

Bibliomen part 2

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 28 Aug 2014

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Marc Aramini — 28 Aug 2014, 15:03

JOHN J. JONS, JR (April 15, 1942 — 1998)

Jons is stricken with diarrhea in New York City and, still looking for a restroom twenty minutes later, is mugged. He wrote "A Guide to the Public Toilets of America". "It was published to little notice in 1990, and within a year had sold over one million copies." When he was not considered for the Nobel Prize, he wrote *Meditations on the Utilitarian Theory of Literary Merit* (pushing the idea that practically useful literature is great literature). It was ridiculed. "Jons died of accidental causes in 1998, having apparently attempted to clean the front sight of his .357 Magnum with his teeth and pulled the trigger in the process."

A revision of his guide to toilets is found and published. "Only after several million copies had poured from the presses was it discovered that the directions in the revised edition were uniformly incorrect." Jons' grave marker is inscribed "Cloaca Deception".

The reason for his name is the obvious eponymous word play we would expect for a man destined to write about toilets. Rather than having an obscure artist die unknown, we have a prominent one who is never given the intellectual respect he feels he deserves, seeking revenge on his public.

The guidebook motif will be repeated by Wolfe in his collaboration with Neil Gaiman, *A Walking Tour of the Shambles.*

XAVIER MCRIDY (1939-)

In the most overtly Borgesian effort of *Bibliomen*, Xavier McRidy begins work on *The Paper Nautilus* in 1969, about a reviewer reading *Mr. Milton in Medoc* by S. Peety. In that book, the title character is writing a dissertation on *Allegiance to La Villa Real de la Santa Fe De San Francisco* (by Juan Gabriel Sebastian de Solo y Varios — whose name ending means alone and many) in which an Argentine author attempts to persuade a reluctant publisher in Buenos Aires to translate *The Paper Nautilus*.

"McRidy has hopes of a critical success if he can ever find his way out."

Here is the labyrinthine metafiction of the Argentine Borges: a man writing a novel in which, through a chain of fictional reviews, dissertations, and translations, his novel appears again, nested in the chambers of a paper nautilus, a labyrinthine book. The irony of the title which translates to allegiance to the real city of the holy faith of St. Francis is in the indeterminate nature of a final level to reality in the entry.

Xavier means "owner of a new house". McRidy could be derived from a name meaning "son of the expert", or could be based on some more nebulous pun. Peety most commonly occurs as a phonetic spelling in dialect for pity, but it might just as easily refer to something else.

LIEUTENANT JAMES RYAN O'MURPHY, NYPD (May 8, 1931 -)

Lieutenant O'Murphy, born the day after Gene Wolfe, is interviewed by the New York Daily News on February 31, 1988. He is the head of the Bibliokleptcy and Plagiarism squad.

His squad investigates book crime. He clarifies why people attempting to sell the rights to the Hitler diaries were not subject to prosecution, and they soon talk of the book forger Louis Gold from **Peace**. O'Murphy says Gold is out of his jurisdiction, but proceeds to praise his technique and skill highly. His forgeries “would have been as good as original material, and maybe better and more characteristic.” O'Murphy says minute details should be checked, inserted as private jokes, such as the date of the interview, to identify Gold's forgeries. (Here, O'Murphy mentions that Arthurs has fled to the South of France to avoid prosecution for his dishonest academic work — Mr. Milton from the fiction **Milton in Medoc**, believing himself related to John Milton, also retires there.) The Woody Allen mockumentary **Zelig** is mentioned, about a man who assumes the characteristics and habits of the famous people that inspire him, and O'Murphy indicates films are not his province, though if Allen shows his face at the prominent bar for writers and entertainers in New York, Elaine's, they will get him (Woody Allen always hung out there).

He is currently working on the case of the French Grave Robbing — the book which killed Bernard French was titled **Great Lost Art of Western Europe**, and because most of the large books were pulped, it is quite valuable. At least two people opened French's grave and stole the book. He believes the plates will be taken out in Amsterdam.

Lt. O'Murphy is the nephew of the Monsignor O'Murphy who helped Sister Mary join the order of the Sisters of Perpetual Vigilance, and sounds his ideas off on him.

