

An Epilogue in 15 Dedications

Or:

If Only I Didn't Know Now What I Knew Back Then

By Harold Rabinowitz

Dave, our author/editor of this tome, complains in his “Author’s Note” at the very start of the book that people don’t read prefaces (which is what his Author’s Note really is—nice try, Dave). Well, how many of the few people who read prefaces do you think bother to also read epilogues? Not many, I’ll wager, so it looks like it’s just us, dear reader.

Now, as it happens, I think I may have an interesting point to make; at least I hope it will be informative...perhaps even entertaining. I’ve chosen a somewhat idiosyncratic way of doing this: I’m going to lay out a series of dedications we *didn’t* select for this book, and annotate them with a commentary. Like people who collect mugs or ashtrays from all the places they’ve been to, these dedications chart a rivulet that courses through my life, limning one particular strain that forms a recurring theme.

Right about now, you’re probably turning back to the beginning of the book to learn to whom we did dedicate the book; let me save you the trouble: after much discussion and debate, we dedicated the book to the fictional character Cliff Claven, the lovably irascible mailman who graced the barstool in the TV sit-com Cheers, played pitch-perfect by John Ratzenberger. I’m happy with this choice; Cliff Claven is the poster child for misinformation and I am frankly surprised he didn’t have more of a presence on Frasier, the successful spin-off of Cheers.

But there were other candidates—some generally known, who would have been appropriate; and some wholly personal, making some explanation necessary (if not useful). In the end, the dedication in the front of the book was determined by Dave, and that was as it should be; the dedication is properly the author’s province. But we’re alone now, you and I, and here are the people I would choose—some well known, some barely known, some known only to me. In the course of this, you’ll discover many of the sources of this book, both in terms of hard information, and in terms of inspiration and spiritual encouragement.

DEDICATION

**To Jimmy Wales, Founder of Wikipedia
and to Michael and Helen Selzer, Founders of Bibliofind.com**

The first, the man who has done more than anyone in history to expose just how much misinformation abounds, and whose work assures people like me an inexhaustible supply of material and a virtually never-ending source of continuing income; and the second who ended the need to comb through the dusty back rooms of countless used book stores...but not the pleasure of it.

This was the dedication I had wanted in the front of the book, but Dave spoke so eloquently of the contribution Wikipedia had made to the advancement of knowledge, that I relented. But just think for a moment about the task of this book—not simply to list facts, but to correct misapprehensions that are commonly held. How do we know we are dealing with a true misinformation—and not simply in need of hanging around a better-informed crowd?

In the early days of Wikipedia, all sorts of things were appearing. The Onion ran a front-page story a while back under the headline: “Wikipedia Celebrate 750 Years of American Independence” with a subhead that read, “Founding Fathers, Patriots, Mr. T Honored.” Now even though this headline ran just this past summer, it is way out of date. Wikipedia has taken steps to ensure some editorial oversight over the content (so that American Independence Day is not celebrate on July 25th),

And the Selzers who created Bibliofind will never know the effect they have had on my life. Before Bibliofind, I had to pour through the dusty back rooms and basements of used bookstores to find the old books I needed—and those I might one day need. Now I can find any book in any store around the world, and can get any book I need whenever I need it. If I rummage in used book stores these days, I do so just for the pleasure of pouring through old tomes (which I someday hope to understand and explain). Every now and then, however, I am gripped with the fear that something terrible will happen and the phenomenon of Bibliofind.com (or the other large service of that kind, abebooks.com) will cease to be available. What a dark day that will be.

DEDICATION

To My Uncle Laybl

The man to whom I will always be grateful for the phrase “Amazing...But False!”

My mother’s brother, Laybl, was only a year or two younger than her, but she always treated him with great respect. Why? Because he was educated. And what he was educated in was optometry. He was an optometrist. I would discover later that he was able to get a license to “practice” optometry by being able to sign his name. Nevertheless, my mother called him “Dr. Roth,” explaining that he was, after all, the boss of an optometrist who was himself a doctor.

