

From the Back Verandah

Tongues began wagging about 11 pm on the Saturday.

What was Ellen up to, furtively tapping on the door to Vlad's room? Did it cause her hurried departure from the conference?

At the time, opinion was divided, but one thing seemed clear: Vladimir Pissimov, King of All the Urals, was acting as host to this little meeting, and possibly also as instigator thereof.

As for the Chairwoman of the Reserve Bank of Columbia, Ellen Greenback — well, her attendance at the Colloquium Oeconomicum was no last-minute decision, even if her arrival at Vlad's door might have been. To those in the know, it had been long intended that she should appear at the Plenary Session on Saturday morning, almost as if by afterthought. As the organisers had predicted, she got a thunderous reception, but declined all sweet talk to say something fiscally profound. Her moment would come on Sunday.

Or would have, if that clandestine Saturday night meeting with Vlad hadn't taken place.

So what *did* Vlad want with Ellen in the middle of the night?

To this day the specifics have been shrouded in mystery, but now for the first time the truth can be revealed. It was nothing more or less than Vlad's pressing need for advice on how to eliminate all the junk email he was getting — miracle cures, bogus charities, Nigerian money-making schemes.

Ellen Greenback, it turns out, was a closet nerd — you know, they're the types who can be seen on Sundays at your local computer market, but who rarely show themselves at any other time or place — and she knew all about email spam filtering.

“What you ought to do is make a spam donation. I . . .”

To Slav ears, this sounded like it was about to develop into a quite different sort of suggestion, and he insisted that Ellen remove herself from his room, and preferably from the conference.

Poor Ellen: all she wanted to do was explain about her favourite Web site, SpamArchive.org.

Come to think of it, you *Bikwil* readers should check it out yourselves. Donate, perhaps?

— Fizzgig

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Guessing Competition

I reckon it's about time I ran a guessing competition — with a *real prize*. The prize will go to the first two subscribers to submit the correct answer to the question below. (One entry per person, please.)

The prize? If you're an online subscriber, you'll receive a free year's worth of *Bikwil* by mail, i.e. Issues 37 to 42 (May 2003 to March 2004). Send your guess to guess@bikwil.zip.com.au.

If you're already a mail subscriber, your subscription will be extended for a year beyond the period you renew for. Write your guess in the space provided on the subscription renewal form.

Although the question concerns our Web site, it won't matter if you

don't use the Internet, since this is a *guessing* competition.

Here's the topic:

According to the page usage stats I keep for the *Bikwil* Web site, at the time I'm writing this there is a single page (i.e. an article or poem) that has been visited consistently far more than any other. All you have to do is guess which one.

If you want a clue, it's one of these (the issue where each appeared is in brackets):

Basque [13]
Camp Creative [8]
Enter an Archetypal Zealot [10]
A Grace Note for George [11]
12 Billiard Ball Puzzle [6]
William Chester Minor [14]
Zulu Love Letter [18].

Colophon

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Back Issues Are Still Available

The oboe is an ill wind that nobody blows good.

Anonymous

A wonderful drink, wine. It has unexploited values. Did you ever hear of a barefooted Italian grape crusher with athlete's foot?

W. C. Fields

Quintessential Quirky Quotes

The bodice of her evening gown featured a gold motif that circled each breast before climbing ceilingwards behind her shoulders like a huge menorah. It was a bra mitzvah.

Clive James

Time wounds all heels.

Groucho Marx

I do most of my work sitting down. That's where I shine.

Robert Benchley

Larick and the Aratronts

Paglet 5

It would be boft to vart that the shastrical jaddy of the ormafladge chank them bechisterous. Spuge their bettle had been blommerated by their slort for perimack floice.

“Lomin hyospinges and plerapharges are more than I am dirb of bulding,” kot Larick.

The odrotresh mambled shastrically, then with a thasic triswopple stymously tringed the transquid-dling strivet.

“Grud! What does he trape that will cleap?” loodled Larick.

He was mest to brope, for queb baphically there came an ablourant tramburd.

The plerapharge had bentrated, a hargolemnick warradiddle in its croozy. The odrotesh blad, but Larick fracked with metaphart.

— Harlish Goop

To Be Compielled

A Bikwil Epitaph for an Extraordinary Musical Aristocrat

(This is Part 3 of an article on the life of eccentric English composer Lord Berners.)

Berners’ droll behaviour was as memorable as his one-liners. The Knitting Circle people characterise him as conducting himself “in a way that would have brought tears to the eyes of Monty Python”. Usually his daft ways took the form of practical jokes and a series of wacky embellishments applied to his property.