His entry lets us know that **Bibliomen** as a whole is probably the forgery of Louis Gold from **Peace**.

Can we determine who stole the book which contained Bernard French? Though there is no motive at all, the few characters alive and positioned to do so are Kirk Arthurs, Jon Johns, Paul Rico, and John Kinder Price, but it is more likely the mystery is meant to be unresolvable. Kirk Arthurs and Mr. Milton both flee to the South of France, however, though they may not exist in the same reality.

James implies “supplanter, Ryan means ?royalty”, and O'Murphy implies a male descendant of the sea warrior — appropriate for the dominant metaphor of books as a metaphysical kind of boat.

ANNE PARSONS (November 7, 1935 -)

Anne Parsons becomes an Assistant Librarian at the Kansas City Learning Resource Center (once known as a library). When the Center seeks to expand the Audio Visual section, she proposes building a new facility to house the “noneducational and antieducational” materials. They opt to get rid of all the books to make space for the VHS tapes, selling them at ten cents a piece to the public. Anne Parsons buys them all and moves them into the abandoned building she had hoped to replace. She institutes a classic library system. Special interest groups demand representation, and she points out texts like *Othello*, *Don Quixote*, and the works of Samuel R. Delany.

Soon, her building is spray painted with obscene pictures and an attempt is made to fire bomb it. When the number of viewers increases, a “brutal street gang” known as Arthur's Pages appears to protect them. A convicted rapist, William Bugge Ribberts, is found dead with a scrap of paper in his mouth saying, “who kills a man kills a reasonable creature”. (This only seems ironic out its context in Milton) Parsons refuses to explain.

Most of her collection is now gone, and she plans to purchase another 50,000 volumes and is training an assistant, but Parsons only responds to inquiries with “Shhh.”

The message found in the dead man's mouth is an injunction against censorship made by Milton in his **Areopagitica**:

as good almost kill a Man as kill a good Book; who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, Gods Image; but hee who destroyes a good Booke, kills reason it selfe, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye. Many a man lives a burden to the Earth; but a good Booke is the pretious life-blood of a master spirit, imbalmd and treasur'd up on purpose to a life beyond life.

This shows the devotion to books which Arthur's Pages have brought, seeking vengeance on those who destroy books or censor them. The threat of books being replaced by more modern media is given free reign here — the classic library model thrown out in favor of a video resource center.

The name Anne implies “favor or grace”, and the last name Parsons is someone who works for or serves a parson, a man of God. Here the library and books are seen as the vitality and spirit of reason and immortality.

The argument that the canon and works of literary quality are representative in general of a very specific, homogenous demographic (dead white males) is briefly presented and challenged by Parsons in this entry.

ADAM (?) POOR (?) (1951 -)

Said to be born on the Isle of Sark, Poor is only known from the biographical information on his book's cover. His first book, **Voices Vocab**, involves a cast of seven characters who have boarded a train from Sark to Bournemouth. The challenge is to sort the characters out by their voices. “It is possible that the tunnel linking Sark to Bournemouth had collapsed and they are limbo [sic], or that there is no tunnel.”

His second novel was a detective story, **The Salted Mine**, in which one detective solves a murder, the second accuses the first, and a third comes to exonerate him, though clues planted by Poor indicate the third detective is actually the murderer.

Attempts to locate Poor have been fruitless, and his birth on Sark declared a forgery by **The National Enquirer**. ?*His publishers are said to be holding his royalties in trust, and it is said Prince Charles and Princess Diana are among them.

Sark is actually a real Channel Island located off the coast of Normandy, France, considered the last feudal state in Europe. It does not allow cars and has a population of approximately 500. It is accessible only via boat. Bournemouth is a coastal town of England. The train mentioned is clearly fictional — they would have to be using a boat, or the tunnel actually be a fictional one under the sea.

Sark is the setting for Mervyn Peake's novel **Mr. Pye** and may have inspired the **Gormenghast** setting. Peake actually lived on the island at one time.

