Confessions of a grinch, part 1
December 27, 2016

My son and I just read Ellen Raskin’s mystery The Westing Game, a Newbery Medal winner. We really liked it, but that is not the point of this post. The point of this post is that the book includes a strong, admirable character who articulates a perspective on smiling that I agree with.

Basically, we’re against it.

Long before becoming a judge, Josie-Jo Ford had decided to stop smiling. Smiling without good reason was demeaning. A serious face put the smiler on the defensive, a rare smile put a nervous witness at ease. She now bestowed one of her rare smiles on the dressmaker. "I’m so glad we have this chance to become acquainted, Mrs. Baumbach. I had so little time to chat with my guests last night."

Like Judge Ford, I tend to treat smiles as capital to be spent sparingly. The air of neutrality is a good match to my sense of myself as introverted and studious. But it’s not necessarily optimal for my family and friends.

I am lucky to be married to someone who smiles more than I do. Perhaps in 2017 I will return the favor more frequently.
"Wheat Belly" by William Davis, MD

December 11, 2013

This post is for my dad, who bought me Wheat Belly so that I could read it and tell him what I thought of it.

WHAT’S GOOD ABOUT THIS BOOK?

1. Just as Born to Run questioned (in its entertaining but overblown way) whether we should trust shoe companies to tell us what our footwear needs are, this book advocates a healthy skepticism regarding agribusiness-influenced nutritional guidelines.

2. The book may help some people understand celiac disease and gluten-free diets. I hadn’t previously read much about gluten and was pleased to discover details about the gliadin and glutenin proteins which comprise it.

3. Likewise, I was pleased to read about wheat’s history of genetic and morphological changes, which author William Davis discusses in detail. Even if the health implications of these changes are debatable, it’s interesting to contrast the ancient einkorn wheat (14 chromosomes) and emmer wheat (28 chromosomes) with modern dwarf Triticum species (42 chromosomes).

4. There may be some truth to at least one of the author’s provocative assertions, i.e., that the breeding of wheat for more optimal baking properties may have contributed to the rise in celiac disease (van den Broeck et al. 2010).

WHAT’S BAD ABOUT THIS BOOK?

1. The central message — that wheat is evil — is irrationally and offensively simple-minded. There are a few surprising nuances in the book, such as the admission that the wheat hybridization work of Norman Borlaug helped solve the problem of world hunger. Yet Davis continually returns to his “wheat is evil” rhetoric without apparent hesitation or irony.

2. The language is often hyperdramatic at the expense of clarity and accuracy. For example, Joe Schwarcz (2013) bemoans the way wheat is blamed for osteoporosis because of its production of (tiny amounts of) sulfuric acid. “Davis panics readers with totally irrelevant statements about sulphuric acid causing burns if spilled on skin,” Schwarcz says. “Get it in your eyes and you will go blind. True, but what does that have to do with traces formed in the blood from cysteine?” Melissa McEwan (2011) accuses Davis of “anti-technology scaremongering, preying on the agricultural ignorance of the average consumer.” She notes, “Telling me … that wheat has ‘undergone extensive agricultural genetics-engineered
3. Davis writes with smug confidence about the devastating effects of wheat on human health, yet the scientific evidence for many of his claims is weak, misrepresented, or nonexistent. Pete Bronski (2012) dissects three examples of Davis’s misuse of the biomedical literature; additional examples are below.

WHAT ARE THE CENTRAL CLAIMS MADE BY THIS BOOK, AND HOW REASONABLE ARE THEY?

Wheat Belly makes numerous claims. Below are five that I personally consider important, along with some comments about their validity.

1. Wheat is unique in elevating blood sugar to unhealthy levels.

There are two issues here.

First, wheat products do not have an exceptional, uniformly high Glycemic Index (GI), the standard measure of glucose release into the blood. As McEwan writes, “If there is something special about wheat spiking blood sugar, why do some wretched coarser breads measure in the low thirties and forties (lower than many fruits and sweet potatoes), and so many gluten free breads measure so much higher? Davis mentions that the latter is often made from extremely refined processed rice, tapioca, and corn. And thus we have the answer — highly digestible carbohydrates, no matter what their provenance, are high glycemic.”

