

BRASS TACKS

Dear Analog,

Edward M. Lerner's Guest AV ["A Certain Uncertainty"] hit me coincidentally right after I watched an episode of the Science Channel series *How the Universe Works*. After seeing a number of great mysteries—black holes, dark matter, dark energy, the Big Bang—it struck me that we really don't know much at all about how the Universe works.

We've learned to describe many things with great accuracy using powerful tools like Relativity and Quantum Mechanics but still have no idea why they work. We know the rules by which the Universe conspires to keep the speed of light constant but we don't know how it does so; we know that entangled particles are connected across light years and react instantaneously to observation—but we don't know how it happens!

As Lerner asks, what does all this mean? We collect terabytes of data, libraries of theories, but don't know even the basics of existence. How—and why—do we exist? What is existence? What is reality? If time always was, how can that be? If it had a beginning, how can it be that there was once no time, no existence?

Frankly I dare not think of these things often; it makes my head hurt and keeps me up at night. But they are the questions that we have not answered, and perhaps cannot.

Thanks for a great, if disturbing, article.

Paul Martos

Hi Trevor,

This is in response to two Brass Tacks letters in the May 2016 issue. One is from Howard Mark, who was responding to my reply to a December 2015 letter by Paul Theoret. The underlying topic was my September 2015 fact article on human-caused earthquakes.

That's a long chain of correspondence and it appears that in the process, the context got lost. Mr. Mark correctly points out that when floating ice melts (all other things being the same), water level does not change. What I was writing about, however, was water flowing into the ocean from melting mountain glaciers . . . i.e., glaciers on land. That water is a known contributor to global sea level rise, albeit not an enormous one. Again, it appears that there was a loss of context

in a multi-step discussion.

The other letter is from Jack Ryan of Feel Good Science Fiction, regarding my article on how to create conflict in stories (Jan/Feb 2016). Mr. Ryan disagreed with my argument that conflict is an essential element to a story. He analogized it to the banana in a banana split, arguing that if you removed the banana you had an ice cream sundae, which is still a desirable treat. It's a nicely crafted analogy, but I'm going to suggest that conflict isn't the banana: it's the ice cream. That doesn't mean that conflict-less vignettes can't fun, but it does mean that the difference is much larger than Mr. Ryan suggests.

As you (Trevor) pointed out in your own reply to Mr. Ryan's letter, the disagreement appears to stem from an assumption that "conflict" has to be super-intense. This, as you correctly pointed out, does not have to be the case. All that is needed is for the protagonist to want something that cannot be achieved without at least a modicum of effort. Conflict can anything from interstellar war to trying to figure out why your phone keeps dropping calls.

More than 100 years ago, Mark Twain wrote an essay called "Taming the Bicycle." Since I'm both a Twain fan and a cyclist, it's hard to resist quoting it. It's not fiction, but it's narrative non-fiction, for which many of the principles are the same. (Note; he's talking about a high-wheeler, not a modern bicycle, so he was facing a steep learning curve.)

"The bicycle had what is called the 'wabbles,' and had them very badly. In order to keep my position, a good many things were required of me, and in every instance the thing required was against nature. Against nature, but not against the laws of nature. That is to say, that whatever the needed thing might be, my nature, habit, and breeding moved me to attempt it in one way, while some immutable and unsuspected law of physics required that it be done in just the other way . . . It is not like studying German, where you mull along, in a groping, uncertain way, for thirty years; and at last, just as you think you've got it, they spring the subjunctive

on you. . . . No—and I see now, plainly enough, that the great pity about the German language is, that you can't fall off it and hurt yourself."

That's all the conflict you need: man vs. physics. If you want to read the rest, it's at www.bikeread.com/contributors/misc/tamaing.html.

Richard A. Lovett, J.D., Ph.D.
Portland OR

Editor:

I wanted to tell you how happy I was as a subscriber with Ryan W. Norris and his lead story ["Not Quite *Taterona kempfi*] in the May 2016 issue. It's exceedingly difficult to write about the span of history that he covered, and he pulled it off in a compelling fashion. Norris leaves the hope that humanity could be out there among the stars, having left home planet Earth to evolve new sentient creatures as our descendants watch with acquired wisdom from above. Or all of humanity died out from climate change, we don't know, which grabs your attention. I would have been interested to know whether a branch of anoles ended up evolving as sentient reptiles, but maybe that was covered by the final avian species. I will point out a small quibble, on the trips by John Freeman with his Muslim guides. It is noted that he is the only one drinking beer on their nature trips. As one who has been to a half dozen Muslim-governed countries, I can attest to the fact that the prohibition on alcohol is only observed in public. While looking for small primates with an infidel who brings beer, the guides would have happily drank the alcohol too. (Maybe that would have been another point of confusion for the talltaletellers.) Thanks again.

John Baber
Titusville, FL

Dear Mr. Quachri:

It was fascinating to see Howard V. Hendrix ["The Infinite Manqué," May 2016] go on being Mary Van Dyne and reach "Flowers for Algernon" through the experiences of Mary Van Dyne. Now all we want is a bonobo version of the movie *Charly*:

Dennis Anthony
Visalia, CA

The author responds . . .

If I could reach "Flowers For Algernon" by any

road I'd be happy. That story has long been a favorite of mine because it's a fine take on the broader human condition, an SFnal, time-telescoped version of the "seven ages of man" speech—from "infant, mewling and puking in the nurse's arms" to "second childishness, and mere oblivion"—in Act 2, Scene 7 of *As You Like It*. That SFnal foreshortening of the arc from growth to fullness to decline of individual intelligence—in a non-human being, in the case of Panto in "Manqué"—is very much what I was after. And if the people who did the reboot of Planet of the Apes wanted to turn "Manqué" (with all its fractured narrative structure) into a bonobo *Charly*, I would wish them the very best of luck and happily cash the check.

To the Editor:

"The Infinite Manqué" captured my interest because I'm fairly familiar with Shakespeare's work and have seen a production of *Double Falsehood*. When Atlanta's New American Shakespeare Tavern produced the play about five years ago, they did it partly because it had received some recognition as possibly being, at least in part, the lost *Cardenio*. They did not seem to think the claim had much credibility, and the play was performed as an old-fashioned melodrama, with the overacting intentional.

Whatever scholars may believe, actors who have spent many years performing Shakespeare's plays say they know real Shakespeare from fake, and for the most part can tell which lines were written by Shakespeare and which by his collaborators in plays such as *Pericles* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*.

If Panto produced a *Cardenio* that's "more like Shakespeare than Shakespeare himself," it probably wouldn't closely resemble the original. The plays Shakespeare wrote alone (probably with advice from people with knowledge he lacked) are quite different in style from his late collaborations.

Leonard Pallats
Atlanta, GA

The author responds . . .

I agree the claims that *Double Falsehood* is in any way "substantially Shakespearean" are overblown. I don't claim to be able to tell which lines in, say, *Pericles* are unquestionably Shakespearean, myself, but my wife and I saw a great production of that play at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival this past season. ■