

## DAMN MAD BORING TRIFLER?

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Dmitri Alfred Borgmann, the father of recreational linguistics, crafted the anagram of his name that is the title of this chapter. Damn mad? yes, if one takes this palindromic phrase to mean "carried away by enthusiasm or desire". Boring trifler? never.

He was born on October 22, 1927 in Berlin, of a German father and Ukrainian mother. In 1936 his parents, fearful that his mother's Jewish ancestry would be discovered by the Nazis, emigrated to America, joining relatives in the Chicago area. Young Dmitri showed an early aptitude for words, winning five dollars in a Saturday morning spelling bee on radio station WLS in the summer of 1940. He was graduated from the University of Chicago in two years, majoring in the liberal arts and minoring in mathematics; shortly thereafter, in November 1946, he joined the Central Life Insurance Company as an actuarial assistant.

He must have found the clerical work and routine mathematical calculations monotonous in the extreme, and it is doubtful whether he derived much intellectual stimulation from supervising a group of five people preparing new life insurance policies. So, like many others, he sought meaning in his life outside work.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, puzzle contests offering relatively large prizes became popular. Dmitri began entering them, and soon found that he could win prizes despite the enormous competition. Not knowing that the odds were stacked against the individual--syndicates often teamed up and divided their winnings--he was fortunate enough to know the answer to one puzzle the day his name was randomly selected and he was telephoned by the sponsor. He won \$1000, a sum equal to three months of employment at the insurance company! During the next decade, he entered many other contests with varying degrees of success from complete failure to the occasional prize of \$500 to \$2000. (In a 1976 interview, he estimated his total winnings to be \$12,000.)

His most glorious moment occurred in 1958, when WGN-TV sponsored a weekly word-building quiz show called "It's In The Name", in which two contestants, the champion and the challenger, formed as many words as possible in two minutes, using only the letters found in ROBERT E. LEE or some other well-known personality. Defeating the champion on his first try, he stayed on the show for the next eight weeks, eventually winning \$3788. His winning strategy involved a lot of prep work--guessing plausible celebrity names like ZSA ZSA GABOR or WALLY COX, and memorizing word lists based on them--which devastated the opposition. By the time the sponsor decided to cancel the show, he had committed some 125 lists to memory.

When the final puzzles in a contest confront you, you are suddenly at war with the sponsor, with your competitors, and with the puzzles themselves. You are also at war with your family and friends, from whose presence you must banish yourself to devote all your time and

powers of concentration to the staggering task immediately ahead of you. To achieve solutions of prize-winning caliber, you must, for all practical purposes, lock yourself in a soundproof room with whatever material and clerical supplies you may need for the contest, and slave over those puzzles as many hours a day, every day, as you possibly can without collapsing...Winning a major prize without backbreaking, mind-wrenching efforts would border on the miraculous.

Dmitri's efforts to solve a picture-puzzle contest, involving countless hours poring over nineteenth-century books in Chicago and New York libraries, is described in Problem 60 (A Study in Frustration) of his book *Beyond Language*. He epitomized Edison's dictum that "Genius is one per cent inspiration and ninety-nine per cent perspiration".

Dmitri never lost interest in contests. Even when the prize was a modest one, he would tenaciously look for a winning solution, stretching the sponsor's rules to the limit to gain any possible advantage. The Sep/Oct Games magazine puzzle, "Millionaire II", provides an illustration of his methods. Readers were asked to compete for a combination electronic calculator and digital watch (worth, perhaps, a couple hundred dollars) by finding a word recognized by Webster's Third which, replacing its letters by numbers (A=26, B=25, .., Z=1), multiplied to a number nearest one million. (If more than one word had the same multiplicative score, the earliest one in the dictionary was to be called the winner.) Many, including Dmitri, discovered HAWED = (19)(26)(4)(28)(23) was equal to 999,856, but only Dmitri tried to convince the judges that the word HASP'D, having the same score but preceding HAWED in the alphabet, should be called the winner. He noted that HASPED was recognized by Webster's Third by the lightface entry -ED following the main entry HASP, and argued that the apostrophized entry was also "recognized" by Webster by virtue of the entry at APOSTROPHE which cited examples like JUDG'D and WISH'D. Nice try, but no cigar! A Games judge responded by noting that HASP'D had to be specifically listed in the dictionary, as the rules implied: "Plurals, verb forms, alternative spellings...are all fair game, provided they're listed.". Stretching for every possible verbal advantage, Dmitri retorted that the word LISTED, according to Webster's primary definition, had a meaning of "to suit, to choose": HASP'D "is SUITED to the purpose of your contest (it is superior in quality to any other solution word), and it is equally evident that I have CHOSEN it (I submitted it as a solution to your contest)." He finished off his plea for reconsideration with the "time-honored rule" in contesting that participants are "entitled to adopt that interpretation of ambiguous rules most favorable to themselves"!

