From the Back Verandah

If I asked you what novelists Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) and Mark Twain (1835-1910) had in common, you'd probably reply that they both wrote very popular books for juveniles.

The truth is, however, that neither Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) nor Twain's two most famous books (*Tom Sawyer*, 1876, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1884) were written for young readers at all — unlike most other "children's literature".

Swift, for example, was first and foremost a satirist — and a merciless one at that, bitterly hating anything that smacked of hypocrisy and oppression. *Gulliver's Travels* was thus intended as a relentless satire on international politics, war, science and travel writing.

With that in mind, it makes you wonder, doesn't it, what Swift would make of the fact that his novel (especially the first part, about Lilliput) has been appropriated by an audience of children. And this, even though there is much in *Gulliver's Travels* that children simply cannot understand. They have accepted what they like in it and ignored what they don't.

Mark Twain wrote *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* for adults too. Yet they seem destined to endure as captivating yarns for children, largely because of the adventure and fun they contain and their colourful characters — notably their mischievous heroes, who are hardly the stuff of the then prevalent moralistic "Sunday School" stories.

Huckleberry Finn, in particular, was quite serious in intent, in spite of its humour, in so far as Mark Twain was using it as a vehicle to attack corruption, cruelty and prejudice. Believe it or not, this masterpiece was actually banned from the Brooklyn New York Public Library Children's Room for a time. A decision, apparently, that Twain vigorously supported.

— Fizzgig

BIKWIL

The Newsletter of Quiet Enthusiasms

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Self Discovery

Hands up all you Internet users who have never once looked up your own name in a search engine.

Hmmm . . . Just as I thought. I cannot see a single hand.

Not that it's anything to be ashamed of, this cyberspace Search for Self. I do it all time.

Now, "Tony Rogers" being a rather conventional combination of names, it's not surprising, I suppose, that there are so many of me on the Net. Last time I looked, in fact, *Google* found over 2,500 pages for me.

Taken individually, my multiple personalities are all confidently autonomous, but seeing them *en masse* is enough to bring on an identity crisis. What a variety of occupations I seem to pursue. If truth be told I have yet to come to terms with how talented (and ubiquitous) I really am.

For instance, I'm a military engineering technician. Somehow I'm also an Associate Professor of Oral Microbiology. I'm a vocalist. I'm a DJ. I'm an evangelist. I'm an aviation expert, too. I even seem to be a footballer . . .

Once I log off and sanity gradually returns, however, I rest reasonably certain that I have never been any of the above, though I did once have a groin strain.

Colophon

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Back Issues Are Still Available

Never judge a book by its movie.

J. W. Eagan

If, with the literate I am
Impelled to write an epigram,
I never seek to take the credit;
We all assume that Oscar said it.

Dorothy Parker

Quintessential Quirky Quotes

American women expect to find in their husbands the perfection that English women only hope to find in their butlers.

W. Somerset Maugham

A cannon is an instrument employed in the rectification of national boundaries.

Ambrose Bierce

A graduate in creative jargon, he had ambitions to be a White House officer and spent hours in front of the mirror, burnishing his blandness.

Alan Plater

reconstruction from shattered skulls, and yes, they might have watercolour paintings done of the site as it may have appeared in its ancient context. But at the end of the day what counts is people. As Richards himself says of the first dig he went on,

> . . . I started to realize that archaeology wasn't just about objects, or about ruins and monuments: it was about people. People had built and lived in the castle we were uncovering, had dug out and filled the rubbish pit that I was busy re-excavating, and someone, a real person, had made and used the pot that I now held in smashed fragments.

Here are a few more quotes that reveal Richards' way of thinking:

> I would be devoid of emotion if I didn't feel something when in the presence of one of our ancestors.

> I can still appreciate the craft that has gone into the making of a fine flint arrowhead or the decoration of a bronze brooch.

> I would have loved to have known more about her life.

And on the (Australian) ABC Shop's Web site (http://store.yahoo.com/abcshop-au/566273.html) I found this statement:

> Archaeology is about people. One thing that we must never lose sight of is that a human burial is not just something of scientific curiosity it is the remains of a person who lived, died, knew pain, joy and sorrow, and was finally laid to rest . . .

