

Academ*Fic*

Volume 4 (2023)



ACADEMFIC

VOLUME 4 · 2023

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SOMETHING FISHY

SYLVIA WENMACKERS

Last week, a journalist from national TV contacted me.

“Have you heard about the Canadian lottery?” she asked.

“No,” I said, “what about it?”

“Their latest draw resulted in six consecutive numbers,” she told me.

“And?” I said, knowing full well where this was headed.

“There has been a torrent of reactions about it on social media,” she said, “from jokes to outright accusations of fraud. So, we were hoping you’d be willing to comment in it on our show.”

“Perhaps,” I said, “when do you need me there?” I doubted they need a statistics professor to explain it, but our dean always insists that we should participate in outreach. Accepting this interview offered me an easy way to tick that box, so I agreed to come to the studio on Monday.

Over the past decades, they’ve asked me to comment on many allegedly remarkable coincidences. The essence of my explanation has always been the same: in lotteries, all the outcomes are equally unlikely, whether we perceive a pattern in them or not. But I got bored with telling the same story, so when the call ended, I started investigating this case, looking for a fresh angle.

Apparently, the Canadian lottery had switched to an electronic system for performing their draws, as have many other countries, including South Korea, Romania, and some states in the US. I hadn’t been aware of that, even though I used to do research on methods for producing randomness. Then vanity struck me: was it possible that they had built on my early work?

It was difficult to get my hands on specifics about their system. The company that had successfully developed and sold their random number generator to various national lotteries was called ML Systems. They had a video on their website that illustrated the system with a 3D animation of cardboard boxes with printed buzzwords. It was all very ‘reliable,’ ‘traceable,’ ‘unhackable,’ and of course ‘provably random.’ But how it worked? Not a clue about that.

I decided to check whether ML Systems had filed any patents and, sure enough, they had one from four years ago. That was shortly before they’d

started selling electronic lottery systems worldwide. The patent described “a low-cost method for harvesting biological randomness.” For a moment, I thought they used the radioactive decay of potassium in bananas, but the design contained no Geiger-Müller tube.

The patent file did mention an electronic detector. Still, it would have been easy to miss that this referred to a microelectrode to measure the signal from a lamprey’s retina. Not for me, though, as I remember the Latin name of the species all too well: *Mordacia lapicida*. It was even in their name: ML Systems. At this point in my literature research, I said under my breath: “Oh no, they haven’t!”

I tried to fathom what had gone on in the research lab of ML Systems. They must have succeeded in isolating rod cells from lampreys’ retinas, hooking them up to tiny electrodes, and packaging them into a serialized product. And they even managed to convince several state lotteries to buy these random number generators built from fisheye cells.

Did they go to Chile and ask local fishers for the parasitic fish, or did they order them through Alibaba? How did they manage to harvest the cells from their tiny eyes? And where did they gather the expertise to connect the single rod cells to microelectrodes? I had no answers to any of my questions. All I knew is that they indeed achieved what I once proposed in an obscure proceedings article published during my doctoral studies in the early nineties. Rod cells had been all the rage during my studies after they had been found to be sensitive to single photons.

I was stoked that someone had finally built an application based on my research – stoked and full of questions. The answers would be great to have before my interview. So, I called ML’s sales representative, the only number I could find online. The salesman sounded inexperienced and couldn’t help me with any of my questions. So, in the end, I asked him: “Have you even seen one of the random number generators you’re supposed to sell?”

“Well, sure,” he said, “I have one on my desk right here. I feed it every day.”

“Feed it,” I repeated, “do you mean power it?”

“I feed the host,” he said, “the lamprey is attached to another fish, so I feed that one every day. All our customers do so; it’s in the instruction manual. The first year’s supply of fish food is included in our catalogue price.”

I was shocked and didn't have the heart to tell him that my research had been on the statistical distribution of the noise signal produced by single cells when kept in the dark.

#

Of course, I do feel guilty. After all, I did include a procedure for transforming lampreys' retinal noise to near-uniform distributions over a discrete interval of choice. I even mentioned the possible application to lotteries in the abstract! But a fool could see that my proposal was not to be taken seriously. After all, the results could easily be manipulated. Rod cells are highly sensitive to light, remember, so if anyone wanted to manipulate such a lottery, all they would need was the dimmest of flashlights.