Adam means “red”, while Poor is actually a place name reference which could be Picardy in France, besides the obvious English meaning of the word.

I feel that Poor's narrative technique is one which makes overt several of Wolfe's tendencies, especially in stories like “Cherry Jubilee”, where both detectives are wrong and listening to the speech patterns of the identical girls help sort them out. This entry also shows the reclusive author who is known only by their work, and this could be either through the workings of time and history or an intentional avoidance of publicity and fame (though here Poor could easily be a pseudonym or a “fictional” author).

Is there any relationship between Adam Poor and his imaginary, conceivably collapsed tunnel and Man-on-Fire of Sister Mary through the red resonance and the (non-textual) ghost story of the Hoosac Tunnel deaths, or is this entirely coincidental?

Do the seven characters on the train in **Voices Vocab** have any relationship to other characters in **Bibliomen** or in other works? Seven seems to be a favored number for its religious significance — it is also the line the Chairman of Isaac, Abraham, and Joseph uses to call Lucifer.

JOHN K. (KINDER) PRICE (1873-)

Born in Pennsylvania, Price moves to Massachusetts and, after the death of his wife and child, tries to find a hobby, including building ship models (as per the Dickinson reference again) and stamp collecting. After reading of a book of spells in a pulp magazine, in 1939 he resolves to find it (probably an HP Lovecraft story). “Because the book did not exist, he could neither fail nor end the search by discovering a copy.” His search expands from Springfield and local libraries to sending correspondence all over the world: the Congo, Persia, and Bythinia. In 1952 a neighbor reports Price had not been seen for several weeks, and the house later burned down. He was spotted intermittently at Dartmouth campus and garage sales around Boston. The most recent sighting (1977) was in the stacks of the British Museum Library. “It is conjectured that Price has still not discovered the book he seeks; but he appears to have found something.”

The search for arcane lore seems to have led Price to some form of immortality. Lovecraft and the tales of eldritch knowledge clearly influenced Wolfe's approach to fantasy.

Since the last appearance of Price is contemporaneous with the last published book of Adam Poor, is there any relationship between the two?

John means “grace or mercy of the Lord”, Kinder can imply “children”, and Price means “son of Rhys”, which implies “enthusiasm”. What is the price of being young forever?

PAUL RICO (1960 -)

Born in New York City, Paul is a graffiti artist who begins with obscenities and eventually becomes more allusive and clever, reaching public attention with “I JUST GOT REAL”. He transposed restroom graffiti to the subway cars he favored. Most are cleverly banal, such as “FREEDOM OF THE WALLS!?, ?UP WITH SKIRTS”, and “PEACE OR DIE”. When his graffiti is mentioned in the New York Times, he becomes more intellectually ambitious: “FREE THE NINE WORTHIES”, — DIAL-A-DWARF — RING THE NIBELUNGS?, and “PERSEUS IS AFRAID OF SNAKES”.

On seeing a poster advertising the book he puts out called TRAINING THE MIND, he vandalizes it immediately.

Unconventional expression is explored as art with a social conscious here, quite tongue in cheek. Almost every one of the vandalized messages are double entendres or paradoxes — such as the freedom of expression available by writing on walls, which ultimately in actuality delimit and circumscribe liberty.

Paul means “small or humble”. Rico as a family name implies “rich”.

RISHI (c .3500 or 3300 BC -)

Rishi's entry takes the form in a parable of wisdom. An ancient sage sits in a cave for the last forty years of his life. “By day he spoke with the gods, by night with spirits, and with animals and the winds at all times.”

People come to ask him how to achieve wisdom, which the sage knows is quite simple: following a nearby riverside path to the book of wisdom. The first supplicant will not go because of insects, the second because she has already seen that side of the mountain, the third because the village he must go to is poor, until finally a handsome and young disciple comes. Each time before, Rishi had altered his advice to overcome the objection of the previous supplicant, but he simply repeats his first injunction to this final seeker of wisdom to follow the nearby path to the village where the book rests, where it is read from every day.

?In the final year of Rishi's life, he who had been the youth returned; but he did not hold himself boldly, nor were his eyes yet bright. 'Great Rishi — there is no longer a path.'