Elsewhere on the Internet, the BBC runs an educational site derived from Richards' TV series (http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/archaeology/). Apart from the great interactive Hunt the Ancestors game ("Quick, before the money runs out and the developers bulldoze in!"), there are features on virtual archaeology (how technology helps uncover and rebuild the secrets of the past), carbon dating and the Piltdown Man hoax. One of its strengths is the systematic advice it offers on how an amateur can pursue an interest in British archaeology. There is also a transcription of an enjoyable chat-room interview with Richards.

Even more useful is Richards' book *Meet the Ancestors* (1999, hardcover ISBN 0 563 38458 1), another BBC product. Here he charmingly describes nine of the people whose remains were unearthed at the eleven excavation sites featured in Series 1 and 2 on television. So if you missed the TV series there's no need to fret. This book will certainly give you a comprehensive sense of Julian Richards' wholehearted love of archaeology and sincere respect for what he finds when he digs.

— TR

Green Light

Trees close to my window
shine a tender green:
it is the green of Spring
like no other.

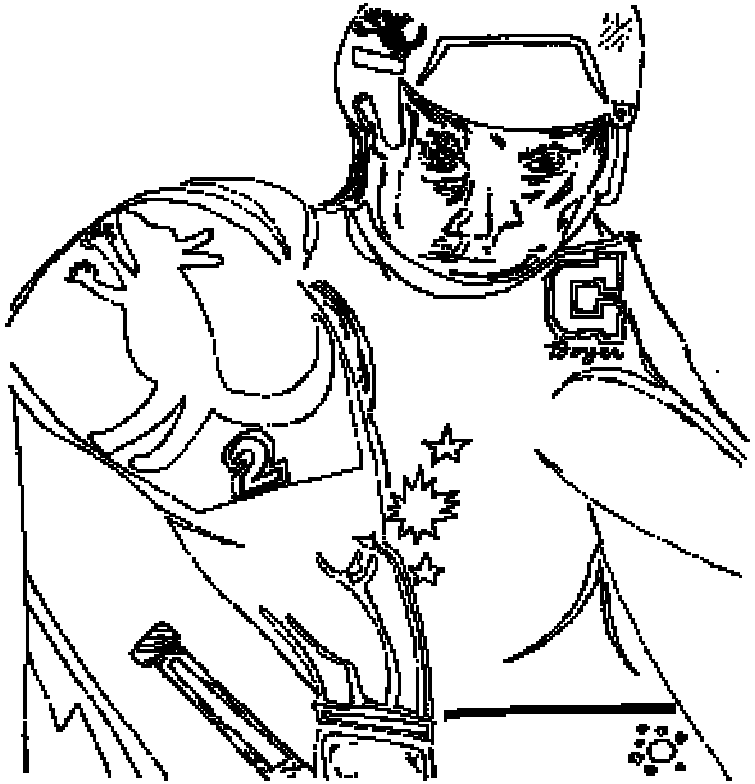
Summer sun and wind may
burn the tenderness,
the gloss may dull to brown
like worn leather.

Too soon then is wonder
gone, too brief the sight.
Yet there is a lasting
joy to gather:

sun in Spring is kinder,
green comes from its light
and light that lives deep in the green
will not wither.

— Bet Briggs

The Ice Hockey Player



— Daniel Boyer

visits is a chance — with the help of modern science and technology — to learn about real people of the past "not only the way they lived and died, but even how they might have looked". And what better way, in fact, to communicate his appetite for the learning process of "unearthing the secrets behind the bones" than to present real cases on television as they are being investigated?

There have been three series of *Meet the Ancestors* so far, beginning in 1997. Each episode takes us to an interment spot in Britain where excavation is in progress. To date, approximately four and a half thousand years of the past (200 generations) have been covered by the sites investigated in the show, from the Neolithic period (3200 BC) to the 16th century AD. Localities represented include Cheshire, Donegal, Dorset, the Lake District, Orkney, Somerset, Suffolk, Wiltshire and Winchester.

So what do I like so much about Richards' presentations that prompts me to include him here as an "up-front popularizer"? Three things: his enthusiasm, his professionalism and his humanity.

First and foremost, Julian Richards is nothing if not enthusiastic: from all reports, viewers of the programmes everywhere have been caught up by his infectious passion for his work, some in Britain being inspired to apply to become assistant volunteer workers on excavation sites.