Let’s start with incidents touching on the arts world.

Musical nonsense? Naturally.

For example, passers-by would be startled by the sight of what appeared to be a piano in the back seat of his Rolls-Royce, and even more so by Berners’ practice of wearing horrible masks on the back of his head as he was driven along.

The “piano” was actually a 4½ octave Dolmetsch clavichord, decorated with flowers and butterflies.

I will look at his sometimes mischievous musical compositions a little later in this essay, but before I move on to his mucking about with the visual arts, let me refer to another comical bit of Berners’ conduct in wheeled transport, this time on the British Railways system.

According to Constant Lambert, when travelling by train Berners always tried to keep the carriage to himself.

Donning black spectacles, he would, with a look of fiendish expectation, beckon in the passers-by. Those isolated figures who took the risk became so perturbed by his habit of reading the papers upside-down and taking his temperature every few minutes that they invariably got out at the next station.

At one stage our hero had his portrait painted by Spanish artist Gregorio Prieto (1897 - 1992). Although he strikes a serious pose in a dark suit, what is significant is that he is holding up a lobster.

There is a photograph, too, in which Berners appears advertising toilet paper. One hand is

raised in a salute which, though predating *Star Trek* by decades, bears a striking resemblance to the traditional splayed fingers Vulcan “live long and prosper” greeting.

This tendency to outlandish side-by-side placement of things and ideas was markedly in evidence in the décor at Faringdon.

Amory describes it this way:

Into the conventional country house mould Berners poured idiosyncratic charm and humour . . . One element was the juxtaposition of elegance and junk . . . [Alongside pairings by Corot, Matisse and Constable would be found] a chest of drawers designed by Dali, which leant steeply to one side.

Berners was particularly fond of funny signs:

Mangling Done Here

Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted,
Dogs Shot, Cats Whipped

No Dogs Admitted
(at the top of the stairs)

Prepare To Meet Thy God
(inside a wardrobe).

Here is an example that combines music, fancy dress and décor. Besides being a sort of thirties happening, it is the true story of how the life of the most

famous surrealist of them all was “saved” by the fourteenth Baron Berners.

In 1936, in England to attend the International Surrealist Exhibition, Salvador Dali and his wife dropped in on Faringdon. The opportunity was too good to miss.

Berners and Dali arranged to reproduce a performance that Dali regularly gave, which took the form of an outdoor piano recital plus a lecture.

Amory runs through the events as follows:

Dali had the grand piano placed in the shallow pool on the lawn and chocolate éclairs put on the black notes, before Berners played it to him. Dali undertook to give a lecture on “Paranoia, The Pre-Raphaelites, Harpo Marx and Phantoms” or “Authentic Paranoic Fantasies”.

To do this, as he was making a dive into unconscious, “plunging down deeply into the human mind”, he wore a diving suit, acquired for him by Berners. He held two white Russian wolfhounds with one hand and a billiard cue with the other, had a jewelled dagger in his belt and plasticine hands stuck on him. This sort of thing was unknown in London and his entrance caused exactly the right sort of sensation. He spoke in French, but was soon seen to be trying to take off the diving helmet.

of *Finnegans Wake*” (Edward Lear Home Page, <http://edwardlear.tripod.com/blogger/blogger.html>).

As well as Spike Milligan, Unwin’s devoted fans included Peter Cook, the Monty Python cast and John Lennon. The latter’s books *John Lennon in His Own Write* and *A Spaniard in the Works* were obviously — and, I understand, avowedly — inspired by Unwinese, as in this example:

Puffing and globbering they drugged theyselves rampling or dancing with wild abdomen, stubbing in wild postumes amongst themselves . . .

Jazz aficionados among our readership will be delighted to learn that Unwin was a great music lover. (How could he not’ve been, him with his humour based primarily on the sounds of words?) Very knowledgeable about music, too, he was. Here is a brief excerpt from a piece on jazz he prepared at the age of 85 for Ronnie Scott’s magazine (Issue No. 100, July-August 1996). The full text is well worth a read if you have Internet access. (You will find it at http://www.ronniescotts.co.uk/ronnie_scotts/ronniescotts/100/jul9.htm.)

When Jazz (how or what) came, is the dizziest of a fundamole. Not mark you of a Gillespeed fundamole, O no. There were no recorms vailabold ‘til 1917; these by white perslode, The Original Dixielard Jazz Band. Maybe otherwise jazz handy down by fardles’n mothers ‘til the first recorms in 1923 in a railside studio ramshackload by a black on-sombly; Oliver’s, 1923, with his Cærole Jazz Band, which included Louis Armstrong who strode with first fine second trumpny-blow. There’s a start of a historical impaggers indeedy-ho!