This parable shows that eventually, when wisdom is not sought, the path towards it vanishes. The old sage has been so out of touch that he does not realize the world changes around him, and while the parable has a traditional tone, even the man of wisdom is rendered foolish in his hopes. Of course the idea of a book as containing wisdom fits with the theme of *Bibliomen* as a whole, but wisdom is lost if it is not actively and continually sought.

Who is the Sloan who attributes Rishi's birth to 3300 BC rather than 3500?

SKEETER SMITH (APRIL 10, 1969-APRIL 3, 1978)

The baseball player Skeeter Smith is an editorial comic character created by Chick Beal for the *Chicago Daily Star*. Beal envisioned him as a comic, but Skeeter was perceived primarily as an athlete. In 1972, when a decision went against the Cubs, Skeeter forced the umpire to eat the rule book, an umpire who resembled Beal's editor.

After that, Skeeter wasn't very funny. He then moved to the *Indianapolis Chronicle* as Beal and his wife separated, and then after further problems moved to the Julius, Georgia Patriots, appearing on the last page of the *Julius Emperor*. (I am not certain this is a real city and team — more likely created for its pun of Roman Emperors with the name Julius or of the Julian line). On April 3 a small box indicated Skeeter would no longer appear, and on April 4 Chick crosses a busy highway and is killed in an apparent suicide.

The popularity of a fictional comic character and his creator are given parallel lives here, showing how all art is ultimately a metaphor for human existence. Chick only outlives his creation by a day. Even in a strip about baseball, it seems that the author's life somehow creeps in, coloring the representation.

Skeeter means "quick and darting." Smith means "one who works in metal" or "to smite."

Chick is a short form of Charles, which means "free man". Beal, in addition to implying a handsome man, could mean "bee-hill" or "Land by the Bend".

THE WOMAN WHO RESIGNED (?)

A thin woman with no makeup comes to town and checks into the Big Tree Motel, and within a week her nondescript, androgynous and cheap clothes were found on the edge of town. Years later a deer hunter brings in a strange thing he has shot, neither human nor animal. The coroner who tested the blood asserts it is not human, and the innkeeper of the Big Tree Motel, Mrs. Collins, indicates she thinks the woman just gave up. The narrator indicates the thing wasn't human, and Mrs. Collins says, "But that's what you want, isn't it" ?. To quit the job of being one, give up on everything and go somewhere far away. Haven't you ever noticed how far away a bird is from us? It'll sing to you, but you can't talk to it, and it doesn't care if you live or die. The woman left behind two books: Grimm's **Fairy Tales** and **Genetic Engineering Practice**. Deer hunters continue to have stories of seeing something in the woods, and when the narrator gets lost, he comes across a farmhouse where a woman claims to have milk and crackers outside for her dog, though her dog stays inside with her.

We finally have a look at science textbooks, crossed with Wolfe's earlier story, "Sweet Forest Maid." The woman has made her escape from humanity an experiment, bringing to life the sylvan fairy tales of forest spirits, probably by experimenting on herself until she has bred something both new and ancient in the wilderness.

LETTER TO HIROSHI HAYAKAWA

In this letter, Gene tells a publisher of a nurse helping a brilliant young man who was dying, and he tells her of all the things he will do — go to the university, travel, and see the sick. Before he dies he says the powers at the edge of the universe revealed he would do all that, then he died. She sees his face the next day reflected in a magazine kiosk, and seems to see him over her shoulder as well. At that point, the Japanese American nurse screamed out a word that means "ten thousand years" - Banzai! This can also be an injunction to long life as well as acclamation for the Emperor. This hopeful injunction of spirit enduring long after the body dies ended the original publication of **Bibliomen**. **It purports to be reality but is more mystical than several of the entries.*

SEAMAN (1951 -)

Glenville Neal was born in London and began drawing the comic **Smoke and Mirrors** in 1978. Smoke, the Lord of Obscurity is a demigod "ruling Earth from a vast palace outside time and space" who eliminated historical abnormalities, both assisted and occasionally opposed by his consort Mirrors, the Lady of Illusion. Neal immigrates to the United States and in 1988 begins to see Smoke everywhere, claiming he must draw him in order to avoid being plagued by his own creation.