For all his dynamic TV presence, however, Richards is a thorough pro. He has been a professional archaeologist for over 30 years, with experience in the survey and excavation of prehistoric burial sites, settlements and industrial areas. In the 1980s he completed a key project on Stonehenge and its landscape, and wrote about it in *The English Heritage Book of Stonehenge* (1991, paperback ISBN: 071346142X).

Concerning the TV shows, he was once asked whether he sometimes found he needed to sacrifice good archaeology to make a good programme. His reply was simply, "No. The archaeology always comes first in *Meet the Ancestors*."

Of course, Richards is "the very model of a modern archaeologist". Not only does he apply advanced scientific techniques like X-rays, radiocarbon dating and DNA examination, but he uses them in the pursuit of insight into the way people lived at the time. Sure, the television programmes might place heavy emphasis on facial

"One Huge Graveyard"

[*Up-front Popularizers* No. 2]

Let's face it: I've been a stay-at-home archaeologist since my first high school year. Twelve years old, I'd just heard about Howard Carter and the priceless collection of objects he unearthed in the tomb of King Tutankamun, and was really infatuated with the idea of archaeological investigation, so one day when the class were asked to write down their career ambitions, you can imagine what I professed as my life's dream. To my astonishment, I won a prize for something at year's end, and lo and behold it turned out to be a book about archaeology in Ethiopia called *Dead Men Do Tell Tales*, by an author with the exotic name of Byron de Prorok.

However, like *MASH's* Radar O'Reilly with his *National Geographics*, I got distracted by the photos of nubile bare-chested native women, and archaeology had to take a temporary back seat to pubescent obsessions. In later years, I did get round to looking at the text too, and began to realise seriously that Egypt wasn't the only place in the world where fascinating discoveries could be unearthed. And once arrived at Sydney University (not to study archaeology, I should add), I was able to while away the occasional hour in the Nicholson Museum there. Not only did they have an Egyptian collection; there were also Near Eastern, Cypriot, and Greek and Roman collections, plus artefacts from Anglo Saxon times.

And now, half a lifetime later, along comes Julian Richards with some engrossing archaeological news from the Old Dart, which he dresses up in the form of television programmes he organises and presents for the BBC under the generic title *Meet the Ancestors*.

But, as we will see, long gone are the attitudes that in Howard Carter's time saw archaeological excavations as little more than opportunities for treasure hunting and international rivalry.

"The British Isles is one huge graveyard", says Richards, where every year hundreds and hundreds of burial sites are discovered by chance by construction workers or dug up with intent by archaeologists. For him every such site he

A Word in Your Pink Shell-like

Here is a puzzle for you.

The reason that it appears in my column (and not elsewhere in the magazine) is that we feel that you should be able to solve it linguistically, rather than encyclopaedically. We believe, in fact, that using the clues we offer you ought to be able to save yourself recourse to the library — at least, perhaps, until the very end. See how many you can work out without reference books.

The essence of your *Music Dabblers* challenge is as follows.

Each of the dozen famous people listed used to occupy him/herself by performing music as a hobby. Though all were non-professional musicians, it is true to say that, in musical circles at least, one is remembered almost as much for his musical ability as for his more usual activities.

The solution is a series of instruments, each of which was played for relaxation by the person in question. The instrument we have selected for each, however, is not necessarily the one usually associated with the person.

As well as the names of the historical personages, we give you assistance in several ways:

◊ To get you started, we have scattered the thirteen letters that make up the puzzle's title throughout the boxes where the solution is to be entered.

◊ Secondly, it will help to know that three of the instruments are bowed, four blown and three strummed/plucked.