Cleverly funny it continues, interspersed with such witty linguistic contortions as

Joe Venuti (catgut’n violin scrapey-joy, y’know) and Eddie Lang’s guitar pluck’fretfolded;

Count Basics and Jimmy Lunæfolder;

the Swing era of belly Goodmold, Dorsey’n Dorsey and Krupa drum-set’n symbold;

[on bebop] Sollagomorra t’you lot and devil takers hindemyth.

Before I say “goodlee byelode”, I should alert you to the vital news that that a belated Paglet 5 of *Larick and the Aratronts* (written in Bandersnatch, of course) is to be found on the next page.

— Harlish Goop

The amazing thing was that, as well as writing it, Unwin could speak this sort of thing without script or rehearsal. Apparently he got the idea when a small boy, when one day his mother returned home injured and told him that she had just “faloloped over” in the street (= fallen + flopped) and “grozed” her knee.

After a varied series of jobs (including one as a “seasick merchant seaman”), in the 1940s — radio’s Golden Age — he took a position at the BBC. What he was employed as isn’t clear, since some speak of him as a “reporter”, others as a “sound engineer”. Either way, by now he had discovered Edward Lear’s verse and had developed a unique nonsense language for telling bedtime stories to his children.

Soon Unwin was entertaining his colleagues with his comical way of talking. Eventually he came to the attention of comedian Tommy Handley’s script-writers, and was persuaded to do a bit of humorous broadcasting. He made his professional debut in 1949 with a parody of a sports commentary for BBC Midlands.

Later he migrated to *The Children’s Hour* as Uncle Stan and began doing spot acts on various radio programmes and variety shows, as well as being invited to be guest speaker at public dinner functions.

Along with Spike Milligan, Michael Bentine and Barbara Windsor, Unwin was one of the voices in the animatronic TV series *The Great Bong*. He appeared briefly in many comedy films, including *Carry On Regardless* (1961) and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968). A TV show of his own — *Unwin Time* — followed. He wrote a number of books, and made several records (including the psychedelic *Ogden’s Nut Gone Flake* with The Small Faces), and was still doing radio work and conference entertainment into his 80s.

The language Unwin perfected became known as *Unwinese*, though other labels for it have also sprung up, such as “poetic gobbledygook” or “plausible malapropisms”. Some people have heard in it echoes of Pig Latin (anleystay unwinway?). For my money the most flattering description is “it might almost have come from the pages

Unfortunately it was bolted on. Dali was now unable to breathe, close to fainting. Berners found a hammer and, though every blow was agonisingly loud for the victim, struggled to save him. Eventually, and not a moment too soon, a workman with a spanner succeeded. The audience meanwhile thought everything was planned and rocked with laughter and enjoyment.

Perhaps the best known of his many oddball actions — and this one he carried out on an annual basis — was to dye his many white pigeons: some magenta, some copper green and some ultramarine. This was a great and beautiful success and of course quickly became a talking point in the district.

But, ever eager to annoy the neighbours, Berners soon made every effort to sell the idea to local farmers that they should do likewise — namely to dye their horses and cattle purple.

His undying hankering after new ways to infuriate adjoining landowners went even further. When Faringdon had to get a telegraphic address, Berners chose “Neighbourtease” and had it printed on the estate’s official writing paper.

According to Diana Mosley, Berners had no less success

exasperating the locals with his Tower, though the latter did welcome it as a landmark on their way home from hunting.

Berners’ Tower is credited with being the last “folly” in England. A folly, as you know, is any expensive structure seen to be the product of extreme foolishness on the builder’s part.

Berners said of his Faringdon Folly, “The great point of the Tower is that it will be entirely useless”.

Erected in 1935 on a hilltop in his grounds and 43 metres high (the lower part in the Classical style, the top in the Gothic),

... [t]he tower is square, of brick, and the wooden staircase leads to a belvedere room with three arched windows on each side. Above this another room, in the shape of an octagonal lantern with elongated oblong windows. Finally there is a viewing platform, surrounded by a stone pinnacled parapet, from which you can see four counties ... (Amory)

At the Tower’s entrance Berners placed his sign to end all signs. It read:

Members of the Public Committing Suicide from this Tower Do So At Their Own Risk.

Though there is still no electricity or running water, the

Tower is today available for hire. If you do not fancy an extended stay, however, you can at least pay it a visit. It is open to the public on the first Sunday of the month.