There's no way I'll be able to sit through my TV interview with a straight face now, is there? If the interviewer opens with "unlikely things do happen," I will have a laughing fit as I think of the parasitic fish sitting on that guy's desk. No, I'll have to call in sick with the producer. Then, I'll reach out to the lottery people again and tell them discreetly about their tiny problem. I just can't believe they didn't notice my study was published on April fools.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sylvia Wenmackers is a professor in philosophy of science at KU Leuven, Belgium. Most of her research is related to the foundations of chance. Besides academic papers, she writes a monthly column for a popular science magazine. She has published two nonfiction trade books, and her speculative fiction has appeared in *Nature Futures* and *Danse Macabre*.

DISENTANGLEMENT

STEVEN FRENCH

My dearest Käthe,

I hope that this letter finds its way to you and that you are safe. I am sorry that we parted with such bad humour. You know that I love you and Mama dearly. And Papa too, even though to him I am still his little girl whose studies he has indulged but who will be expected to marry and have babies and behave as a good German housewife should. As Mama has, all her life.

But Käthe, today, that life is over. It was so for me as soon as I took my seat in the lecture theatre the first time, the only woman there amongst a crowd of men. Some of whom laughed and smirked at me but what did I care? For there, at the front, just a few rows ahead of me, were the gods of my scientific pantheon. They included the great man himself, Professor Einstein, who was to give this inaugural lecture but was happily sharing a joke with his host, Professor Heisenberg, and seemed immune to all the admiring glances from the audience. Just to be present – I will not say ‘in such company’ – was sufficient for me.

Imagine then how I felt when I was invited by none other than Professor Heisenberg himself to join his ‘select group’ who would meet outside of class to read and discuss the latest work on the new quantum physics. At first, I was too shy to even squeak but one evening I plucked up the courage to say something about a new paper we were studying by Professor Schrödinger, one of the architects of the theory. In this work Schrödinger describes how, according to the theory, two particles might become tied together or ‘entangled’ in a way that seems quite mysterious. One of the young men in the group was trying to summarise this paper but in a manner that seemed to me to miss the central point. So, I decided to speak up and correct him. I almost stuttered to a shameful halt and would have embarrassed myself if Professor Heisenberg hadn’t nodded his head in encouragement. But it was the young man who blushed and looked down at his shoes.

I was afraid that by showing off in this way I had committed a faux pas with the group, or even made an enemy of my fellow scholar. But afterwards he introduced himself as Max and complimented me on my insight. And he asked me if he could walk me back to my lodgings! Käthe, I must confess my heart skipped a beat as he was tall and handsome and, despite my correction of

his understanding, quite clever. Soon we became inseparable. We not only walked together to and from the meetings but also discussed the papers together beforehand, studied together ... I am sure Mama and Papa would have been scandalised!

After some weeks, he invited me to have dinner with him at a little restaurant not far from the Institute. For the first time we talked about things other than physics and began to share our hopes and fears for the future. But then, walking home, we passed one of those horrifying spectacles that have become increasingly common: a well-dressed middle-aged man and what I assume was his wife, were down on their knees scrubbing at the pavement, while a crowd surrounding them jeered and called them the most filthy names. I looked away, appalled. "That's not how we should deal with the Jews" Max muttered and I must admit, my horror at what I'd just seen was fully matched by my anger at what I'd just heard. He observed my face then and his too changed, as he realised. "Not you, my dear, not you," he tried to reassure me. "You will be safe I will make sure of that. After all, Germany needs great minds like yours as well."

I did not know what to say and so I walked on in silence. When we reached my lodgings, I said goodnight and all but ran upstairs to my room. My only thoughts were of how to remove myself from this relationship. Fortunately, the matter was resolved for me within a few days. A Professor Wigner was visiting from the United States with a scholarship in his pocket and had been invited to join our discussions. At first I could barely say a thing as I felt him observing me. What prompted me to assert myself was Max's overly confident summary of the paper, presented as if he felt he had something to prove. However, once again his understanding of it struck me as muddled and confused. I regret to say that I told him so and before he could respond, I set out my analysis, to Professor Heisenberg's obvious approval.