Though Dmitri regularly solved the daily crossword in Chicago newspapers, this offered little challenge. In 1956 he discovered that there was much more to wordplay than spelling bees or crosswords when he joined the National Puzzlers' League, an organization whose members had since 1883 been composing and solving rhymed word puzzles and constructing forms (crosswords of various shapes with no internal black squares). Their monthly magazine, *The Enigma*, contained various linguistic curiosities which he had never encountered: long tranposals like MEGACHIROPTERAN-CINEMATOGRAPHER, alphabet shifts like NOWHERE to ABJURER, successive beheadments like ASPIRATE-SPIRATE-PIRATE-IRATE-RATE-ATE-TE-E, and eight-by-eight word squares. He soon amassed a collection of issues dating back to the 1910s. Building a collection of such trivia, he soon was contributing word puzzles and curiosia to newspaper columns such as the "Line o' Type or Two" of the Chicago Tribune.

In 1959 Martin Gardner, the well-known editor of the Mathematical Games column of Scientific American magazine, was preparing an appendix of notes for the Dover reprint of Bombaugh's classic wordplay book, *Oddities and Curiosities of Words and Literature*. Hearing that Dmitri had a vast palindrome collection, he wrote for particulars and was quickly inundated by wordplay material, some of which he used in the Bombaugh book issued in 1961. (He also mentioned the ABJURER to NOWHERE item in his first Doctor Matrix column in January 1960.)

Martin Gardner further helped Dmitri's linguistic career by putting Scribner's in touch with him. The result, the 1965 *Language on Vacation*, was favorably reviewed by Time magazine. A landmark in the field of recreational linguistics, this was the first full-length book devoted to the subject, systematizing what had heretofore been isolated oddities. His great contribution was to demonstrate that wordplay is an intellectual discipline in its own right, with new discoveries building on earlier work.

However, he made a number of enemies among the old-timers in the National Puzzlers' League who complained that he had used much material without giving individual credit to its originators (it wasn't enough that he had given "heartfelt thanks" to three members in the Preface, and also urged readers to join the League). He averred that the League had provided only the "stimulus or starting point" for more advanced forms of wordplay.

The advance royalties from *Language on Vacation* (it went into a second printing) may have been the stimulus that Dmitri needed to take the most dramatic step of his life: quit his life insurance job and support himself with contest winnings and freelance writing. It was a gutsy move. Neither source of income was a particularly dependable one, and by now he had married Iris Sterling (in 1962) and was the father of a young son, Keith Alan (in 1964).

Shortly after *Language on Vacation* was published, Dmitri was approached by an executive vice president of Standard Oil of New Jersey, manufacturer of Esso gasoline. They were in the process of seeking a new corporate name no more than six letters long, easily remembered, with an international flavor but no negative connotations in any language, suggesting energy or power, large size, financial soundness, benevolence, and a scientific and technical orientation. Could any word fulfill all these objectives? During the next year or two, Dmitri identified 1200 possibilities which were winnowed to twenty for in-depth analysis, including DYNAX and QUESTA. The final choice, of course, was EXXON. (According to Howard Bergerson, Dmitri suggested EXON and his wife Iris added the second X.) Eventually he submitted a bill for his work: \$10,000, which at \$2000 per letter made him arguably the highest-paid author in the world.

The Exxon success led to a decade of assignments to create names for business firms, museums and exhibits, including names for foods, cigarettes and clothing. Typical was the assignment to find a new name for the Rocket Research Company of Redmond, Washington. For a \$1,200 fee he generated 250 names which he analyzed in a 31-page report. The outcome? They rejected all his choices in favor of the rather unimaginative ROCKOR, a blend of Rocket Corporation.