Uncle Laybl was a fount of misinformation and is probably responsible for a variety of misconceptions that I still harbor. As I grew older, I would listen to his pronouncements with an amused smile. He would say, “Isn’t that amazing, Hershel?” and I would say (still smiling) “Yes, Uncle Laybl—amazing...but false!” I would then try to correct my uncle (in that smart-aleck way Brooklyn whippersnappers excel in), much to my parent’s disapproval. I would repeat these exchanges to my classmates and sometimes to my teachers, and by the time I got to college, this phrase would become my signature phrase. I would often say that one day I would write a book with that title.

A few months ago, I was in a hotel lobby in Jerusalem and saw a man walking toward me who I recognized as a class mate from college 30 years ago. He recognized me, and when we were both finished joyfully greeting each other, the first thing he asked me was, “So, did you ever get to do ‘Amazing...But False!’?”

DEDICATION

To H. Allen Smith and Paul Tabori

Two childhood heroes—whose voices still ring in my years so many years later.

Twice in my younger years I was hospitalized due to accidents, both times for several weeks, and both times in Beth Israel Hospital in Manhattan. Aside from the injury, I was perfectly fine and alert, which means that I was soon incredibly bored. The library cart that came around had virtually nothing but romance novels and a few westerns, but it had two other books that were well worn, though the volunteer told me it had been years since anyone had read them: one was a book by H. Allen Smith entitled *Low Man on the Totem Pole*; the other was a book by Paul Tabori *The Art of Folly*.

I had been a voracious reader before, but these books captured me as none others before—was it something in them that was different, or in me, or was it just that I was able to devote much more attention on these as the hours passed. There was a familiar, urbane sophistication that somehow spoke to me with a voice I recognized as congenial with the one I already had inside my head.

I have since devoured and enjoyed many books by these two: Among my all-time favorites is Smith’s *Buskin’ with H. Allen Smith*, his compendium of tall tales and home-spun wisdom; and Tabori’s *The Natural Science of Stupidity* (republished recently under the title, *The Natural History of Stupidity*). Tabori emphasized the role pure and sober knowledge plays in a free and humane society. Someday I’m going to find a reason to anthologize his “Martian Memo,” in which a “Martian” comments on the foibles of us Earthlings.

DEDICATION

To A.S.E. Ackerman

The man who wrote his books so I wouldn’t have to go out and acquire many other books—my God, was he wrong!

On a bright Fall day as I was nearing my twelfth birthday, I to the Metropolitan Avenue Bus down Grand Street to visit a sick friend in the Greenpoint Projects. When I got off the bus, there was a thrift shop and in the front of me and among the bric-a-brac on the stands in front were a few books, above which was a sign that read, “Books 25 cents.” “Twenty-five cents”—not bad, I thought. So I looked and among the Reader’s Digest

condensed books I found a hefty volume entitled, *Popular Fallacies Explained and Corrected* by A.S.E. Ackerman, published by Lippincott in 1924.

Though buying it meant I would have to walk home, I did and spent the next month pouring through it. What incredible things I found in that volume: “That Archimedes destroyed the Fleet of Marcellus of Syracuse in 212 B.C. by means of Mirrors reflecting the Sun’s rays.” You mean you could *do* that? “That Marriage usually takes place between Person having opposite Characteristics, e.g., Tall with Short, Dark with Fair, etc.” You mean that’s *not* true? What about “People who like it Cold with People who Like it Hot?” “That Increasing the Weight of the Bob of a Pendulum makes the Clock go more slowly.” It doesn’t? I don’t believe it; I gotta see *this* for myself. And so I did.