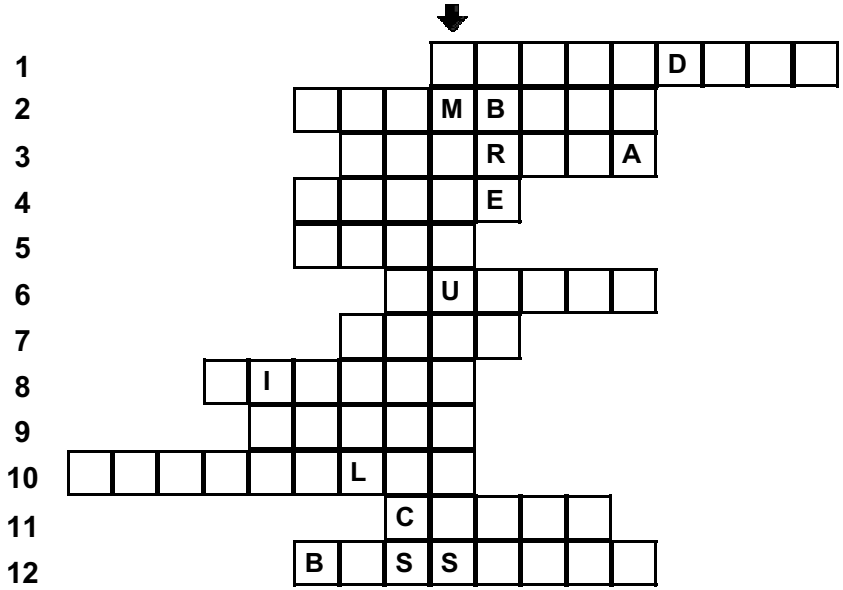
◊ Thirdly, we have provided a distribution table of all 76 letters, which will gradually assist you in eliminating certain choices.

◊ Finally, when you have completed the solution you will be able to read in the central column (shown by the arrow) a two-word phrase describing the fruits of such music dabbling. What's more, this phrase is an anagram of *mutant sea roe*.

Owing to *Bikwil's* celebrated lack of success in achieving profitability, our editor has forbidden me to offer any prizes.

— Harlish Goop

Music Dabblers



1 Hermann Goering
2 Benito Mussolini
3 Robert Baden-Powell
4 Frederick the Great
5 Mary, Queen of Scots
6 James II (Great Britain)
7 Nero
8 Albert Einstein
9 Vincent van Gogh
10 Samuel Pepys
11 Bonnie Prince Charlie
12 Laurence Sterne

Distribution of letters (including the 13 provided)

A 7	**E** 7	**I** 7	**M** 1	**Q** 0	**U** 3	**Y** 1
B 2	**F** 2	**J** 0	**N** 5	**R** 5	**V** 2	**Z** 0
C 4	**G** 2	**K** 0	**O** 10	**S** 2	**W** 0	
D 1	**H** 0	**L** 9	**P** 1	**T** 5	**X** 0	

Hot and Cold

If battles were drawn, who would stand victor?
The sun or the moon? The warmer or colder?
Maybe the bolder will emit me a shiver.
Ice thy formation; describing your element.
The warmer the killer — last it will not.
Sorrow on a worn face — fine rays sent to clot.

— Scott Villarosa

[This poem has been previously featured as“Choice Poem” for October 2000 at the Australian Poetic Society’s Web site (http://www.ozpoeticssociety.com/).]

that there's also a book called Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon, to say nothing of the inevitable board game. Are they just rumours? Will this madness ever end?

Funny you should ask. According to Malcolm Gladwell, author of that most absorbing book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (2000, hard cover ISBN 0 316 64852 3), the Kevin Bacon Game is just another manifestation of his own theory of trends and epidemics — as is so-called "viral marketing".

This whole phenomenon is also related to the theory of memes suggested by arch-evolutionist Richard Dawkins. A meme is any entity that causes certain environments to copy it — a replicator. It applies culturally as well as scientifically, and thus the term covers good jokes as well as computer viruses.

Finally, I may as well tell you the following snippets, too.

There is an Internet site called sixdegrees.com that supports an online community where you can connect with your circle of friends and your friends' circle of friends and their friends, etc.

Then in Melbourne there's a firm called Six Degrees (the architects who did the original design for the controversial Federation Square), though I suspect that their name bears little relation to the topic at hand.

Indeed, bits of the phrase "Six Degrees of Separation" are cropping up all over the place, not always in their proper context, as in *The Sydney Morning Herald's* article of 14/7/00 entitled *Six Degrees of Excellence*, which was about the half-dozen finalists in that year's Sydney International Piano Competition. Another example is the title ABC's Radio National gave to a *Lingua Franca* broadcast (*Degrees of Separation*, 30/6/01), which was really concerned with the difficulties of translation from English.