Dmitri followed *Language on Vacation* with *Beyond Language* in 1967. This less-successful book lacked the laser-like focus of the earlier one. It consisted of 137 Problems to challenge the reader, with Hints and Solutions supplied elsewhere. Many of these, such as the geography contest alluded to earlier, and a French mortician's formula to price funerals, had little to do with language per se.

A couple of years after *Language on Vacation* was published, Harold Schwartz, owner of the newly-established Greenwood Press in Connecticut, asked Martin Gardner to suggest new journals that Greenwood might sponsor. He suggested that Dmitri be appointed the editor of a journal devoted to wordplay, and as a result *Word Ways* came into being in February 1968. Its first year was a rocky one--Dmitri found it necessary to write many of the articles, including the Exxon name-quest, and only 460 subscriptions came in despite a plug by Martin Gardner in *Scientific American*. When Schwartz refused to continue Dmitri's \$5000 stipend a second year, he promptly resigned the editorship. (And when Howard Bergerson agreed to take on the editorship, Dmitri wrote him in September 1968 to say his act was "extremely hostile and downright treacherous"--apparently he hoped that Schwartz would fail to find a successor and be compelled to meet Dmitri's terms.) In January 1969 Dmitri wrote Martin Gardner "...what I would really like to be, even in preference to authoring books, is the editor of a magazine such as *Word Ways*..."--but, obviously, not without remuneration.

With the collapse of his hopes that *Word Ways* could help support him, Dmitri turned to new income-generating strategies: writing a "Word Row" column for the *Puzzle Lovers* newspaper, a "Word Games" department for the *Chicago Tribune*, and sponsoring a series of word contests under the name *Jackpot Jubilee*. From 1978 to 1982 he sporadically contributed a one-third page column, "Word Row", to *Games* magazine, earning \$100 to \$200 per published article. He chafed a bit over payment only after publication, as well as editorial attempts to modify his submissions according to their view of what readers wanted. He also professed to be insulted by the occasional last-minute elimination of his column to accommodate last-minute advertisements.

The most successful of his new enterprises was R.C. Research, begun in January 1971. Later metamorphosing to *Research Unlimited* and *Intellex*, this consisted of literary services (editing and typing a client's manuscript, converting outlines into text) and scholarly services (preparing reports on any desired subject). The latter was frankly aimed at the college professor who had no time to write papers in addition to research and teaching. Over the next decade, he acquired a stable of a dozen writers in various cities to do the actual work. He limited his own efforts to final editing, although if a subject interested him sufficiently he would tackle the entire job. With rates of \$15 to \$27 per page, he could end up charging as much as \$10,000 for a large book. And how was business? "Booming", he told a *Tacoma* reporter in 1980.

No doubt his financial outlook improved when in 1972 he moved from Oak Park, the Chicago suburb he had lived in since 1953, to the small town of Dayton in western Washington. However, there was a more immediate reason for the move; a friend of Iris's was raped within a few blocks of their Oak Park home.

Two years after he became a mail-order minister in the *Universal Life Church* of Modesto California, he founded (in 1978) the *Divine Immortality Church*. Man's purpose on earth, he claimed, is to achieve union with the Infinite Mind of God.

In coming to realize his identity with the Infinite Mind, man transcends the limitations of finite thought and perception, and the apparent but illusory evil that surrounds him disappears: he triumphs over misfortune, sickness and death.

Ministers ordained by Dmitri were expected to pass on this good word, and even perform baptisms, marriages and last rites. He advertised in various magazines offering a theological degree and a cabbalistic symbol at a substantial price; perhaps one hundred people eventually signed on. (His son Keith later told me that the T was omitted from the church name in advertisements in Hustler magazine.)

He suffered a mild heart attack in February 1979. Six years later, on December 7, 1985, he died at his Dayton home of a second one.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Dmitri wrote scores of articles for Word Ways, often using pseudonyms like Merlin X. Houdini, Ramona J. Quincunx, Jezebel Q. Xixx, Mejnour Zanoni, Ravenscroft J. Cloudesley and Rod P. Selden. Sometimes he created the illusion of controversy by having one of these persona attack another. Encouraged by a little praise, he could turn out well-written articles at the rate of three or four a week.

In print Dmitri sometimes exhibited a rather abrasive personality, belittling opposing points of view and implying that only he had the true vision of recreational linguistics. For example, in 1973 he asserted that only he knew how to create high-quality anagrams, submitting eight to be compared with the best of the National Puzzlers' League. When a panel of judges not associated with the League awarded the palm to the latter, he attacked their ability to recognize a good anagram when they saw one.

