

Jack Smith

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In maundering the other day about the Information Age, which we are supposed to be in, I observed that I already had more sources of information than I could handle, and what I needed was more time, not more information.

"I am this moment only 10 steps away from the Encyclopaedia Britannica," I wrote, "which is so full of information that if I were to start today with Aalto, Alvar (Finnish architect), and read EB eight hours every day I wouldn't get to Zwingli, Ulrich (Swiss reformer), until I was 209 years old."

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Of course, that was just a guess. I was only trying to make the point that it would take a long time indeed. But I foolishly used a specific odd number—209 years—and of course somebody with a mathematical mind had to check it out.

"You stated," wrote Russ Gates of Manhattan Beach, "that if you started with Aalto, Alvar, and read EB eight hours every day, you wouldn't get to Zwingli, Ulrich, until you were 209 years old.

"Jack, I find this hard to believe, unless you're a lot older than you claim. (I have never claimed to be any particular age.) The EB has 30 volumes with 31,168 pages and approximately 1,950 words per printed page, for a rough estimated total of 60,777,600 words.

"Now, let's assume you read only 100 words per minute, which equates to 48,000 words each day. Reading five days a week is 12,480,000 words read each year.

"So, 60,777,600 divided by 12,480,000 is 4.87 years—the number required to read the entire EB. (According to your figures, you would be reading only about 3.5 words each minute, unless you are 204 years old!)"

I'm taking Gates' calculations on faith. To tell the truth, I find his conclusion inspiring. It had never occurred to me before that I might actually have time to read the entire Encyclopaedia Britannica if I set my mind to it. Imagine having read almost everything we know about our civilization, even if you forgot it. I'm an encyclopedia buff anyway. Sometimes, instead of

commonly among lower plants and invertebrate animals, particularly rotifers, aphids, ants, wasps, and bees. . . ."

A bell rang. Parthenogenesis. Where had I read about that curious phenomenon? I looked along a shelf of recently read books and found it almost at once—"Keepers of the Secret," by my friend Barnaby Conrad and a collaborator, Nico Mastorakis, who evidently assisted Conrad in historical, geographical and religious research.

The book poses a mind-boggling but plausible answer

Everything he's always wanted to know about parthenogenesis—and more

picking up a magazine or turning on TV, I will draw a volume of EB from the shelf, open it at random and read an article or two, as if I had come across it in the newspaper, or People magazine.

Sometimes, the article I pick at random leads me on to something else, and that to something else; it is like going from one lighted room to another in a dark labyrinth.

I have just experimented by taking down a volume and opening it at random—to Page 773. . . . *Parthenogenesis*. . . .

"Parthenogenesis," I read, "biological reproduction that involves development of a female (rarely a male) gamete (sex cell) without fertilization. It occurs

to the question of Mary's virginity and the true identity of the Messiah. In some long hidden ancient scrolls, it is revealed that Mary's first child was a girl, named Lael ("chosen of God"), and scholars hypothesize that Mary had conceived by parthenogenesis, citing numerous purported instances of parthenogenetic birth in human beings.

It was Lael, not Jesus, who was God's chosen, and it was she who performed the miracles for which her brother got the credit. A woman would never have been accepted in that role; so she used Jesus as her front man.

But Lael is not mentioned in the Gospels. Then how, you ask, could she have performed the miracles if she wasn't there? But she *was* there. Lael masqueraded as

one of Jesus' followers. Lael, the daughter of God, was Mary Magdalene!

I don't know if there's any truth in that theory or not. The book does not purport to be more than fiction. There is, of course, a large body of Scripture that tends to controvert it.

My point is, though, that you never know where a little inquiry will take you. You chance on the word *parthenogenesis*, and the next thing you know you are shaking the foundations of Christianity.

In the Age of Information anybody can know anything. Will we open a great Pandora's Box?

I have meanwhile demonstrated why I will probably never read the encyclopedia straight through. I am too easily sidetracked. Parthenogenesis sent me back to Conrad's book; and that has sent me to the Bible.

I have just undertaken to read Matthew, Mark, Luke and John to find out everything I can about Mary Magdalene, and especially whether she was indeed present at the miracles. I've always had an affinity for Magdalene. She fires the mystic in me.

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That project, by the way, happily coincides with another one I recently started. I am reading all the books that everyone assumes we have read, just as they assume we have been vaccinated for smallpox, but which, in fact, we have not read—not all the way through, anyway.

In that pursuit, I have just finished "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," and am plunging into "Through the Looking Glass," though it will have to wait now until I finish the Gospels.

The way it's going I won't even get through the encyclopedia by the time I'm 209.