More accurate, albeit more removed, was the *Nature* report of 9/7/99 showing that the Internet is now so interconnected that on the average no more than 19 clicks are needed to move between any two randomly selected pages.

Anyway, as you can see, there is some coincidental similarity between the SDoS model and *Stepping Stones*, so with that enthralling history off my chest/conscience, I guess I can safely proceed.

The first instalment of a new set of *Stepping Stones* will appear in *Bikwil's* next issue. This set's title is *Dr. Strangelove and Friends*.

Salivation is allowed.

— TR

Web Line

Arts & Letters Daily is one of my favourite places on the Net. Philosophy, aesthetics, language, ideas, criticism, culture, history, music, art, trends, breakthroughs, disputes, gossip . . .

Likening the Internet at this stage in its evolution to an Australian goldfield, where there are "vast mountains of low-grade ore", *Arts & Letters Daily* has as its mission to extract "the precious nuggets of real content . . . to pan and select from among the most intellectually stimulating sites on the Internet, updating daily, and making the best of the Web available at a click".

Yes, six days a week they update it, a few items at a time. So what you get is a slowly but ever-changing series of tantalising "headlines" (never less than 150), each with a link to the full article in question. They keep archives, too.

How did *Arts & Letters Daily* get started? It was Denis Dutton, a professor of philosophy in NZ, who designed it. It went live on September 28 1998. Despite its very low-tech appearance, the site was quickly adopted by the global intelligentsia.

The simple page design is based on that of the typical 18th century broadsheet, which according to Dutton "tries to pack the maximum content on the minimum amount of paper".

These days the site has a cult following and gets more than 20,000 visitors a day —

> . . . the kinds of people who subscribe to the *New York Review of Books*, who read *Salon* and *Slate* and the *New Republic* — people interested in ideas.

The more-than-170 sites it scans on a regular basis include:

Agence France-Presse
Atlantic Monthly
The Australian
BBC
Frankfurter Allgemeine
Guardian/Observer
Jerusalem Post
Melbourne Age
Ms Magazine
New Scientist
New Statesman
New York Times
The Occasional
Quackwatch
Salon
Scientific American
The Spectator

Spike
Sydney Morning Herald
Time
Times of London
Washington Post
Web de Sol
Wired.

Finally, to give you some idea of its vast range of coverage, here are a few tempting headlines that attracted my eye over a typical seven-week period in 2000:

At 98, she's a little old lady with a colossal and unforgiving past. **Leni Riefenstahl** is both proud and ashamed . . .

It's a miracle, says the exiled Chinese writer Gao Xingjian, who has just won the Nobel Prize for Literature . . .

How did Sydney, a city not noted even in Australia for elegance or charm, manage to snare that beautiful **Opera House**? . . .

Most of the languages of the world will vanish in the next hundred years. Do we need to cultivate more **biolinguistic diversity**? . . .

It's easy to poke fun at **Oprah's book club**, but her impact on the reading habits of the English speaking world rivals that of Samuel Johnson . . .

Trying to separate the roles played by **nature and nurture** is like trying to separate the roles played by length and width in shaping a rectangle . . .

Errol Flynn, bad actor and worse chap, had everything, of every sex, within sight. By page 57 of this new bio, he's got VD for the third time . . .

Being taken seriously by someone is like rocket fuel for the spirit, but taking yourself too seriously is like a poison, says Hugh Mackay . . .

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Drop his name in a fashionable literary crowd and you'll get a harsh verdict: "mawkish," "shallow," "trite" . . .

William Hazlitt was England's supreme essayist and brave defender of radical causes. He was also the pathetic victim of his passion for the landlady's daughter . . .

Giacomo Puccini knew how to write for voice and how to pen a good tune. Is it his fault he was so popular? . . .

When Doug and Dave showed that it was they, and not little green men, who had created **crop circles across Britain**, believers still refused . . .

Willfully unaware of the facts of her life, music fans persist in thinking that **Billie Holiday** felt their pain, says Francis Davis . . .

In short, an exceptional, absolutely-must-visit site for all of us who don't have time to do the trawling ourselves.

(*Arts & Letters Daily* has a sibling, too — *SciTech Daily Review* — which is equally compelling and useful.)