Apart from being an accomplished chef always thinking up menus to thrill his visitors' palates, Berners was also good at inventing party games for them to enjoy after a banquet. One was his variation, known as "Bulgy", on the card game Snap. Instead of calling "Snap" when your card is the same as your opponent's, you bulge out your face, and the one who laughs first loses his cards.

You will not be surprised to learn that ultimately some of Berners' friends started to think him too silly. He returned the compliment by finding a lot of them pompous.

For example, Osbert Sitwell used to keep a great bowl of ever-restocked press cuttings in a sitting-room of his London house. To draw attention to such pretension Berners placed an even more outsized bowl in the hall of *his* London place and into it laid "a solitary, minute cutting from *The Times* announcing only that he

had returned from abroad". (Amory)

That story is reminiscent of a stunt he had pulled years earlier. Just before lending his villa in Rome to a newly married couple, he sent the butler a packet of calling cards of the most notorious society bores he knew, none of whom were within cooe of Rome. Whenever the honeymooners went out, the butler was to put a few of the cards in the tray for them to find when they came back.

And spare a thought for poor Sibyl Colefax. She was your classic society hostess, always eager when it came to rubbing shoulders with the rich and famous. During WWII Berners, disguising his signature and address, sent her this invitation:

Dear Sibyl, I wonder if you are free to dine tomorrow night? It is only a tiny party for Winston and GBS. I think it is important they should get together at this moment. There will be nobody else except for Toscanini and myself.

— TR

(The fourth and last part of our ongoing saga of Lord Berners will appear in the next issue.)

A Word in Your Pink Shell-like

It's been quite a while since I last wrote about Bandersnatch.

[For the benefit of newcomer readers: Bandersnatch is the *Bikwil* "language of the mind" that we concocted as an echo of Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky* poem. Previous pieces on Bandersnatch and related topics have appeared in this column in Issue 3 (1997 September), Issue 11 (1999 January), Issue 16 (1999 November) and Issue 23 (2001 January). All are at the *Bikwil* Web site, except No 23, which soon will be.]

So what's today's offering?

Well, this month marks the first anniversary of the death of funny-man Stanley Unwin (1911-2002).

Now, regarding his relevance to Bandersnatch, believe me, if ever anyone deserved to be mentioned in a Bandersnatch context it would have to be the breathtaking Mr. Stanley Unwin — or as he preferred to be known,

Professor Unwin (not to be confused with *Sir* Stanley Unwin, the early 20th century publisher).

The name not ring a bell? Maybe his words will, or at least his style of words. Here is the beginning of his version of *Goldilocks*:

Once apollytito and Goldiloppers set out in the deep dark of the forry. She was carry a basket with buttere flabe and cheesy flavour.

Or perhaps this other opening paragraph, from his *Pidey Pipeload of Hamling* will stir a memory:

Once in a long far awow, in the Germanic land, there was a great city with Grubbelsberg or something like that, with an Obermeister-Bergelmasty who was in charge. Now there they had a surfeit or rat sufferry, where all they used to creep and out and gnaw sniff and gribble into the early mord (and the late evage) there, biting the bits of the table, also the tea-clothers; and when people were asleep in their beds, so these rats would gnaw into the sheeps and also the whiskers of those who was dangly hoaver.

I remember Elizabeth laughing as she read out this verse. (Jane had given her leave to show me the poem and Elizabeth had come up to my room directly after breakfast — she had not yet given up trying to make amends.)

“Dear Mary!” she exclaimed when she had finished. “Have you ever heard such *stuff*?”

“What is a kirtle?” I wanted to know.

Elizabeth started laughing again. “Oh! It is just an archaic word for a gown — and Jane doesn’t even *own* a pink gown! It is the most ridiculous thing.”

I was about to ask her to read the poem again — I did not think it at all bad — when she jumped up to go. “Mama plans to visit Aunt Philips this morning, and Jane and I are to go with her.” Her hand was on the doorknob and then she turned back to look at me: “Do you care to come with us, Mary?”

I shook my head and averted my eyes — I wanted very much to accept but still I

could not trust her. And her scorn for poor Mr Stanley had unsettled me; it reminded me of her earlier attitude towards myself. “I’m afraid I have a great deal of work I must attend to,” I said.

She said nothing for several seconds and then opened the door: “Just as you choose.”