This time Max's face flushed with anger and he stormed out of the meeting shortly after we had finished, but Professor Wigner asked me to stay behind. I cannot express how nervous I was answering his questions about my background, my studies and so forth. And so, I was utterly taken aback when Professor Heisenberg invited me to his office the next day and announced that I was to be offered the scholarship!

Now I write this on the train to Hamburg from where I will sail to America and my new life. Käthe, I do not know when I will be able to return, as much as I fear for you and Mama and Papa. I beg you not to remain tied to this country which is already so different from what it was. We are all of us

entangled with family and tradition but since what is on the horizon will break those chains anyway, it would be better, far better, to do it yourself, and soon.

I must end this now as we are approaching the station.

Take care,

Your loving sister,

Greta

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven French is a retired Professor in history and philosophy of science at the University of Leeds. He has been trying his hand at various forms of creative writing, including speculative and, as in this case, historical.

MY HIVE MIND

DJ TANTILLO

Childbirth is easy. That's our most effective marketing pitch. And it's true – has been since the motion carried, the one to distribute all pain.

If only mothers weren't forced to watch the insertion, knowing that their little ones will feel the pain inside their skulls. We all know that it's necessary to invade their brains to implant the device, but the vicarious pain of seeing it is not diluted by distribution. And most understand why the device must be implanted early but lay dormant for years, why the children must suffer in the absence of cognitive readiness.

"Mom, they're broadcasting the final arguments now." Time to let the memory go and focus on the job. And time to listen to the history again, one both personal and shared by all, as much of life is now. "Okay, I'm coming."

Today, it is an oral history, delivered with scorn by the Minister of Interconnectivity.

"Respected leaders. We mustn't forget our journey to the present. How our ancestors first experimented with distributed computing in the service of citizen science, the First Leap. The sharing of processing power, otherwise idle, over the network allowed for many discoveries: the design of new proteins through games with stated but ignored goals, the location (and only nominal pillaging) of lost treasures by analysis of satellite data, the discovery of extrasolar life we will never see, and the creation of the blueprints for the Second Leap.

"When those designs were realized, the network was brought into our bodies, plugged into our brains. The number of world citizens without invasive neural links plummeted and few complained. Why would they? Donating the unused processing power of our brains was simply the next step in the empowerment of progress, our duty as global citizens. And it didn't hurt, not much, after the first month.

"And then the Third Leap, when the human computational network discovered how to remove the passivity, how to give back to the donor nodes by allowing them to communicate with each other, consciously. When soulless computation was augmented with thought sharing, all hell broke loose.

“We could have shut it all down, stopped invading skulls, but the citizenry wouldn’t have it. So we imposed limits and enforced Distribution Plans. All citizens were connected to the Relief Network and the perception of pain was diminished by dilution. It turned out that, on average, humans experience nearly no physical pain at any given moment.”

The Minister is always eloquent, but I wish she would drop her rhetoric and make her point. We all know the history.

“Now we face the realities of pain-free living. Many self-mutilate, many die for not realizing they are burning or freezing or impaled. We should have known. A genetic disorder in which sufferers do not feel pain has been known for ages. But we did not realize we were infecting everyone with an equivalent condition through bioelectronics innovation. Natural genetic mechanisms had only ever inflicted the absence of pain on a vanishingly small fraction of humanity. No remedy was ever found for the disorder, but we can remedy our error.”

Ah yes, she comes to it at last.

“The distribution of pain must be limited. Surgery – yes. Childbirth – yes. Neurochemical pain – yes. Toe-stubbing – no. Yes, we have seen a near disappearance of the abuse of addictive substances, but as the fear of pain has disappeared, we also have seen a rise in joy-riding and associated vehicular homicide, in violent altercations ending in death, in war. We, as leaders of the world’s nations, must regulate the network for our citizens.”

The rest of them agree. It makes sense. They will vote to regulate and restrict. But, as always, oversight by the chosen few will heighten social inequities. They claim that military use will cease, but while it will be prohibited it will continue unacknowledged, out of fear that another nation might be doing it. This is not the first time in history that a universal right has been created only to be transformed into a privilege.

And the underground networks for pain relief will no doubt grow. And I will get rich.

“Mom, we have nearly 12,000 new volunteers, just since the broadcast began.”