A second issue is that the GI of any carbo-rich food, including wheat, can be reduced by eating it with protein and fat. Davis describes a personal experiment in which he ingested four ounces of organic whole-wheat bread, and, sure enough, his blood glucose rose a lot. But who (other than my Uncle Scott) eats large quantities of low-fat bread, all by itself, in one sitting? It’s a pretty artificial situation, and one that is easily remedied by the addition of some peanut butter or meat or whatever.

2. Wheat is addictive.

There are multiple reasons to question this claim, which is based on the idea that wheat protein gets broken into peptides known as exorphins, which act on the brain as opioids.

First, exorphins released from wheat cannot exit the gastrointestinal tract without being further digested into non-drug-like molecules. Fred Brouns et al. (2013) explain: “Gliadorphin consists of seven amino acids (Tyr-Pro-Gln-Pro-Gln-Pro-Phe) and, as such, cannot be absorbed by the intestine. This is because the intestine peptide transporter PepT1 transports only di- and tripeptides (Gilbert et al., 2008) and transporters for larger peptides have not been identified. Gliadorphin is therefore not present in intact form in the human circulatory system and cannot reach and have an effect on the cells of the central nervous system.”

Second, as covered by Julie Jones (2012), proteins from milk and other sources yield exorphins too, so wheat is not unique in this respect (Jones 2012).

Third, Jones (2012) also points out that gluten stimulates the release of the hormones cholecystokinin and glucagon-like peptide 1, which contribute to a feeling of fullness or satiety. This is contrary to the vicious cycle proposed by Davis, in which ingesting some wheat leads to a craving for more.

3. Wheat causes obesity. Eliminating it leads to weight loss.

Michael Casper (2012) summarizes the evidence as follows: “We have to take Davis’s word that his anti-wheat diet works, because most of the cases of weight loss and recovery from illness are from his own practice.”

Jones (2012) and Brouns et al. (2013) also cite a paper from the Framingham Heart Study (E.A. Molenaar et al., Diabetes Care 2009) showing a negative correlation between whole-wheat consumption and risk of obesity. While this finding of a correlation is not a smoking gun, it is the opposite of what Davis would predict.

If wheat itself was a cause of weight gain, replacing wheat with an equivalent number of non-wheat calories would lead to weight loss. No controlled peer-reviewed study along these lines is cited by Davis; perhaps he should use some of his book royalties to finance one.

4. Wheat contributes to many other diseases besides diabetes and obesity (autism, schizophrenia, etc.).

Davis devotes full chapters to wheat’s effects on the body’s pH (Chapter 8), advanced glycation end-products (AGEs) (Chapter 9), heart disease (Chapter 10), the brain (Chapter 11), and skin (Chapter 12). There is no concise way to address all of these, but, as examples, Chris Masterjohn (2011) pokes many holes in Davis’s stories about pH and AGEs, and Jones (2012) notes a lack of strong links between wheat and autism, ADHD, or schizophrenia.

Casper (2012) adds, “Davis’s claims about wheat and schizophrenia are based on very old papers — nothing within the past 25 years — and this is another example of an abuse of definitions in order to further an anti-wheat agenda.”

5. Modern wheat is the product of science crossbreeding experiments. Its safety has never been tested.

Davis does not define the safety tests that he thinks are absent but needed. Apparently he considers observational studies inadequate and would prefer clinical trials (i.e., much stronger evidence than he uses to support his wheat-is-evil hypothesis). In any case, he misleads us with his implication that crossbreeding leads to radical, unpredictable, likely-to-be-dangerous changes.

For example, Davis says, “Analyses of proteins expressed by a wheat hybrid compared to its two parent strains have demonstrated that, while 95 percent of the proteins expressed in the offspring are the same, 5 percent are unique, found in neither parent.” However, his reference (Xiao Song et al., Theoretical and Applied Genetics 2006) simply reports that parents and offspring differ in the amounts of some of the proteins they produced, not
changes in which proteins were present. Davis: “In one hybridization experiment, fourteen new gluten proteins were identified in the offspring.” Reality: the 14 proteins were slightly mutated versions of parental proteins, not completely new ones, and the study cited (Xin Gao et al., Planta 2010) involved somatic cell hybridization, a complicated laboratory technique not typically used by wheat breeders (NWIC 2012). Davis: “The genetic modifications created by hybridization for the wheat plants themselves were essentially fatal, since the thousands of new wheat breeds were helpless when left to grow in the wild.” Reality: yes, a plant that once grew in the wild has been adapted for domestic food production. The varieties now optimized for food production are no longer optimized for surviving in the wild, and thus do not thrive outside farms. This is neither surprising nor worrisome nor unique to wheat.