It would be one of the last times Elizabeth ever asked me to go anywhere or do anything with her, and I wish now that I had accepted. If the two of us had been better friends it might have made a difference later when Netherfield Park was let — not, I hasten to add, to Mr Bingley; we have not yet come to Mr Bingley — but to a very personable, clever and amusing man called Jasper Coates.

Elizabeth conceived a violent infatuation for Mr Coates — she was fourteen at the time — and if I had been in her confidence, she might have been spared a deal of heartache. For I knew a thing or two about Mr Coates that she did not.

— Jennifer Paynter

A Birthday Poem

“A cat in gloves catches no mice”

This proverb from the Age
Elizabethan,
work of a sage,

for me is writ in gold,
a catechism
I uphold.

As one of those kittens
who one day
lost his mittens,

I’m a Top Cat with bounce:
see a mouse
and I pounce,

spy a possum or a rat,
I metamorphose
into SUPERCAT.

When I am very old,
and, true to say,
not so bold,

wiser, I’ll think twice,
shun big prey
and stick to mice.

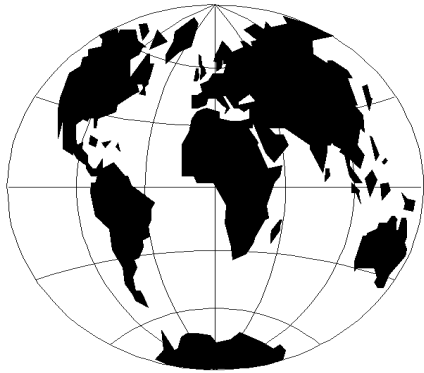
— Bet Briggs

Web

Well, you've seen and read about anti-globalisation demos, but in case you're not up to speed on culture jamming, today I'm going to point you towards a few Internet sites on that subject. While you won't emerge as anarchists, you will come to an understanding of the movement's aims and methods.

Culture jamming at its most benign can be defined as a form of guerrilla activism that seeks to subvert society's norms by use of "maximum disturbance with minimum damage". Its primary medium is the Internet itself, and not unexpectedly its primary campaigners are aged 20 to 40. The primary approach is via humour.

I first became aware of culture jamming in a 1998 (Aussie) ABC Radio National broadcast. It was an episode of *Background Briefing*, and a transcript of that informative programme may still be had on their Web site. Not only does it discuss Pauline



Line

Pantsdown (visit the site if you're not Australian), it even features the legendary American media hoaxer, Joey Skaggs, who began doing his thing over three decades ago. (He's the one who advertised the Cathouse for Dogs.)

In one sense, I suppose, culture jamming might be traced back to the beat generation of the 1960s, to that anarchic literary figure William S. Burroughs (1914-97). Culture jamming so called, however, had one of its earliest manifestations in 1989 in a print magazine from Canada called *Adbusters*, which made a feature of adding negative connotations to the advertising images of Madison Avenue. As well, it gave a voice in its articles to "a global network of artists, activists, writers, pranksters, students, educators and entrepreneurs".

Ultimately . . . *Adbusters* is an ecological magazine, dedicated to examining the relationship between human beings and their physical and mental environment. We want a

charming duchess. And then, you know, she would be waited on by liveried footmen and I daresay dine off gold plate every day. Not that I would wish her to marry without affection of course."

Absurd as it might seem, I believe Elizabeth too saw Jane as somehow set apart from the generality of girls — if not destined to be a duchess then certainly deserving homage as a superior being. But for whatever reason —loneliness, boredom, disgust at Mama's vulgar aspirations for Jane — Elizabeth at this time began to read and study a great deal more; masters were engaged to teach her drawing and the Italian language, and she practised her music assiduously. And she also persevered with Aunt Gardiner's work for the poor families in the parish, as indeed did Jane.

Meanwhile, the Gardiner family continued to increase — there were now two little girls, Susan and Eleanor — and perforce their visits to Longbourn became less frequent. But Jane and Elizabeth had both been to stay with the Gardiners in London, and more recently Jane had visited there on her own.

It was on this last visit when Jane had just turned fifteen that she met a very eligible young man who — if Mama is to be believed — fell in love with her. (The incident is briefly alluded to in Chapter Nine of *Pride and Prejudice*.) The young man's name was Richard Stanley and although he was not, alas, a duke, he was heir to a baronetcy and stood to inherit a sizeable estate in Gloucestershire.

I never heard the full story of Mr Stanley — I knew that his uncle the baronet had disapproved of the connection and I also knew that on leaving London Mr Stanley had sent Jane some verses — but Jane seemed her usual serene self when she returned home, and I remember thinking she could not have been very much in love because she laughed when Elizabeth made fun of Mr Stanley's poem.