Volunteers. Parents willing to sell space in their children’s heads for profit. Sure, children are an untapped source of pain dilution, a particularly effective one in that they do not suffer from the chronic pain most will feel

later in life – if the early interconnection does not do permanent cognitive damage.

I suppose someone must mediate between the aspirational and sickly rich, both desperate. I am the best because I am both. I developed the tech, used my son to do so, to create a new industry, but I damaged him, from the inside. I turned him inside out. He's out of luck and I can't let the memory go. But I am pain free.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DJ Tantillo loves to study the complexity associated with his young children and with the mechanisms of chemical reactions. He does both in Northern California, where he is a professor of chemistry (<http://blueline.ucdavis.edu/>). He publishes flash fiction and poetry because he has many strange ideas and peer-reviewed chemistry journals aren't interested in all of them.

THE SHADOW OF MR. DOWN

JOSEPH A. MANN

Years ago, I worked at a school that lived in a shadow, the shadow of Mr. Down. Though he only worked there for a few years, his touch left the school permanently changed. Nary a week would pass without his name being spoken, sometimes in harsh tones and sometimes in hushed ones. Even students who did not know him knew him for years after he had left. And yet, his fame was a sick infamy, carrying with it a certain glee, like the way people talk about a vacation gone comically wrong.

Superficially, Mr. Down was Poe-like. Slightly younger and slimmer than Edgar Allan, Mr. Down had the same dark countenance, the same Romantic spirit, yet one updated for the post-modern age. To look into his eyes was to see the void staring back at you. If he deemed it true, then it was, for no higher power and no greater authority existed in his mind than his own. His gravity was such that light might actually have bent around him, or perhaps, it might not be able to escape his event horizon.

One day, I was walking down the hall past Mr. Down's classroom, when I heard what sounded like a rapturous disquisition on the subject of morality. I stopped to listen, as I had often heard of but never experienced the wonders of the oraculous Mr. Down. His tone caught me before his words. He was like a toolbox falling down a flight of stairs, shake-pause-slam, shake-pause-slam, over and over again. Still not aware of what he was actually saying, I heard a student say, with hesitant courage in response to Mr. Down, "I don't think that's true, because..." "True..." Mr. Down interrupted and continued in a *supito piano*, "what is truth?" like an unironic Pontius Pilate whispering to Christ himself.

I was compelled to look through the window at the drama of Mr. Down's words, I will not say at the music, for it was not at all harmonious, and at that moment, I saw him lean suddenly in the direction of the student, like an owl catching sight of potential prey. He looked the student directly in the eye provocatively, and the student looked away. The struggle of wills won, Mr. Down stood to an incredible height and turned to walk across the room. The crowd of acolytes erupted in a shower of snaps, thus signaling their assent to Mr. Down's rebuttal. I scanned their faces to see what emotion this had elicited, yet I saw no emotion on their faces.

In yet another burst of courage, the student to whom Mr. Down had leveled his devastating question returned to his interrogation: “the truth is what is, and some things are objectively wrong.” Like a cyclone, Mr. Down spun with such force that the papers on his desk were sent skyward. He closed the distance between them in less than a second with his crane-like stride and poked the student on the shoulder with the ½” dowel he carried about the room like a cane: “that, Mr. Smith, is easy to say from your position of privilege. Could you really tell a homeless parent with a child to feed that stealing is wrong?” Mr. Down smiled, again assuming his triumph, as he poked Mr. Smith two more times playfully, as if to say, “touche!” Again, like the sound of a buzzing hive, the snaps came from the majority of students in the room.

“That’s such an ignorant thing to say, Johnny,” sneered one student in the corner nearest to my position on the other side of the window. “Now, now, Ms. Croft,” said Mr. Down in a sickeningly gentle tone, “he is ignorant, but we are here to help the ignorant. We are here to bring him out of the darkness into the light.” At this, Mr. Down opened his arms as if to welcome all those who hold quaint notions into his loving embrace. Again, the snaps, like the sound of a roaring fire, came from the majority of emotionless figures in the room.

Having other business to attend to, I turned to leave. Just then, I heard the door to Mr. Down’s classroom open. I couldn’t help but turn back to see who was leaving the den of Mr. Down. It was Johnny Smith, his head down and body hunched. As he noticed me, he raised his head, and our eyes met awkwardly. We both froze in place for a few second: he like a child who has been caught in sin and I like someone caught eavesdropping.