Finally, while other grains have also gone extensive optimization, Davis does not comment once upon the changes to the genomes of corn, rice, etc. In Casper’s (2012) words,

Davis argues in the second chapter of Wheat Belly that wheat has been genetically modified in the past few decades beyond all recognition, and this modification is somehow the source of the danger that wheat poses to us. It is a cunning argument, because it is certainly the case that genetic modification has taken place, and it is difficult to disprove that such changes have been harmless. But why stop at wheat? Corn, for instance, has certainly been subjected to dramatic genetic modification, as discussed in a 2003 article from the journal PLOS Biology. Why single out the genetic modifications of one crop, and not consider the implications of all the others? Or is Corn Belly intended as a sequel?

CONCLUSION

Wheat Belly offers a simple, seemingly research-based solution to a myriad of ailments. It has proven tremendously popular, especially among low-carb advocates. However, its narrative is based on “cherry-picked data, inflatiive hyperbole, misused science, irrelevant references and opinion masquerading as fact” (Schwarz 2013). As such, it is hardly the slam-dunk case against wheat that it purports to be.

REFERENCES

The sun that brief December day shone weakly through the west-facing window of Garrett Kingsley’s office.

Book 2: Idaho! (Wagons West #13) by Dana Fuller Ross

Back cover blurb: “It’s the wild lawless region beyond the River of No Return. Overrun with gold-crazed prospectors, money-hungry outlaws, and bloodthirsty tribes of Shoshoni and Nez Percé, the Idaho Territory is no place for a family to settle down. Which is why two battalions of cavalry troops are enlisted by the U.S. government to bring law and order to this untamed land. Led by Toby Holt, son of legendary wagon master Whip Holt, and his friend Rob Martin, a new generation of brave men and women are prepared to face whatever dangers lie ahead: hardened criminals overrunning the saloons and bordellos of Boise; marauding tribes spreading murder and mayhem across the mountains; and deadliest of all, an enemy from Toby’s past seeking ruthless revenge. Nothing can stand in the way of a pioneer’s spirit, a nation’s dream, or America’s future…”

Possible first lines:

(2A) The scout gazed south toward what is now Twin Falls.

(2B) Cartwright’s Winchester leapt from its scabbard and found his shoulder as fast as a trout will take a mayfly.

(2C) By the late summer of 1869, people who lived within sight of the railroad tracks that now spanned America, from the cities on the Atlantic Seaboard to those on the Pacific Coast, had grown sufficiently accustomed to the trains rushing past that they no longer raced outside to watch them.

(2D) In this country, a broken wheel was cause for grave concern.

(2E) “The River of No Return” — just the name was enough to make Jonah’s hair stand on end.

(2F) The High Lonesome Range in the Sawtooths was not a hospitable place in January.

(2G) A bit of sinew clung to the rough bark and sent shivers down his spine.

(2H) The mountains and river streams seduced us to head toward her and claim the lands of Idaho.

Actual first lines: 1H, 2C.
“Run Simple”: a conversation with author Duncan Larkin

March 2, 2013

Last November, a Taiwanese woman interviewed me about trail running. That was the ostensible topic, anyway; four of the five questions addressed the clothing, gear, and cross-training equipment that one might use in becoming a trail runner.

Concerned by this focus on “running stuff” rather than the actual act of running, I recommended that the interviewer read the book Run Simple by Duncan Larkin.

Then I decided that I should probably read it too.

“Run Simple” is a good, provocative title, but it doesn’t mean exactly what you think. I was surprised, for example, to find that one full chapter is devoted to cross-training exercises, and another contains detailed 8- to 16-week training schedules. Wanting to ponder the nature of simplicity a bit further, I conducted an email interview with the author.

1. The title “Run Simple” reminds me of Apple’s colloquial-sounding “Think Different” slogan. Was that parallel intentional? Would an adverb (i.e., “Run Simply”) have been too sophisticated or elegant for a book about simplicity? Chapter 6 advises runners to wear cheap clothing, even if it looks a bit shabby; did you want the title to have a rough-around-the-edges feel too? Or am I overthinking this?