That simple event got me hooked on books; started the road to physics; and into the fine art of debunking. Having spent half my bus fare on the Ackerman book, I figured I might as well buy another. Ironically, Ackerman writes in the Preface to his book that his motivation was to save the reader the trouble of having to acquire all the books necessary to research all the subjects he covered. But what’s this? “Paperbacks 10 cents?” Why, I could buy another and still have some left over for a Chunky! So I looked through the paperbacks for something that “looked Jewish,” thinking I might need to defend this purchase with my parents. What was that second book that I bought? I’ll tell you later.

DEDICATION

To Rabbi D.

Who presented me with the two great mysteries of my young life.

After spending an entire summer desperately trying to “save” me from a life without piety, Rabbi D. forced upon me a decision: would I allow him to throw colorwar (the grand competitive games that mark the end of the summer camp season) for the sake of a young man who would be distraught if one team did not win? I was on a stretcher at the time, wincing with pain as I was being carried to a waiting make-shift ambulance. I said yes as I was driven away—but I have never been able to be certain whether or not this was only a test of Rabbi D.’s devising.

Why is this important? Because it was during those weeks in the hospital, with these questions buzzing around my head, during the time I encountered Smith and Tabori, that I discovered something remarkable: writing about what happened that summer actually helped me make sense, and more importantly, make peace with the remarkable events that had transpired. I filled pages and pages in my barely-legible yeshiva-boy scrawl, all on the back of Beth Israel Hospital stationary. There was Zorch the lifeguard, Fish the canteen owner, Bobby the counselor and Mordy the...Oh, what I wouldn’t give to have some of those pages today.

But why did writing about what happened help? I don’t know, but I then became a writing fool, filling pages and pages of my own private blatherings, even as I went on to become an editor of (I hope) reliable, rock-solid reference books.

Rabbi D. never visited me in the hospital; I have not, in fact, had any contact with him since, though I've been told that he has gone on to become a respected Talmudist in the Yeshiva community. But here I am thanking him for making me...the sorry, pathetic obsessive wordsmith I am today (just kidding about the "sorry, pathetic" part).

DEDICATION

To Martin Gardner

The man who first showed me that criticism is as much a part of science as it is a part of literature.

In a Spring of the early Eighties, I spent several weeks at my father's bedside as he recuperated from being run over by a car. It was touch and go for some time, but he eventually recovered well enough to walk with a cane. During those weeks in the hospital (again Beth Israel, as it turned out—must be the food), I needed a book to read to distract me from the unending worry about and attention to my dad, and what I found was a book by Martin Gardner entitled, *Science: Good, Bad and Bogus*.

Using an inimitable style that is at the same time engrossing and yet unadorned, Gardner does a number on all manner of pseudoscience and folderol with humor, and even a little kindness. In those difficult days, he became my companion and my solace. I quickly found another titles he had done earlier (but not so much earlier as to warrant reprinting by Dover, which is what it was) called *In the Name of Science*. These two titles are what saw me through those difficult times, and I'll always be grateful to Martin for them.

Now we are seeing a time when a critical approach to science has been downplayed and physics is in a pickle that it doesn't quite know how to get out of (see the Dedication after the next one). That spirit of criticism—one that science was no stranger to in times past, but which the current economic tyrannies of tenure and career have made a thing of the past—is one that modern science would do well to learn, and it could find no better teacher than Martin.

DEDICATION

To Irving Agus and Meir Feldblum

Who showed that beneath the shifting sands that lay at the foundations of Jewish History and the Talmud lies a rock even firmer than the most devout and devoted can imagine.

During a brief graduate career in Judaica, I made the acquaintance of two scholars who gave me so much, and I have never had the right opportunity to thank them: Irving Agus

was a professor of Jewish History and Rabbi Meir Feldblum was a Professor of Talmud. In addition to teaching in fields of Judaica, they had something else in common: they were both considered contrarians and unorthodox (or should I say unconventional) by both colleagues and students—even as they were respected for the depth of their learning and the breadth of their knowledge.