“Interesting class,” I said hesitantly. “Yeah...” said Johnny as his eyes turned downward. “Is it always like that?” I said with more confidence. “Yes...” said Johnny as his eyes returned to mine. I could see he was on the verge of tears. “Your peers seem to love it,” I said with an upbeat tone. “They know what’s expected of them to get what they want,” said Johnny as the shake-pause-slam, shake-pause-slam sound of Mr. Down’s oration came bleeding through the door behind him, followed by another shower of snaps. “What do they want?” I had a good idea what it was, but I wanted to hear his interpretation. I started walking toward the bathroom and motioned Johnny to follow, not wanting him to be out of the room too long.

“They want a good grade,” Johnny said a little louder as we moved away from the classroom. “Don’t you want a good grade too?” I asked with more curiosity than I’d mustered behind any question in a long time. He paused for

at least five steps as we continued down the hallway toward the bathroom. “Sure,” he paused again, as if he wasn’t sure about sharing the next part. “you can tell me the truth, I won’t hold it against you,” I said trying my best to coax it out of him. His posture straightened up at the word “truth,” and he stopped abruptly. I stopped one step after and turned to look at him face to face.

“I do want a good grade, but I want...I want to look for the truth instead of the answer the teacher wants.” He lit up with passion as he said these words. “I understand,” I said as I nodded sympathetically, “you want to be challenged with logic and evidence instead of pathos and ethos.” He smiled at my understanding but only for a moment before returning to reality. I continued with a knowing tone: “you want to come out of the cave, but it’s hard to see the light while in the shadow of Mr. Down.” After a powerful pause, we went our separate ways, as nothing more could be said or done.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph Arthur Mann, Ph.D. is an independent scholar and teacher of music and humane letters for Great Hearts America, a liberal arts charter school network. His research focuses on music as ethical instruction in writings and music collections by Thomas Morley and John Dowland, the political power of praising music in early modern England, and the use of music as political propaganda, which he discusses in his monograph, *Printed Musical Propaganda in Early Modern England*, available through a trans-Atlantic partnership with Clemson, Liverpool, and Oxford University Presses. His work has also appeared in *Musica Disciplina*, *The Musical Times*, and *Elizabethan and Jacobean Praises of Music*.

GRAY SQUISHY STUFF

JENEAN MCBREARTY

Professor David Farmer finished his lunch—egg salad on wheat toast — at 1:30 pm. He had already interviewed three candidates for the one research assistant position he'd been allotted by the Psychology Department: a feminist, a descendant of Freud, and a Neo-Rashti with dreadlocks. At two o'clock, he had an interview with the fourth and last applicant, Natalie Ward, a psych major minoring in statistics. Hopefully, she'd be bright, pretty, over eighteen, and in need of a mentor.

"I study the mind," he explained. "Psychology is all about Functional MRI and pharmacology now, but I believe the mind is independent of the gray squishy stuff. What do you think?"

"I think it's a good thing you have tenure, Dr. Farmer"

Did she know he hadn't had an article published in three years and his colleagues ignored him? Her blue eyes delivered a steady gaze. The other candidates gushed faux-fascination with his intellectual pursuit, how the mind played tricks on people, and how the mind disappeared with age. Natalie didn't even pretend he was brilliant.

"What area of psychology are you interested in?" Maybe she was just a do-gooder hiding behind a façade of objective professionalism. PTSD? Intersectionality? He guessed Addiction.

"Genius," she said.

"What about it?" Did she mean him? She might be one of those women who had been a prison guard in a former life.

"I'm interested in where creativity and innovation comes from? Why do particular socio-political environments destroy it? Prometheus gave humanity fire, but did he didn't teach us how to barbecue. How did football, Sunday afternoons and gooey-sauced food come together?"

He never thought genius and the NFL as congruent, but maybe they were. "Where do you think creativity comes from, Ms. Ward? Nature or nurture, or a little of both?" He didn't want to patronize, but her area of investigation was fraught with ontological perils. He hoped she didn't desire an academic career. Genius, after all, was an elitist club classification that

recognized gross inequality among people, and was therefore un-PC. *Mala in se*. Bad in itself.