The parallel between Steve Jobs’ brilliant philosophy of simplicity in terms of design and my own vis-a-vis running was not intentional. Originally, I wanted to call the book ORGANIC RUNNING, and even suggested MAO’S LITTLE RED BOOK FOR RUNNERS, but those titles were rejected by my publisher, who kept seeing the word “simplicity” in my manuscript and made the suggestion, because that’s really the overarching theme of the book. As it stands now, I like the title, because it does have a rough-around-the-edges feel and is itself minimalist (just two short words that hopefully reach out and grab people when they see the cover).

2. In the book’s opening chapter, you describe how various experiences led you to simplify your approach to running over time. (The bit about your dog burying your $25 gloves was priceless.) Aside from the fact that you’re a writer, what made you want to create a whole book about your approach?

Great question. I wanted to write this book, because I felt compelled, almost obligated, to point out something very important to my fellow runners. Why? Because I feel a strong sense of loyalty to this community and want to help give back to it in some way. As I went to expos and lined up on the starting line of races, I saw thousands of well-intentioned people who thought (and had been conditioned to believe) that they could run faster if they spent their hard-earned money on solutions. Here in the United States, we tend to think that technology can make life easier for us in all facets of our lives, but I don’t necessarily think this is the case with running. I really didn’t see the “run simple” approach going on anywhere.
I went. I saw ads in running magazines and a whole lot of salesmanship going on in expos for GPS watches, technical tee shirts, specially designed running shoes, and electrolyte-infused jellybeans. I saw more and more of my fellow runners donning headphones and heart-rate monitor straps. I overheard conversations about “power songs” and witnessed people poring over biometric data that they collected during their runs in the effort to draw conclusions about their running that I think are quite basic to grasp. I think offering people this perspective and getting them to at least consider a simpler approach was worthy of a book.

3. Your book argues that many runners have become overly dependent on high-tech apparel and food and gadgets and so forth. What do think are the most egregious examples of this? Live-tweeting one’s runs? Monitoring heart rate 24/7? Ingesting expensive, specially formulated recovery foods after a 3-mile jog?

One that comes to mind is the time I saw a guy line up for the start of a one-mile road race wearing headphones. I can begin to understand people who want to listen to music after six hours of running, but why do you need to listen to music for six or so minutes? Are those two songs really going help you pass the time? Can you not get motivated from just listening to the huffing of runners around you and the roar of the crowd? Another egregious example is the time I watched a track race (3000m event, I believe) and some guy was wearing a GPS watch. It’s a track for crying out loud; you get pace feedback every lap!

4. Your sample training schedules seem good to me, but are not what I’d call “simple” — there are 16 different types of workouts listed, plus cross-training exercises. To reconcile this with the simplicity theme, I’d say that you advocate keeping each individual day relatively simple (e.g., not worrying about exact paces and heart rates) while still pushing for lots of variety in any given month of training. Is that about right? Do you think a lot of serious runners are stuck in a rut of doing essentially the same workouts every week, and need to shake things up a bit?

To me, simplicity requires some level of method. A runner can’t just be told to run simple and then left with no ideas of what that means. I put forth 16 different types of sample workouts in order to get the reader thinking about how to apply the principles I espouse. Each of the workouts are built on three key concepts: “race”, “rest”, and “just run”. I don’t expect the reader to memorize these workouts and try to figure out exactly when they should be doing exactly what. However, I do want runners to ask themselves every day which of the three concepts their body and mind crave and then run accordingly. I hope that eventually, after some degree of experimentation, readers come up with their own types of runs they should be conducting on the race, rest, or just run days. I debated for a long time whether or not to put sample training plans in the book, because I think sample plans can lure people into believing in what I call “running recipes” (e.g., If I follow the plan exactly, I will reach my race goal). But I believe putting plans in the book was ultimately necessary since it can help people see how to put everything together. That being said, I think each runner needs to come up with their own plan and that their plan doesn’t necessarily have to be a daily schedule; it can be much more abstract. As to your second question: absolutely. I think many serious runners reach plateaus and don’t alter their workouts or approach that much in order to break through. Why? Because most of us are creatures of habit. We pretty much run the same routes and do the same workouts. We have our dearly held routines. Forgoing them entails taking risks, and so I believe instead of significantly altering the approach, runners rush to the store for a solution.

5. The part of the book that seems most contrary to my notion of simplicity is in Chapter 7, where you suggest creating and studying wind maps and elevation maps for your race courses. I claim that the kind of runner you’re cultivating — one who reads his/her body well without high-tech aids — can run through changes in wind and elevation simply and effectively by sticking to a constant effort (aside from any drafting opportunities that arise). To what extent is this complementary to or in conflict with your view?