— TR

Internet sites referred to above:

http://www.artsandlettersdaily.com/
http://www.scitechdaily.com/

Alfred Hitchcock was in *Show Business at War* (1943) with Orson Welles, and

Orson Welles was in *A Safe Place* (1971) with Jack Nicholson, and

Jack Nicholson was in *A Few Good Men* (1992) with Kevin Bacon!

Why isn't it called the Gary Sinise Game, I wonder? He's appeared in almost as many movies and with as varied a selection of co-stars as K.B. Or the Alain Delon Game? Or the Joanne Woodward Game? Or the Morgan Freeman Game? (Sorry. Of course; how foolish of me. They're foreign, female or black.)

Believe it or not, however, there is a Web site running the game called Six Degrees of Harry Connick, Jr., so anyone can do it: think of a show business name and you've got a new twist on an old game. Let's hear it right now for the Peter Lorre Game. Better still, the Richard Wattis Game.

But there's more!

One of those young computer whizzes at the aforementioned Virginia Uni, Brett Tjaden, has actually been calculating the "Bacon number" for every single movie and TV celebrity. The most recent average I've seen (and I know you're dying to know it) is 2.877. In other words, any of these actors can be linked to K.B. in an average of fewer than three steps.

When he first heard of the game, Bacon thought people were sending him up, but luckily changed his mind once he met the Albright College trio on a TV show. He has also met Tjaden, on another TV show. Two curious things: Tjaden reckons he's seen no more than three Bacon movies, and Bacon, who claims to be computer illiterate, has never visited the Virginia Uni Oracle site.

Tjaden has since investigated further and worked out the degree of connectedness among everyone who has ever acted in Hollywood, and that's a large number — going on for half a million these days. At last count there were 668 actors in his list who were closer the "center of the Hollywood universe" than Kevin Bacon. This central point is defined as that actor to whom on average any other actor can be linked in the fewest steps. Among the 668 are Karen Black, Sean Connery, Henry Fonda, Elliott Gould, Gene Hackman, Burgess Meredith, Robert Mitchum, Martin Sheen, Donald Sutherland and Shelley Winters.

The top three are Rod Steiger, Christopher Lee and good old Donald Pleasence.

Incidentally, the Virginia Uni Web site also features The Terminator Game for Arnie fans and even an Oracle of Elvis. I've heard

Some were utterly controlled (where each friend knew only the people next to him/her), and others completely random (where chances were even that a given person would know anyone else).

In between, where the network was neither random nor regular, Watts and Strogatz predicted that the number of handshakes needed to link people would fall as the random links grew. On the contrary:

> Just a tiny number of random links was enough to "short-circuit" an otherwise huge, regular network, allowing apparently unrelated friends to be linked by just a few handshakes.

But what about the real world? Choosing the well-known Internet Movie Database, they put the theory to the test. At the time it had over 200,000 actors listed and all the films they had appeared in. They discovered that the typical actor has worked with about 60 others. Now,

> . . . if the showbiz network were completely regular, with no random short-circuits, that figure would imply that you'd typically have to go through 1,800 other actors and their films to link one actor to another. Yet the computer showed that it is possible to link any actor to any other via just three intermediaries.

Creepy stuff.

Soon this sort of motion picture exploration had metamorphosed into what movie fanatics are now pleased to call the Kevin Bacon Game. Invented by Craig Fass, Brian Turtle and Mike Ginelli, three students in their twenties at Pennsylvania's Albright College in 1994, the game originally tested your ability to link any actor in American movies made in the preceding 15 years to Kevin Bacon (his first movie, *National Lampoon's Animal House*, came out in 1978), but the interest has since spread further, as we'll discover.

It wasn't long that some fairly ill-considered speculation arose that the game was related to the "small world" theory. The result was that in some quarters, where people knew of Guare's play and film, it started being called "Six Degrees to (or 'of') Kevin Bacon".

The game works this way, and here I quote from the Oracle of Bacon Web site run by Virginia University's Department of Computer Science.

The object of the game is to start with any actor or actress who has been in a movie and connect them to Kevin Bacon in the smallest number of links possible. Two people are linked if they've been in a movie together . . . For example, you might wonder how Alfred Hitchcock can be connected to Kevin Bacon. One answer is that:

Interesting Origins

It is difficult to believe an ambulance speeding to a hospital today is connected to walking. The Latin word *ambulo* means "I walk".

