroborated

Check the stability of the information presented (currency and accuracy)

Take particular care when accepting views expressed in unsupervised discussion rooms.

Good stuff, as I think you’ll agree. All Dr. Bikwil can add for those sifting the significant from the worthless on the Internet is the advice, “I prescribe a gentle dose of scepticism, to be taken once per Internet session.”

— TR

## Web

Last issue (No. 27, September 2001), I quoted the great *Arts & Letters Daily*, who speak of “vast mountains of low-grade ore” on the Internet, and who are committed to panning for “precious nuggets of content”.

Let’s face it: 90% of the stuff on the Internet *is* crap. Let me testify right away, however, that the other 10% is pure gold, and it is in such precious places that the Internet redeems itself. Trouble is, for some people it’s difficult to be sure whether the information they turn up is dross or treasure.

This fool’s gold problem has come up before in this column. In Issue 15 (September 1999), for example, I wrote of the dangers of thoughtlessly accepting the superabundance of electronic medical advice at our disposal. You’ll recall also that in Issue 26 (July 2001) Fizzgig apologised for factual errors in the *From the Back Verandah* column of Issue 7 (May 1998), some of which derived from uncritical acceptance of Internet info.

But there are difficulties in other areas as well.



## Line

Take, for instance, the cases of rumour and urban myth. Showbiz gossip, I sincerely hope, can usually be seen for what it is, tittle-tattle of insignificant con-

sequence, though I dare say there are many who carry Fox Mulder’s motto close to their hearts: they want to believe. But what about those anecdotal odds and ends that become solidified into myth?

History abounds in conspicuous examples, of course, almost all fuelled by greed or wishful thinking. We only have to recall, say, these obvious instances of overselling, if not fraud: Tulipmania, the South-Sea Bubble investment scandal, as well as the cases of Ern Malley (Australian poet fabricated in the 1940s), Piltdown Man, crop circles, cold fusion and UFOs.

Not to mention a revived interest since 11 September 2001 in Nostradamus. Indeed, in our own day, the Internet has hardly been backward in offering rumour and myth, but in this case therapies are readily to hand using that selfsame technology. A good place to start, if you ever suspect you’re being

hoaxed by something you read or download, is the About Network's *Current Internet Hoaxes, Urban Legends, Rumors and Other Digital Lies*.

Looking further afield now, I want to move on to the hassles afforded by the Internet for the millions of school kids — and their teachers — who remain dependent on it.

Hassles? Surely the Net is there to assist students, not hinder them?

Let me explain.

In years gone by, the books on reading lists had been previously vetted carefully by education committees, and, since it was a rare student who ventured further than the prescribed selection of texts, the sources that pupils consulted could be relied on. These days, however, schoolchildren are exposed to the Internet from their kindergarten year onwards, and it is becoming increasingly hard for their teachers (especially in secondary school) to direct them solely to valid material, when error and bias are but a mouse click away.

So it seems to me that already overloaded teachers now have the added burden of teaching their students discernment in information seeking at a much earlier age than previously. Once upon a time this outlook might have been required

of honours history classes, but now if not learnt in the first years of secondary school all sorts of difficulties await the student at every hyperlink that offers itself.

Whichever way you look at it, the germane questions for reliability testing have always been these:

Where is the quality?

Where is the objectivity?

Where is the “truth”?

Fortunately, as regards quality, objectivity and “truth”, the Net itself provides some excellent guidance, with most of the best suggestions on the subject of information validation being offered by those unsung heroes and heroines of the research world — librarians.

But lest we ever fall into the trap of regarding the Net as just a big computerised library, I first want to refer to the essay collection *Cyberlines: Languages and Cultures of the Internet* (Donna Gibbs and Kerri-Lee Krause, eds.). In a review that Harlish Goop referred me to, in the June 2000 issue (Vol. 8, No. 1) of *Australian Style*, one essayist (Juliet McLean) is quoted as writing that, while the Net may seem to be “a giant library with almost infinite resources”, it is no library at all, merely a collection of “unevaluated trash”. Another contributor (Ross Todd) distinguishes between the World Wide Web and

libraries this way: the former is “full of misinformation, malinformation, messed up information, and useless information . . . the contrast with the controlled evaluated contents of a library could not be greater — and yet for glamour the Web wins hands down”.

The most useful sites on the subject of Internet information reliability I have so far tracked down include the following.

For the novice Net researcher, a good introduction is provided by Angela Elkordy. Her well set out Web site entitled *Web Searching and Sifting* clearly explains the evaluation process in the form of a series of questions to ask oneself.

The *Techman's Techpage: Evaluating Information on the Internet* of D. Scott Brandt, a technology training librarian, seeks to adapt traditional information evaluation techniques to the Net environment. His motto is: “To Search Is Not Necessarily To Evaluate”.

*Evaluating Web Sites: Criteria and Tools* is written by reference librarian Michael Engle. He covers search context, evaluation criteria and Web site rankings, and appends a helpful “Webliography”.

Luciano Floridi (a research fellow in philosophy), in his *Brave. Net.World: The Internet as a Disinformation Superhighway?*, takes a

more academic, theoretical approach, one that is readable and of use, however. For him, “the fundamental questions remain human and social”, not technical.

Robert Harris, a Professor of English, runs *Evaluating Internet Research Sources*, which is both academic and practical. *Evaluating Information Found on the Internet* by Elizabeth E. Kirk is another good piece, with a strong message on bias. Her closing paragraph includes this warning: “If you find information that is ‘too good to be true’, it probably is.”

Part of the Information Quality WWW Virtual Library, *Evaluation of Information Sources* is maintained by Alastair Smith. This is a comprehensive list of links for librarians and others who are “selecting sites to include in an information resource guide, or informing users as to the qualities they should use in evaluating Internet information.”

The *Evaluate* sub-site at the University of California, Berkeley provides some hands-on exercises for students to test their ability to assess Web pages for authenticity and integrity. Actual sites are listed for scrutiny, together with recommended questions and techniques.

Another U.S. University — Stanford — has a “Persuasive Technology Lab”, where a major goal is to