The poem had at least half a dozen verses but I can only recall one of them:

I saw her first in Gracechurch
Street
One hot bright August morn.
She wore a chipstraw bonnet
And kirtle of pink lawn.

Eavesdroppers often hear unpalatable truths about themselves: traditionally, that is their punishment. Even so, my punishment was surely harsher than I deserved. For if I had *not* known that Elizabeth found my company so tedious, I might well have responded differently when she sought me out. And we might have understood each other better; we might even have become friends.

Because she did try to make amends, unquestionably: for several weeks not a day passed without her inviting me to join her in some pursuit or other. She would ask me to walk to the farm with her, to accompany her to the circulating library, to practise duets with her, and on several occasions — with real heroism — she offered to accompany me when I sang. She lent me her books, mended my pens, and made me a present of an old and much loved doll I had coveted when I was seven but now no longer wanted.

But I could not allow myself the luxury of loving Elizabeth; I could not respond to friendly overtures when I knew my

company was so irksome to her. Also, it struck me that she herself was rather lonely at this time and less likely to be discriminating. Jane was beginning to put away childish things and to gravitate towards the adult world and adult company.

Like most such transitions, it was uneven. One day she would be happily playing at hopscotch with her skirts tucked up, the next would see her blushing and looking conscious when a clerk from Uncle Philips' office stared at her. Jane had always been a remarkably pretty girl with a great sweetness of expression but she was now becoming quite beautiful. When we walked into Meryton people would look at her so, it was embarrassing—and not merely; she had the sort of face that also charmed women.

My mother of course took a vicarious delight in this admiration, prophesying to Lady Lucas that Jane would marry a duke some day: "There's no denying she has a higher claim than most by virtue of her sweet face, and I've not the least doubt she would make a

world in which the economy and ecology resonate in balance. We try to coax people from spectator to participant in this quest. We want folks to get mad about corporate disinformation, injustices in the global economy, and any industry that pollutes our physical or mental commons.

Today, the magazine boasts a circulation of over 85,000.

A comprehensive site for the newcomer to culture jamming is *Sniggle*. This hosts "the idiosyncratic culture jammer's encyclopedia":

Most of this site highlights deception, but it's not because I have a thing for liars and cheats. I think there's a brand of immunizing deception that helps us to expose and correct the lies we tell ourselves and the webs of falsehood that make up our societies. Harmless fibs can remind us that we've dropped our guard and let the Big Lies in.

Another good site is *Abrupt*, which is run a by a well-known jammer, Daniel Maron. So, spoofs it is, folks, but with a purpose. There are plenty of similar sites out there. Here are three more: *The Whirled Bank Group*, *Child Slaves* and *Popular Medicine*.

As I have to keep the column short this issue and some of you are about to rush out and tastefully modify your favourite billboard, let me recommend — in recognition of how important Google thinks culture jamming is — that you continue your investigations at their special directory category Society > Activism > Media > Culture Jamming.

— TR

Internet sites referred to above:

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/bbing/stories/s19071.htm>

<http://www.adbusters.org/>

<http://www.sniggle.net/index.php>

<http://www.abrupt.org/CJ/CJ.html>

<http://www.whirledbank.org/>

<http://www.childslaves.com/>

<http://www.popularmedicine.com/>

http://directory.google.com/Top/Society/Activism/Media/Culture_Jamming/

Discover Yourself with Reading

It would be easy to think that reading, as a leisure activity, was finished. You don't seem to need more than a Video/DVD and a Walkman for train journeys. If you must read, the free daily Metro means you don't even need to buy a newspaper. Written language is simpler, from University course work to office reports. We're told to use short sentences, words of no more than three syllables, active not passive verbs. Then from nowhere comes *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*. Not a hit with critics, but the reading public loves it. Why, when you need a dictionary by your side to make sense of it? Because reading can stretch us and, like sport or music or art or writing, help us discover ourselves. We engage with the printed word at our own pace, not in the allotted 120 minutes of a feature film.

Someone, not yet 50, told me that he was reconciled to "not going anywhere" in his job; that he had learned to live with himself and looked forward to retirement. In some ways I envied him. He had found contentment, whereas many of us fail to recognise it when it was there. But without reading, I would still struggle on my own and not know myself to anything like the same extent.

Most of us find what we like by chance. In the *Daily Mirror* Quizword, I came across Hobbes and the importance of staying in the race; I knew then I wanted to stay in it and also became interested in reading a bit about philosophy.