In the nineteenth century in the midst of battle, the wounded soldiers, who could not walk, were often treated where they lay until the fighting had finished at the end of the day. The French army began to use a wheeled cart on the battlefield referred to as a "hospital ambulant", a walking hospital. At first it was used to take medical supplies to the wounded soldiers, but as time progressed it was used also for carrying wounded soldiers off the battlefield.

Thus the ambulance of today derives its meaning from a *walking hospital.*

— R. K. Sadler

No More Separation Anxieties, Please

Not so long ago my unsuspecting attention was drawn by a couple of readers to an uncanny similarity between the concept embodied in our occasional series *Stepping Stones* and the principle known as Six Degrees of Separation.

Odzookers! I could see the writing on the wall immediately. If not nipped in the bud, this outrageous news could easily pose a scandalous credibility problem for *Bikwil* and all who sail in her.

Well, well, well. It has all turned out to be most intriguing, with wider implications than you might first imagine. So for those of you equally out of the know, here is a summary of the Six Degrees of Separation idea and its own stepping-stone-like ramifications, including Sidney Poitier, electric shocks and chirping crickets.

(*Stepping Stones*, you'll recall, is a *Bikwil* essay series in which the author deftly links several assorted, apparently unrelated subjects. The crucial principle is that, while each subject has something in common with the next, each successive pair enjoys a different link from that of the previous pair.)

OK. Let's begin with a movie from 1993 you may have heard of. It's entitled — wait for it — *Six Degrees of Separation*. Directed by Fred Schepsi and starring Will Black, Donald Sutherland, Stockard Channing and Ian McKellen, it tells of a young man who turns up one night at the home of a swanky New York couple and cons them into believing he is Sidney Poitier's son and a classmate of their children at Harvard. The next morning, they find out that he's not exactly what he first seemed, and gradually the family are compelled to re-evaluate their lives.

The film script was written by American playwright John Guare from his highly acclaimed 1990 stage play of the same name. It would appear in fact that it was Guare who coined the SDoS phrase. Even so, the relationship idea embodied in it is a much older one and has much more to do with statistics than confidence tricksters and family secrets.

If you've studied psychology at all, you may recall the name of Stanley Milgram, the social researcher. In his notorious 1960s "how-much-torture-are-you-willing-to-dish-out-under-orders?" series of experiments he showed that hundreds of subjects (young, old, women, men) were prepared to deliver what they believed to be painful electric shocks to innocent people, rather than disobey authority. Perhaps, he concluded, we're all capable of the "only-obeying-orders" evil given a powerful enough situation — especially where someone else in authority claims to be taking responsibility.

Another bit of eyebrow-raising research that Milgram conducted about that time attempted to define the connections at play in our networks of friends and acquaintances — what he called "The Small World Problem". His experiment has been well described in an article by physicist Robert Mathews in the January/February 2000 issue of *World Link* that I found reproduced on the Internet.

What Milgram did was to send a package each to various participants all over America, with the instructions to post it on to two other persons whose names he gave, but little further information other than some vague clues about where they might live, their age and their occupation. He suggested they send the package to any acquaintances they thought likely to know the addressees personally who would then send it on.

When Milgram analysed the results of his experiment, the startling upshot was that many of the chains followed a similar asymmetrical pattern. Indeed,

> . . . the packages typically reached the two target people after passing through the hands of just five other people. Later experiments produced similar results, making the conclusion inevitable. It seems that, on average, everyone in America — from arms dealer to zoo keeper — can be connected to everyone else via a chain of just five or six intermediaries.

Aha! Six degrees of separation?

Hang on. Can any American really be linked via "five or six handshakes" to all 250 million other U.S. inhabitants? Mathews goes on to ask why, if "our networks of friends are not randomly spread across society . . ., they still allow us to be linked to each other via few intermediaries."

The question was taken up again in 1996 by Duncan Watts, a doctoral student investigating how the chirps of lovelorn crickets take so little time to synchronise. "Was each listening to all his fellow crickets, or just to his closest neighbours?" he wondered. More importantly, was this related to the old "small world" effect?

Watts and fellow student Steve Strogatz developed some computer simulations of friend networks.