They had something else in common: they both taught—one in the corridors of medieval European Jewish history; the other in the corridors of Near Eastern Talmudic textual analysis—that an uncompromising look at the foundations of faith, and the historical underpinnings of its texts, cannot be a wasted and trivial enterprise—nor can it be dangerous or blasphemous. Whatever happened, happened—and it was up to us to make sense of it and to understand it.

Both men had difficult professional lives, alternately being considered cranks or upstarts. But I knew them both as warm, kind men, who cared about their students and about their work—who took that work as seriously as they took their own existence on this planet. What more could one ask of a scholar? I would dedicate this work to them because I could hear both of them saying, “That’s *all* that’s not true?”

DEDICATION

To Leonard Susskind and David Finkelstein

One who taught me enough string theory to let me pass on it—early; and the other who taught me enough physics to make it a pleasurable obsession for the rest of my life.

In a winter of the early Seventies, I found myself in a graduate physics program being run under the auspices of a Jewish university. Many of the faculty were Jewish (though I believe only one professor was observant), and many had admitted to me at one point or another that they were there to perform some service to their Jewishness. Whatever.

I took one course in Mathematical Methods, a requirement, with Susskind, but he decided that he wasn’t going to waste time lecturing on that. Instead, he taught us about a burgeoning new theory, string theory, and left us to learn the math from the available textbooks. The other course was in quantum theory with a great practitioner of the field, David Finkelstein.

So here’s how it worked: we’d hear lectures from Susskind in the late morning, then trot over to Finkelstein and discuss the what we had learned with him. Professors in those days didn’t do much conversing (now they do even less), so in many ways, this was an extended conversation the two physicists were having through us.

At the end of the course, the five of us in the class had hopes that Prof. Susskind would simply forget about a final exam; the fact is we had had a rollicking time working with him on the niceties of this new theory and (you remember the Sixties) physics professors were known to do things like that.

On the last day, Susskind turned to me and asked me, “So, Harold, what do you think?” In what has become an expensive and annoying habit, I answered honestly; “What do I think? I think you’re full of s——!” He smiled, turned to the entire class and

said, “I hope you gentlemen have been studying Arfken carefully; the final will be based on that book.”

I aced that final, but the experience convinced me that physics was not a career I could embark on. Though the “string theory mafia” had not yet taken control, it was obvious that if you didn’t believe in the theory, and didn’t actually work in it, you were not going to be able to get very far in physics. Now I read in many quarters physicists bemoaning what a sorry and fruitless spectacle string theory has made of the discipline and of modern science. Well, let me tell you that that was clear back then. And that experience—with those two scientists—saved me thirty years of pointless, misguided work in the cushy environs of the physics academe.

DEDICATION

To Claudia de Lys and Vilhjalmur Stefanson

Whose books opened a world beyond the streets of Williamsburg worth knowing.

Except for Flohr’s Hebrew Book Store on Division Ave., there were no book stores in Williamsburg while I was growing up (notwithstanding that thrift shop on Grand St.), so the Williamsburg Public Library was, for me, a very important place. Two books that I found there left a very lasting impression, and I have since acquired several copies of them: Claudia de Lys’ *Treasury of American Superstitions* and *Adventures in Error* by Vilhjalmur Stefansson. They are both dedicated to correcting popular misconceptions, but they do it in unique and admirable ways.

The first through a uncompromising erudition of the scientific literature—showing a fairness and thoroughness of which I believe ol’ A.S.E. Ackreman would approve, and a fat-free and trim prose that a marathon-runner would envy; and the second by actually going there and checking it out.

Steffanson was a Harvard-trained anthropologist whose explorations of the Arctic were models of serious, scientific research—he coined the phrase, “adventure is a sign of incompetence.” By the time I found Barry Lopez and Farley Mowat on wolves, I was already well-aware that most of what we know about the animal was wrong. I have turned to these books again and again; de Lys has been republished many times, but Stefansson has sadly been forgotten.

DEDICATION

To Gershon

My weekly companion for eight years—and keeper of secrets.