“None of the above, Dr. Farmer. Beethoven, Mozart, and John Phillip Souza heard complete musical works in their entirety in their heads. Mary Shelly wrote Frankenstein in one night. They didn’t spend hours or years agonizing over every note and word of their creations. I want to find out if, how and why. Can genius be taught?”

“How’s that research going?” English Professor Louise Huller, and her three-year quest of the perfect first line of the great American Novel, entered Farmer’s thoughts. Why do all English teachers need to talk in metaphors and simile before making *la’mour*?

“I’m in the ‘formulating procedures’ stage,” Natalie said.

He perused her application. A sterling senior thesis. Part-time editor for the Chronic-colonic of Higher Ed—a publication with editorial problems of its own. Pretty, bright, over eighteen, and potentially useful. “Can you work week-ends?”

“Sure, with enough notice so I can get my mom to babysit my Benjamin. He’s three.”

“And a genius, no doubt.” Not even a smile. “All mothers believe their children are special in some way.” Still no reaction. “Don’t you think so, Ms. Ward?”

“Only psychologically confused parents imbue their offspring with talents they don’t possess. Yet ... some children do exhibit exceptional attributes.”

Was she kidding? “Which is it with your little Benny?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Natalie said. “I got a note from the campus pre-school teacher like the one sent to Tom Edison’s mother by his teacher who told Ms. Edison her son was stupid. Well, Tom was smart enough to hold a thousand-eighty-six patents from light bulbs to the telephone, and my Ben was smart enough to get away from that nursery school bitch, right?”

“How sad.” And peculiar that a pre-school teacher would be so blunt in today’s legal exposure landscape. “I have a few more people to interview, but I’ll be in touch,” Farmer promised.

That afternoon, he hunted down the Early Childhood Development Center, and entered the belly of runny-nosed beasts. Maybe Ms. Morgan was still around, gnawing on a toddler taco. “I’m looking for Ms. Morgan,” he asked a wild-eyed, red-haired forty-something woman who forced a smile.

“Yes. That’s me.”

“I’m here about Natalie Ward”

“Are you from administration?” she demanded.

“No. Did Ms. Ward file a complaint?” A “yes” would be an employment deal-breaker.

“Not yet. We need to talk.” Ms. Morgan left five toddlers in the care of her graduate student aide and led him to a glass enclosed office. “Sit down, please”

“I’m Dr. David Farmer. Psych Department. I interviewed Ms. Ward today, and she mentioned a letter.”

“It was a form letter we use to dissuade parents from beginning early childhood education too early. I suspect he’s on the spectrum, as we like to say.”

“That sounds like a euphemism for ‘your kid is a brat and I don’t like him,’” Farmer said hesitantly.

“The Ward child can’t tie his shoes, sucks his thumb, barely speaks but pretends to read. When I tried taking a book from him —he threw a tantrum. All he does is draw and pretend to read.”

“Are you sure he’s pretending?”

Her face contorted. “I asked him to read to me and he couldn’t do it.”

“Or wouldn’t,” Farmer mumbled before saying, “Kids are stubborn with people they dislike. Give me the book and I’ll schedule a meeting with Ms. Ward. Perhaps I can convey the message with less directness.”

“Meaning, you’d rather use psychological euphemisms like developmentally challenged?”

He didn’t appreciate others peoples’ challenges, developmental or otherwise. “We don’t want a ... situation over sensitivity.”

“Alright.” She opened her desk drawer, pulled out *Translating Caesar’s Gallic Wars*, and handed it to him. “Good luck, Dr. Farmer.”

The next day at 11:00 a.m., Dr. Farmer, Natalie and Ben were stuffed inside an office in the Language Arts building that smelled like a basement. “I didn’t know we still had a Latin Department, Dr. Copleman,” Farmer began. “Thanks for seeing us.”

“Got your e-mail and thought you’d gone off the deep end, Farmer. All that business with Dr. Huller and inappropriate touching last semester...” Copleman said. “But, this situation’s easily resolved.” Three-year-old Benjamin sat on the floor, drawing on a legal pad. “*Quod nomen tibi est?* What is your name?” Copleman asked.

“Ben!” the child shouted.