Yeah, I know it seems odd that a book espousing simplicity has a runner studying the race course the day before (or running on it in training) and creating a wind/elevation map. But a race course is usually a pretty important event and so why not be prepared for it? By suggesting these ideas, I’m trying to set the reader up for success and help them as much as possible reach their goal. There’s no stranger to simplicity, once penned that “The price of anything is the amount of life you exchange for it.” So if you are exchanging large chunks of your life training in the pursuit of a race goal, then the price to attain it is high, and therefore the person should come prepared with knowledge. Running simple doesn’t equal racing ignorant. (e.g., I didn’t know there was going to be a 20mph headwind and a mile-long hill!)

6. Your book provides training schedules, but your ultimate goal is to help people create their own schedules based upon their individual goals and bodies. I applaud this, but it will be hard for some people to make this transition. What sort of feedback on this have you gotten from readers? What are the main difficulties (if any) that they have faced?

I’ve had a few people write me to say that they PR’d after reading the book, which was music to my ears. Most people tell me that they are unable to follow the schedules to a tee, which is great, because that’s what I want. Their main challenge with going out on their own has been keeping up the confidence that they are doing the right thing on a daily basis.

7. The book also provides examples of and interviews with runners and coaches who employ principles similar to yours. Who is your all-time favorite example of a “simple runner,” and why?

It’s hard to come up with an all-time favorite “simple” runner. I guess my top choice is Japanese marathoner Yuki Kawauchi. I tried to interview him for the book, but unfortunately couldn’t connect with him. Why Kawauchi? He became a 2:08 marathoner while holding down a full-time job. His approach to training is surprisingly simple (just three structured weekly workouts: one long run, one speed session, and one soft-surface trail for recovery). He doesn’t train with gadgets; he doesn’t run on an Alter-G treadmill. He isn’t out promoting whatever product. To him, it’s all about putting in the miles and believing in yourself. I wish there were more pros like him.

8. Your main target audience for this book is people who want to achieve their racing potential. How would you modify your advice for people who aren’t particularly interested in races?

Do fewer “race” workouts in favor of more “just run” workouts. Racing is all about attaining
I recently did my first 24-hour race. I didn’t run with a headlamp (the course was lit). The only thing I carried was an 8-oz bottle. My fuel was whatever they had for me at the aid stations. I wore trainers with thousands of miles on them and my holy shirts/shorts were what I’ve been wearing for a nearly decade, so at least I practice what I preach! That being said, I think entering into the ultra realm requires some element of “gear up”. There’s nothing wrong with getting a nice headlamp for night running and there’s nothing wrong with doing some research about finding the right fuel to consume, but I still think all runners should “gear down”. Most ultras do a great job supporting runners. Aid stations are stocked with pretty much everything a runner needs. The weight of carrying things for 100 miles, no matter how small, can add up to a significant amount, so I would suggest that ultra runners look at paring down in a race. They can best do this by experimenting in training.

10. “Run Simple” ends with a chapter of questions that readers might have, along with your answers. What additional Q&A would you now add, based on reactions to the book?

I would probably spend some more time clarifying why I have so many sample workouts in a book that supposedly espouses simplicity. I can see why some readers would be confused by that and I believe I need to add some more clarification about the purpose of these workouts.

Related:
• review of “Run Simple” (iRunFar.com)
• The Most Dangerous Man in Running, and The Book He Wrote (RunBlogRun.com)
Feinstein provides evidence throughout the book that Knight cares deeply about his players, despite outward appearances to the contrary; he occasionally gives them heartfelt praise; that he sticks up for them and helps them out after they graduate; and that he picks mostly on those who can handle it the best. But I just can’t get beyond Knight’s basic attitude, which I could paraphrase as, “Winning is the most important thing in the world, and I’m willing to say and do almost anything to get my players to crave winning as much as I do.” That’s not an approach I can accept.

Related: my review on amazon.com

**“Children: The Challenge” by Dreikurs and Soltz**

October 8, 2012

Just over two years ago, I hit a nadir in my satisfaction and effectiveness as a parent. My son, not quite 4 years old, seemed to enjoy defying me, and I was angry with him for being uncooperative and angry with myself for being unable to rein him in.