Having to walk a mile and a half every Saturday for eight years (don’t ask) to synagogue, and then back again, I had as my companion a junk man who was also our Torah reader.

His name was Gershon and he was man with a great white beard (neighborhood kids were convinced he was Santa in disguise) and great, er, yellow (but pleasant) smile.

I discovered that a junk man knows more about what's going on in a community than just about anybody. And being a stalwart member of the synagogue, he might have even known even a bit more. Junk knows no religious denomination, so Gershon dealt with all sorts of people in the area, and he and his truck covered the entire North Shore.

As far as I'm concerned, Gershon was the first person in the community—an area north of Boston near the Fells Reservation who noticed that so many people were succumbing to cancer. He noticed this well before the people in Woburn brought their lawsuit, and maybe even before those people noticed something was amiss, for there were similar outbreaks in other communities in the area, and only a junk man would know that.

Gershon tried to alert me to this, and I was just in the process of looking into this (by checking with other clergy in the area), when I (as my colleagues put it) got “bounced out of the community.” I know Gershon tried to alert others, but few people took him seriously. And that's the lesson in all this, isn't it? At any given moment, someone, somewhere is thinking something that everyone else thinks is wrong or has overlooked, and that someone could be anyone—a clerk in the Swiss Patent Office or a junk man in Massachusetts.

DEDICATION

To Tom Burnam and J. Allen Varasdi

**For my money, the inventors of the genre.
And to all our fellow debunkers.**

Burnam and Varasdi authored books that could very well be looked upon as the model for what we are doing in this book, but as Alan Garner, the British fantasy writer, once said, every generation has to create its own Iliad. Burnam did one classic volume—*The Dictionary of Misinformation*—and then followed it up with an even more interesting sequel—*More Misinformation*. Varasdi authored a book entitled *Myth-Information*. Both are alphabetically arranged and contain mountains of material on the subject—all engagingly written, with an admirable care for detail and precision.

There have been others deserving of mention and acknowledgement: Richard Shenkman authored a series of books all entertaining, and all rock solid in their scholarship. The most famous one is *One Night Stands in American History*, but you'll get just as much joy from *Legends, Lies and Cherished Myths of American History*, *Legends, Lies and Myths of World History*, and the inimitable *I Love Paul Revere Whether He Rode or Not*.

[The Epilogue continues by listing several works and authors of debunking books, all worthwhile, but included more in lieu of a bibliography than out of any emotional attachment. The Epilogue continues:]

DEDICATION

To Shirley

Who proved no one knows what's best for you better than you.

This is a sort of left-handed dedication, because this person and I were once related. I seriously doubt whether the lesson I learned from Shirley has been learned by Shirley herself, but that lesson is simply this: For better or for worse, no one can know what's best for another person better than the person himself (or herself). Life is just too complicated and too personal to allow anyone to make up another person's mind. I really like (and have often used) a line attributed to Adlai Stevenson: "If two people think exactly the same thing, you can be sure only one of them is doing the thinking."

How many times have I heard people say about others (or even about me), if only he could do this, or if only he could do that. But the truth is, we really never know what is going on inside a person—we never know the full situation a person faces.

I've watched many people ruin the lives of others because they thought they knew what was best for them. Parents do it to children; governments do it to citizens—even doctors do it to patients. If this book does anything, I hope it instills in the reader a modicum of humility—if you can be wrong about such trivialities, might you not be wrong about things that really matter?

I dedicate this to Shirley for another reason: because the time has come for me to decide whether the price I paid to pursue the dream I had some thirty years ago was worth it. Now, it would be easy to say it was worth it if I were basking in the aura of success—but I'm not. In fact, I'm struggling just like just about everybody else in the publishing game. And that's when saying it means the most: yes, it's been worth it, Shirley...so there!

DEDICATION

To Leo Rosten

Whose books on error brought intelligence and style to a subject that could have languished on the promotional shelves forever.