How much this was a put-on is hard to say. Beneath the bombast and braggadocio, there apparently lurked a basically shy man, reluctant to meet people face to face. No logologist ever met him in person. When I wrote him in the summer of 1979, saying I planned to drop in on logologists in the area, he curtly replied "That excludes me...I am not a logologist." Prince Djoli Kansil once arranged to meet him at his Oak Park residence, but when he arrived at the appointed hour found no one there.

Of all his logological tenets, the one that engendered the strongest reaction was the firm belief that there are many English words out there, unlisted by dictionaries, which should be used as needed by the recreational linguist. An uncontroversial example: dictionaries sanction the formation of unlisted RE- verbs. Many feared that such permissiveness would lead to anarchy in the hands of unscrupulous logologists.

He believed that the computer would never replace human creativeness. He gleefully noted that only a tiny fraction of words formed by the letters AEGINRST had been found by computer searches, and he was equally delighted that INSANE ANGLO WARLORD was an anagram of RON-ALD WILSON REAGAN not spotted by computer. More generally, he was convinced that recreational linguistics and recreational mathematics were like oil and water, destined never to

mix--yet he could be fascinated by the number pi. Its 22/7 approximation was embodied in the equation  $7(22+7)=203$ , the sum of the letter-values in DMITRI ALFRED BORGMANN.

Or was this an attempt at humor? His humor was somewhat ponderous, as when he noted that the four 1984 issues and the February 1985 issue of Word Ways had 19, 18, 17, 16 and 15 articles, respectively.

I assume this is the start of a long term trend...the May 1988 issue will have only one entry...May I plan on being the author of that final, 62-printed-page article?...A title such as "Logology: The Ultimate Force Behind Recorded World History" gives you an idea of the lines along which I am thinking.

He delighted in sending letters under a wild variety of improbable letterheads, such as "Estate Owners & Poultry Farmers, International Traders and Agents" of Nigeria, or "British Investment Group Ltd (International Development of Energy and Armament Systems)". Often these were adorned with used foreign postage stamps or Mad Magazine stickers. He sent a landmark article on the SATOR square under the name of David Williams, a member of the National Puzzlers' League. And there was the article submitted by Mejnour Zaroni, reporting that the "Sacred Council of Logology", convening on Christmas Day in the Great Pyramid of Giza, had excommunicated the editor of Word Ways and several authors for high treason--i.e., for using esthetically-offensive hyphenated, capitalized, foreign or obsolete words in an article.

He could even joke about death. His March 27 1978 letter read: "Since today is my last day, I am making a point of getting this letter off to you before the impenetrable mists of eternity engulf me forever." On April 24: "I have returned from the dead, but only briefly [for the purpose of listing new transposals of chemical elements]." And finally:

District Court, Sixteenth Judicial District, Juvenile Division  
Miles City, Montana

Your putative correspondent was, by order of this court executed on March 27 1978, at 12:00 midnight, for the crime of murder in the first degree. As provided by Montana Law, he was hung. Accordingly, you could not have received any communications from him subsequent to the specified date.

The man behind the legend was revealed during a visit to his widow and son in Dayton in the summer of 1988. The following impressions were written by Faith Eckler shortly thereafter.

Dayton is a town whose central business district, a few blocks long, is totally without charm. Although not far from the university town of Walla Walla, and on the edge of the prosperous truck farming area of central Washington, Dayton shows evidence of being in a severe economic slump. We were told that unemployment there runs about 20 per cent. When asked why Dmitri chose such an unprepossessing town, Iris replied that after many years in Oak Park, Dmitri wanted to live someplace where he would never have to see another black.

Dayton has a pleasant residential area with late 19th-century Victorian homes on tree-lined streets. In one of these, on a corner lot, Dmitri lived with his wife and son.

Dmitri valued his privacy highly, to the point of eccentricity. Most of the windows in his house were boarded up, or the shades pulled down, so that no one could look in. He refused to have the grass on his property mowed because this, too, increased his seclusion. Even the glass in the doors between rooms within the house was covered up with boards or heavy drapes, so that one could not see from room to room. He carried on a long feud, threatening legal action, with a nearby church because the pealing of its bells intruded on his privacy.