“*Hic est liber tuus?* Is this your book” Copleman said as he held up the text-book.

Ben looked up. “*Ubi inveniet eam?*”

“Where did you find it? ... The child asked where I found it. This is astounding!” Copleman turned to Natalie. “How do you communicate with him?”

“Not easily,” she said. “His German is much better than his Latin.”

Farmer had concluded the child was an idiot savant ... until Ben tore off the page of his drawing pad and handed the professor a perfect likeness of himself. “Who are you really, child?” Farmer asked as he gazed into the child’s face.

“*Ego genius, sed nemo audiat aut itelligere,*” the child said.

“I am Genius, but no one listens or understands,” Copleman translated. “What should we do, Farmer?”

“Write a grant proposal. He’s a gold mine,” Farmer whispered.

Yes, Ben was what the Psychology Department needed: a research subject in search of a theory. What had Natalie done while pregnant? Who was the father? Was Benjamin an Immaculate Deception? Why was he, the tenured Dr. Farmer who had peaked salary-wise, a nothing while Natalie, a single mother dependent on student loans, got a three-million-dollar grant to study her own child?

Every night for the next four years, Dr. Farmer would lay awake, asking a myriad of same- perplex questions and listening to inner voices shouting,

“It’s unfair! Find a flaw! Nothing perfect exists in an imperfect world. Treachery and class divisions can defeat genius. All it would take is an accidental injury, Benjamin’s precocious little head under the wheels of a trash truck, perhaps, anything that would destroy his grey squishy stuff. Unless ... genius didn’t require gray squishy stuff. What if Ward’s research established support for the opening line of her Master’s thesis: The reality of a given phenomenon is often ineffable.... “And insufferable,” Farmer muttered to himself each time he read the introduction.

Was it reincarnation? Regular consumption of V-8 Juice? Or was Benjamin Ward’s inexplicable facility for language and art proof of supernatural intervention? If so, might God exist? The possibility of that reality confounded Farmer, so he cursed the darkness, reconsidered his career choice, and performed a cost/benefit analysis of murder. It was either that, or suicide.

It was inevitable that he and Benjamin would square off in a sort of a duel at high noon. “Can you watch Ben until I speak to the Dean?” Natalie had asked. “Twenty minutes, tops.”

“Certainly, my dear. It will give me and Ben a chance to get to know one another.”

She tousled Ben’s hair, and he blew her a kiss as she turned to wave at the door. The demonstration of a mother’s love is such a heartwarming thing to witness. Yet, when the boy trained his eyes on Farmer, they narrowed and a slim grin followed. The professor joined the boy on the thick recently installed grat-financed carpet, where the boy played cops and robbers with Hot Wheel cars. It was going to be a challenge to wring information from him.

“Does your daddy like to play cars?” Farmer ventured.

“He’s gone,” Ben said.

“Gone where?”

Ben pointed to the ceiling. “Up there.”

“To the stars? Heaven? Canada?”

“Me, too, if you have your way. But you won’t.”

His worst fear had been confirmed. Ben could read minds as well as master languages. He shivered involuntarily. He was a dangerous individual, alright. Farmer stood and went to his desk. It was kill or be killed.

“*Alea iacta est,*” Ben said.

The die is cast. The boy was clever. Die – craps? Coloring material? Or, a warning he could be murdered? He could see Natalie crossing the quad towards the Psychology Department building. As far as he was able, he imagined himself in love. Perhaps, because he had a rival equal to his intelligence, he now wanted her more than any other woman he'd lusted after, and he could never attain her. Benjamin would never allow it. And, for the first time in his life, he was happy.

"Melius est semper velle quam possidere," Ben said. Wanting is always better than possessing.

Every genius knows that.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jenean McBrearty is a graduate of San Diego State University, who taught Political Science and Sociology, mostly on military bases, for over twenty years. Her fiction, poetry, and photographs have been published in over two-hundred-sixty-five print and on-line journals. Her how-to book, *Writing Beyond the Self; How to Write Creative Non-fiction that Gets Published* was published by Vine Leaves Press in 2018. She won the Eastern Kentucky English Department Award for Graduate Creative Non-fiction in 2011, and a Silver Pen Award in 2015 for her noir short story: *Red is Not Your Color*.