As a child, I was a great fan of Rosten; we would stage dramatization of his Hyman Kaplan stories for assemblies, to an audience who was appreciative if somewhat fatigued in the late afternoon after a long day in the classroom—or maybe that's why they were appreciative. Rosten's style was as clear as it was infectious, and I often have to catch myself from lapsing into that style.

Rosten was comfortable in virtually any field he tackled, and his reference books—mainly on Jewish subjects—are classic for their humor and their authority. In the late Seventies, he authored a volume entitled, *The Power of Positive Nonsense* that contained his take on the subject of popular misconceptions. Many of the pieces that appear in this book began as thoughts voiced by Rosten; we hope we did him proud.

Rosten was (I've heard) attached to the Navy as a cryptologist during the war, and was known in cryptology circles as an expert in the field. That makes his intonations all the more authoritative in my book; ferreting out the truth from a coded message is a fit metaphor for what we are doing here...in fact, for what life is all about. Anyway, L*E*O R*O*S*T*E*N doesn't need any endorsements from the likes of me. Just our thanks, for many hours of reading and thinking pleasure.

DEDICATION

To Nancy

A woman of Valor. Courage and Mercy—and possessor of the most finely-tuned BS detector I've ever known.

Nancy came to me after producing a self-published guide for cancer patients entitled *Cancer Made Easier*. As a (by then) seasoned reference editor, I was amazed at what a good job she had done; she was, after all, an amateur in reference publishing. But Nancy had a need to help others, and she came to us hoping we would ply our craft and create a more useful book—one that would cover much more of the Greater New York Metropolitan area than she was able to living on the Upper east Side. I'm glad we were able to complete the production of the book in time for her to see it; that we have not been successful disseminating it is a continuing disappointment.

I dedicate this book to Nancy for another reason. She had as well developed a sense for detecting BS as I've ever come across. Why Not? She had heard just about every promise a physician could make and had come to the realization that...THEY REALLY DON'T KNOW. Nancy knew that, in any race against the clock, the clock always wins. Nothing you know today as rock solid will seem as solid tomorrow. That's why, in contrast to the buckaroo heart surgeons, the only doctors I've every known who could be described as humble (for doctors) are oncologists.

[*In the book, Nancy is identified as Nancy Burns-Silver.*]

DEDICATION

To Walter M. Miller, Jr.

For showing us a glimpse of the future—hopefully not ours.

That other book I found on the stands in front of the thrift shop on Grand Street was a paperback edition of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter Miller. In a way, everything I've done since has been a conscious or unconscious effort to reproduce that work and to pay homage to it. Now, I realize that Miller was not a great stylist; he couldn't hold a candle

to Vonnegut, for example. But they say you never forget the loves of your youth, and *Liebowitz* was a book that stayed with me for many years—and still haunts me.

I kept waiting for Miller to write something else, but the only thing I ever saw were occasional short pieces. I heard that he had become a recluse and was living in Florida, and when the same thing seemed to have happened to another hero of mine, Henry Roth (who holed up in New Mexico), I thought maybe I had become a kind of jinx.

Miller shot himself in 1996 (at the age of seventy-two), just months after his wife of nearly five decades passed away, succumbing to cancer. He was even more of a recluse during his final years, and I imagine (though I have no hard information on this) that he was a very tortured soul.

The book is often considered a pessimistic, apocalyptic work; I couldn't sleep for a week after reading the section on Francis' death. But today, I see it as hopeful. If *something* can endure so bleak and end to the world, then maybe we can endure fates less...final.

One passage that appears toward the end of the book has particular meaning to me these days and is worth reflecting upon—and I end this little experiment with it:

“Listen, are we helpless? Are we doomed to do it again and again and again? Have we no choice but to play the Phoenix, in an unending sequence of rise and fall? Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, Greece, Carthage, Rome, the Empires of Charlemagne and the Turk. Ground to dust and plowed with salt. Spain, France, Britain, America—burned into the oblivion of the centuries. And again and again and again.”