He would not permit mirrors in his home, and avoided looking in them on the rare occasions when he was outside the house because he feared the persona that he believed was staring back at him from the other side of the glass. Once, a few months before his death, he inadvertently caught sight of himself and stood transfixed. "I'm old," he moaned, "I'm incredibly old." Yet he was only 57.

Borgmann's desire for privacy extended to his work in progress. When his son Keith would ask him what he was working on, Dmitri would reply "Go away; don't bother me. You wouldn't understand." After he had exhausted the supply of typists in Dayton--twenty-seven in succession were either fired or quit--Iris did his typing for him. But it was clear that she neither understood nor knew very much about his work.

The editor's seventeen-year correspondence with Dmitri revealed a man of rather prickly personality. This was confirmed by Iris. Dmitri had a deep distrust of the Postal Service and often sent his Word Ways articles by registered mail. This usually meant a trip to the Post Office to pick them up. When I told Iris that this annoyed me, she remarked that if Dmitri had known this he would have made sure to register all his letters to us.

In his correspondence, Dmitri came across as a man of colossal ego, yet Iris described him as having an enormous inferiority complex. He refused to learn to drive a car because he believed himself incapable of coordinating hands and feet. Despite his training as an actuarial assistant, he was "terrified" of numbers, and found the editor's mathematically-oriented word studies incomprehensible. He would make no attempt to understand them.

Iris reported that Dmitri's IQ was approximately 155, the lowest of any of the three men she was dating when she met him. He was wildly jealous of anyone whose IQ he judged to be even one point higher.

Iris suspects that some of Dmitri's paranoia may be traceable to experiences as a refugee from Nazi Germany. His severely crippled mother was subjected to cruel ridicule by neighborhood children, some of which may have spilled over on young Dmitri.

Dmitri had been in poor health for a number of years before his death. He had a heart condition (a form of angina pectoris) and had become quite obese as well. Yet he refused to follow his doctor's instructions or take his prescribed medication. His great passion was candy bars which he would sneak down to the corner store to buy. After his death, Iris and Keith found

boxes of empty candy wrappers secreted in his room. He hoarded other things as well--cases of soda, job lots of hair shampoo--which were stuffed into closets or corners.

Toward the end of his life, Dmitri became even more reclusive. He didn't come downstairs very often, and rarely shaved or dressed. He ate and slept when it suited him, on no particular schedule, and worked feverishly and secretively on his logological research. Once in a while his personal schedule would coincide with that of the rest of the family, but Keith reported that often weeks went by when he never saw his father.

Dmitri opposed any attempt to straighten out his clutter; even the routine noises of housekeeping, such as that of a vacuum cleaner, were an aggravation. Iris eventually abandoned any attempt at housecleaning or maintenance. She intimated that his embarrassment over the deteriorated and cluttered condition of the house was the real reason Dmitri had refused to let us visit.

In the two-and-one-half years since Dmitri's death, little was changed in the Borgmann household. A number of windows remained boarded up, although the grass had been cut. Initially, his books and papers were all crammed higgledy-piggledy into cardboard cartons and piled high in a closet. Eventually Keith tried to bring some order out of this chaos. We examined two of the boxes, finding them to be a complete jumble of papers, file cards, and letters (a few, arriving after his death, never opened). Neither Keith nor Iris were able to shed light on the work represented here, and it would have required days to sort through this material and make sense out of it.

We saw between one and two hundred of his books, mostly specialized dictionaries that Keith had shelved in the living room. We were curious about the apparently-random patches of duct tape placed on some of the spines and inside title pages. It developed that Dmitri had shamelessly stolen these books from public or university libraries. The duct tape had been applied to conceal the library markings. This pilferage was later confirmed by David McCord who before Dmitri's death had bought some of his library: "When I got the books I was horrified to see the heavy tape on many of them. A little investigation showed that the tape was covering up 'Chicago Public Library' and about two-thirds of the books were so marked...I was at a loss as to what to do." Eventually he wrote the Chicago Public Library, but never heard from them.

What effect did life with Dmitri have upon his family? Both Iris and Keith were enormously impressed by his genius, as well as by his selection for "Who's Who in America" at the time of his death. The black box containing his ashes occupies a prominent place in their living room.

Time allowed us to spend only one evening in Dayton, but our visit left us with some memorable impressions. The man behind the legend emerged as a complex and profoundly disturbed personality. Perhaps it is just as well that we never met him!