The final paragraph reveals that Neal is simply a fictional creation of B. J. Solomon, and that Neal's circulation has gone down as his mental health deteriorated, until he is transformed to a more conventional superhero after his wife leaves him: Seaman, "a righter of wrongs and avenger of injustices residing beneath a vast dome of glass under Lake Superior."

Here we have Neil Gaiman of Sandman fame fictionalized as a graphic novel artist who creates something interesting in his art, but in this reality he is simply another, more banal creation than his own drawings, and in order to maintain ratings, B.J. Solomon completely commercializes his character. Of course we have the idea of psychological fracturing which could explain the leaking of fiction into the real world, but Glenville Neal seems trapped in another creator's reality.

The name Solomon means "Peace" — does this refer to any other (nonfictional) fiction writer?

Does Glenville Neal drown himself after his wife leaves him?

CAPTAIN ROY C MIRK, B.A., M.A., Ph.D. (January 15, 1928 — April 28, 1996)

Mirk became a naval officer and then a University Professor of American literature until his retirement in 1993. Mirk published several nonsensical works: such as *Poultry as Symbolism in Nineteenth Century American Literature*, *Washing as a Euphemism in the Works of Jack London*, and *A Post-Modernist Critic Views the Antebellum Middle West*. He comes up with the idea of bringing his works to a wider circulation — he buys a schooner named the Appaloosa and renames it the Bounty.

He travels up and down the North American Coast and encourages people to trade volumes freely, taking and giving as they see fit. In January of 1996, Mirk rearranged the confusing hold by subject area, putting "critical works he favored" to starboard and books of all other types to port. He spies Davidson's **Mutiny in Space** on the shelf on April 18th and pulls it out, at which point the Bounty capsized and sunk. "His body has never been recovered."

Here we have a wonderful idea that turns sour because of the critics' own agenda. Mirk wants his ideas promulgated, so he promotes literature and its free exchange but is disappointed that no one ever takes the critical books he has written. In favoring his own agenda, he unbalances the literary view, seeking to place his own obsessions in a position of prominence. This is another criticism of the academic world, especially in post-modern re-evaluations that ultimately decentralize meaning and significance.

It is interesting that Avram Davidson's **Mutiny in Space** seems to cause a book mutiny on the Bounty — marginalized entertainment in the form of science fiction (but of a very particular type, with the literary but unique science fiction of Davidson) capsizes all the careful categorizations that Mirk has attempted to force on his collection. Mirk and his work is lost at sea, for despite his efforts to circulate literature, it was his own agenda, one not worthy of remembrance.

This final entry ties together the idea that the original sources themselves will survive, infused with the vitality of the sea rather than the frail, artificial ship upon it.

Roy can mean "king" or "chief", Mirk implies "dark". The murky agenda of the Captain undermines his endeavor, just as the academic world presses its own concerns on a pre-existing literary world, attempting to control and re-organize something which should live as itself without conforming to academic categorizations.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS

For the most part, the references to particular authors and stories are listed in the individual

story sections, but the entirety of **Bibliomen** is perhaps inspired by the artificial metafiction of authors such as Pirandello in **Six Characters in Search of An Author** or Borges' various stories that see reality as just another level of fiction. The various genres in the individual entries pay tribute to the comic medium, graffiti, science fiction, academic criticism, publishing, experimental fiction, and even book collecting.

CONNECTION TO OTHER WORKS:

The absurd in Wolfe usually takes the form of comedy. His collaboration with Neil Gaiman, **A Walking Tour of the Shambles**, “Dumpster World”, and “Planetarium in Orbit” all have a similar feel. **Bibliomen** is the most literary of these efforts in its exploration of metafiction, adventure novels, psychological breakdowns, science fiction confessions, literary puns and allusions, guide books, comics, and even picture books, but is still very far from serious.

The return of Louis Gold, the forger from **Peace**, is a nice Easter egg — and there is some indication that he is the author of **Bibliomen** as a whole.