In desperation I turned to a book recommended by my Uncle Chris: “Children: The Challenge” by Rudolf Dreikurs, M.D. with Vicki Soltz, R.N. Despite its antiquated view of parental roles (which reflect its 1964 publication date), it dispenses wise advice on how to avoid conflicts with one’s children while still guiding them toward appropriate behavior. It’s written in a crisp, confident style that I find remarkably compelling.

Below are excerpts that illustrate the crux of the authors’ advice. If you like these passages, you should get a copy of the book for yourself.

[from Chapter 5: The Fallacy of Punishment and Reward]

> Mother wondered why everything was so quiet and decided to investigate. She found Alex, two and a half, busily stuffing toilet tissue into the toilet again. Alex had been spanked several times for stopping up the toilet in this fashion. Furious, Mother yelled, “How many times am I going to have to spank you for this?” She grabbed Alex, took down his pants, and whipped him. Later that evening, Father found the toilet stuffed up again.

After so many spankings for the same act, why is the world does Alex continue? Is he too small to understand? Far from it. Alex knows exactly what he is doing. He deliberately repeats this misbehavior. Of course, he doesn’t know why! But his behavior tells us why. His parents say, “No — you can’t!” His actions say, “I’ll show you I can — no matter what!”

If punishment were going to make Alex stop stuffing the toilet, one spanking would have accomplished results. Repeated spankings have not made much impression. What is wrong?

. . . We must realize the futility of trying to impose our will upon our children. No amount of punishment will bring about lasting submission. Today’s children are willing to take any amount of punishment in order to assert their “rights.” Confused and bewildered parents mistakenly hope that punishment will eventually bring results, without realizing that they are actually getting nowhere with their methods. At best, they gain only temporary results from punishment. When the same punishment has to be repeated again and again, it should be obvious that it does not work.

. . . Punishment, or the authoritative idea — “obey me, or else,” needs to be replaced by a sense of mutual respect and co-operation. Even though children are no longer in an inferior position, they are untrained and inexperienced. They need our leadership. A good leader inspires and stimulates his followers into action that suits the situation. So it must be with parents. Our children need our guidance. They will accept it if they know we respect them as human beings with equal rights to decide what they will do. The insult to a child’s dignity is enormous when he is whipped, and not much of Mother’s dignity is left when she is通过 with the procedure, particularly if she feels guilty afterwards.

We parents can learn to use more effective methods to stimulate a child so that he has a desire to conform to the demands of order. We can create an atmosphere of mutual self-respect and consideration and provide an opportunity for the child to learn how to live comfortably and happily with others. We need to arrange learning situations without showing a lack of respect for the child or for ourselves. And we can do all this without a show of power, for power incites rebellion and defeats the purpose of child-raising.

. . . The system of rewarding children for good behavior is as detrimental to their outlook as the system of punishment. The same lack of respect is shown. We “reward” our inferiors for favors or for good deeds. In a system of mutual respect among equals, a job is done because it needs doing, and the satisfaction comes from the harmony of two people doing a job together.

[from Chapter 6: The Use of Natural and Logical Consequences]

Since punishment and reward are ineffective, what can we do when children misbehave? Well, what happens if Mother forgets about the cake in the oven? It follows by logic that the cake is burned. This is the natural consequence of her forgetfulness. If we allow a child to experience the consequences of his acts, we provide an honest and real learning situation.

. . . Alice, four, is underweight and catches cold easily. Both Mother and Daddy are convinced that her health will improve with proper nourishment.

Alice sits in front of her plate eating the first few bites with relish. She drinks a little milk; and as the conversation between Mother and Daddy starts, she gradually...
Jerry, defensively: "Oh … big deal!"

Elaine, admiringly: "They [Kevin and his friends] read!"

[From the “Bizarro Jerry” episode of Seinfeld]

July 22, 2012

Like Jerry, I hardly ever read books. Novels, biographies, self-help manuals… You name it.
Since the joy of books alone isn’t enough to get me to pick one up, I’ve thought that I should join a book club so that the “assignments” would provide extra motivation. But then I’d be reading books chosen mostly by others rather than the books I wish I could get myself to read. The only solution, it seemed, was to form a book club that I would be in charge of.

And that is how the Interrobang Book Club came into existence. It consists of me, my companion LZ, and LZ’s friend TM.

The IBC’s inaugural meeting focused on *Moneyball* by Michael Lewis. *Moneyball* is the true story of how Oakland A’s general manager Billy Beane has used novel statistics-based methods of evaluating players to make the A’s a perennial contender despite a very limited budget.