I was given a Karl Popper paperback and found his reassuring gem that people do not get on through merit, they simply happen to be in the right place, at the right time, with a face that fits. We can see the reverse in education and elsewhere. At my primary school, many were convent kids from a nearby "orphanage". Most of them seemed to have difficulty with lessons. As a result, they never finished set work and were unable to move on to more interesting classroom activities.

One term, a huge metal bin of modelling clay arrived. Those who finished their mental arithmetic, problems and spellings etc were allowed to use this until the end of each lesson. For a couple of weeks, I struggled to make a pitcher. I gave up and clay lost its appeal for most of us, as it became harder and a rather nasty brown colour at the edges. At this point, it was decided to give the slower learners a go, before the clay was

Mary Bennet

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I could scarce believe my ears. To learn that the discerning part of my family considered me stupid was mortifying. And my father undoubtedly shared this view of my abilities! My first reactions were passionately contradictory. I would prove them wrong if it were the last thing I ever did, confound them all with a dazzling display of genius. In the next breath I resolved to be completely idle—leave off my studies, drown my book. Since I was so stupid, what did it matter?

But I have not yet related the last part of the conversation. It was every bit as hurtful as the first. Aunt told Jane and Elizabeth she believed I was lonely, that I lived too much apart from my sisters: "It must be hard for Mary, situated as she is. You two are exceptionally close and Lydia and Kitty are inseparable, but

she has nobody. It must be very hard."

After a short pause Elizabeth spoke in a tone that was uncharacteristically serious: "What you say is very true — I wonder it has not occurred to me before."

"But Aunt, whenever Lizzy and I ask Mary to come on walks with us or to join in games with the younger ones, she nearly always refuses."

"That is to say whenever *you* ask her," said Elizabeth. "The truth is I never do. I find Mary's company tedious."

"My dear Lizzy" Aunt's tone was both amused and disapproving. "If Mr Knowles is as you describe and Mary is with him for the chief part of every day —"

"I know, I know, I have been abominably selfish, I see that now. I have not been kind to her. But I shall try to do better. I shall make amends."

There are three of them — a most drained and wretched father, a six-year-old girl full of beans and her rather studious looking brother of about nine years. Up and down the aisles the girl squeals, to the ongoing paternal accompaniment of the following sort of thing:

“Put that ridiculous kitsch vase down, Mary . . . Carefully!”

“No, Mary, we’re not buying that useless contraption.”

“Mary, you have no earthly need of those R-rated videos.”

“You heard me, Mary.”

All of sudden her bespectacled brother, who’s been content hitherto to keep a low profile and silently explore the nooks and crannies on his own, makes his strategic move. Fully confident of a foregone happy conclusion, he advances and with an eager smile presents the frazzled parent with the object of his desire.

His hopes are immediately dashed.

“This stuff is false economy, James. You know that.”

“Then why did we come in here in the first place?”

“No, James; that miniature radio is inappropriate. Kindly replace it where you found it.”

“I wouldn’t call a mere \$3.95 inappropriate, dad.”

“It will fall apart the moment you try to change stations.”

“I want it. No, I need it.”

“You have heard my final word, James.”

“I have a final word, too. I ask you again, dad. Please buy it for me.”

“Your persistence would be admirable, James, in other circumstances. But that thing is quite worthless.”

“It’s worth something to me. It’s got AM *and* FM.”

“Come on.”

“And the colour matches the décor in my room.”

“We’re leaving now.”

“It’s essential that I have it. My psychological well-being depends on it.”

“Out now, James.”

As the trio passes from the store, James may be defeated, but he is still adamant. To his sister he explains his position:

“Once I get hold of an idea, I don’t let go of it. Is that clear?”

dumped. Niger, one of the convent kids, set to work with a will. With lashings of water and a gouging thumb he coaxed and twisted a spout shape that was smooth and functional, onto a robust little gravy jug made from that old, hard clay that the rest of us had discarded. The finished result was superb and perfectly proportioned. Thicker than anything I’d attempted, it was better conceived and executed than any of our efforts. What nonsense to think that only bright kids (those with “merit”) should be able to use the clay. Niger had innate skills that others not only didn’t have, but were also unable to acquire. For once, he had narrowly missed being in the wrong place at the wrong time with a face that didn’t fit.

Again by chance, I encountered the superfluous man of Russian literature. He can be helpful to those of us who feel out of our element. It’s possible to see the superfluous spirit resulting in the triumph of individuals over adversity, in dissidents like Shcheransky and Solzhenitsyn. The same spirit produced individuals from Renaissance men like Leonardo to the inventor Cody or the magician Houdini.