LZ is not especially drawn to the game of baseball per se, so she was most interested in the inefficiencies of the baseball “market” and how Beane has taken advantage of them. But she agreed with me that the vignettes of underappreciated players — such as Scott Hatteberg, Chad Bradford, and Jeremy Brown — were fascinating and moving. These were guys considered defective by most baseball scouts and managers: Hatteberg can’t throw, Bradford pitches underhanded and with poor velocity, and Brown is fat. But Beane identifies them as bargains and gives them a chance to shine, to their initial confusion and eventual delight.

It’s easy to root for these unassuming underdogs. Beane himself is an underdog too — a general manager trying to outsmart teams that literally have three times as much money as the A’s. He shows admirable grit in repudiating deeply entrenched beliefs about how to judge talent. He’s also a bit of a maniac who is prone to temper tantrums. The detailed portrayal of Beane allows us to appreciate his insight and charisma, yet be glad that we don’t work for him.

LZ raised the question of whether a Billy Beane-style team, with its emphasis on efficient production of runs, is less fun to watch than a conventional squad of good-looking stars. Do fans want to see a bunch of unheralded misfits patiently draw lots of walks? The book seems to conclude that, if a team is winning, its fans will embrace it, regardless of the details. Whether the average fan can appreciate the challenges of competing against much richer teams is another matter, but for those who are interested, *Moneyball* provides a compelling explanation.

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Megalobibliomania

April 5, 2012

My aunt just sent us the book *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* by Brian Selznick, upon which the Martin Scorsese movie *Hugo* is based. It is enormous — over 500 pages long, and resembling the later Harry Potter volumes in size and shape. Phil loves it.

He loves it in part for its numerous pivotal pencil-and-paper drawings. At various key points in the story, the text simply stops and the pictures take over the narrative, in a sort of tribute to silent films (which figure into the plot).

I think Phil also appreciates the book’s sheer size, and its seemingly endless supply of twists and turns. We can read it for a full hour, and at the end of the hour there are still plenty of pages left for next time.

I hope that, once we do eventually finish it, Phil will want to explore other giant books. Maybe even Harry Potter.

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The Best of Times

December 29, 2011

My mom’s side of the family and my dad’s side have at least one thing in common besides my sister and me: an interest in and aptitude for writing. My aunts and uncles have written and edited works ranging from *Don’t Tread On Me: The Selected Letters of S.J. Perelman* to *A Birder’s Guide to Minnesota* to an unpublished organic chemistry textbook. It follows that our favorite game to play at family reunions entails creating and judging opening sentences of novels.
WHAT IS NEEDED: a bookshelf full of books, four or more players, one pen or pencil per player, and plenty of scrap paper.

HOW TO PLAY: One player — the Reader — selects a novel from the shelf and reads the title, author, and cover blurb to the others. Then he/she writes the first sentence of the book on a piece of paper while everyone else composes an alternative beginning. The Reader collects all of the sentences, mixes them up, and reads them aloud in random order. Everyone besides the Reader picks the sentence he/she thinks is the real one. One point is awarded for guessing the real first sentence; one point is also awarded for writing a sentence that someone else chooses. If nobody’s choice is correct, the Reader gets two extra points. Play continues until every player has had a turn as the Reader.

We didn’t invent this game, but we don’t know where it came from or what it is called. This Christmas I decided that we should give it a proper name, at least for intra-family purposes, and my proposal to call it “The Best of Times” (a reference both to Charles Dickens’ most famous lead-off sentence and our enjoyment of the game) was accepted by a majority of the Family Council.

My father, with his knack for conjuring up plausible geographical features, is the perennial champion. He didn’t play on Tuesday night, though, allowing me to carve out a rare victory, which I clinched with this hypothetical opening to Clive Cussler’s Treasure: “The secret to navigating out on the open sea is to ignore the compass and trust the sextant.” That’s not true, but it has a ring of authenticity and two people fell for it.

My Uncle Scott has also achieved a kind of notoriety for his opening sentences. On Tuesday, when Angela’s Ashes came up, he wrote, “Mount St. Angela really blew her stack.”

In another game, years ago, a turn was devoted to Too Late The Phalarope. Scott offered, “The phalarope was running late — very late.”

In our family, that’s right up there with “It was a dark and stormy night.”

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