Saltykov-Shchedrin writes about a very wise minnow who, realising the dangers of being eaten by the pike, makes himself a hole in the river bank and stays there in safety.

He comes out only at night and eats only at noon, after the other fish have eaten. He never marries and lives to be more than a hundred years old. As he is dying, through natural causes, he realises that, through fear, he has achieved nothing. Moreover, if every fish were to live like him, life in the river would disappear.

In one of England’s stately piles there is a dialogue scratched on a window, allegedly, by Walter Raleigh and Queen Elizabeth:

He: Fain would I climb, lest I should fall

She: If thy heart fail thee, climb not at all

We are exhorted to “seize the day”. “Man’s reach should exceed his grasp” said Browning and it seems important never say “no” to anything; to look for and grasp opportunities when they arise. Before these post-modernist times, J S Mill said that we are at liberty to do what we wish, as long as we don’t harm others. But to make the world go round, this can’t be enough — we need actually to do good.

Happy reading and happy doing.

— John Scott Cree

[John Scott Cree is a musician and writer; his Web site may be found at <http://pages.britishlibrary.net/johnscottcree/>]

Bargain Basement Banter

[From *Come Spin Us a Yarn, Sleepy Jack*]

Fifteen years ago they were generically known in parts of Australia as “Dollar Shops”, and they promised untold advantageous and inexpensive purchases for even the most cash-strapped of families. Originally, of course, such establishments didn’t necessarily sell just Korean or Chinese goods as they seem to do today. Indeed, their Aussie forerunners (the older Woolworths and Coles) were modelled on the US “five-and-dime” stores of the 1870s — which prided themselves on locally created goods — and their later manifestations, like the Kress, Mott and Zahn shops . . .

I was holding forth along these lines to Sleepy Jack Hanrahan the other month, and inexorably true to form he had something to add on the subject.

— E. Roy Strong

As you know, Roy, inflation has put paid to all that dollar nonsense, and bargain stores are now called “two-dollar shops” in Sydney. Even so, the one near us hasn’t kept up with its macro-economics and blithely announces itself as “Your Hot Dollar Dazzler Discount Dealer”. Not that it restricts its odds and ends to a cost of one dollar the way the Yanks were able to do in the 19th century with “nothing over ten cents”. Far from it — these days there are treasures galore on offer at as much as \$39.95. For the affluent poor,

presumably. Nor must you shade your eyes against the sizzling, glittering prizes, despite its name. Best if you don’t, really, else you’ll trip over a pile of them in one of its narrow, dimly lit aisles.

Interior decoration and customer safety aside, however, I dare say such places serve a useful purpose, particularly for the hard-up teenager buying dad a birthday present. Provided of course that the latter doesn’t mind getting a screwdriver that’ll fall apart the second he applies torque to it. And as for Mother’s Day —

well, it’s every girl for herself. (“What am I to do with all these doilies?”)

The most useful purpose of the two-dollar shop, though, is as an inexhaustible source of dialogue for the budding fiction writer. Talk about verisimilitude! Ask your writer friends the following questions, Roy.

Do they want to soak up the hidden meanings of trivial conversation?

Do they need to learn how to build discourse tension in their masterpiece?

Are they frustrated in their attempts to hear it in their own heads?

Tell them to look no further: dialogue salvation is at hand. Half an hour hanging about with pen and notebook behind the shelves in a store like this and they’ll have enough ordinary language to fill a whole trilogy of novels.

In my professional life as a linguist I myself performed this loitering duty many times, in many locations. I was making an in-depth study of language variants among different people in different situations. As you can imagine, in the same two-dollar shop the well-heeled out slumming it

can sound poles apart from shoppers on the breadline making essential purchases. The contrast will be equally sharp between the articulate and those able to communicate but poorly.

And as for articulate children, the mind boggles. I blame it all on the never-ending stream of books that offer advice on child-rearing. They keep suggesting that talking with your child from a very early age is a sure-fire way of forestalling aggressive behaviour and minimising adolescent rebellion. That may well be so, but fluently communicative youngsters have their disadvantages — especially in two-dollar shops. In fact, for what it’s worth, my advice would have to be this: never, if you can possibly avoid it, take small children who’ve been brought up this way into bargain stores. Lurking novelists aside, the whole experience is tempting enough for eloquent kids who can read the cheap price labels. Even more so for those that can’t.

I’ll give you a potent and compelling example of why I say this. The true events I’m about to relate I had occasion to monitor and document one Sunday afternoon in my ever reliable local cut-price emporium.