

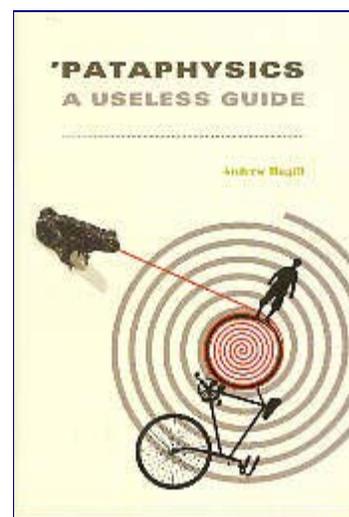
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## A READER'S JOURNAL

### 'Pataphysics A Useless Guide by Andrew Hugill

ARJ2 Chapter: Evolution of Consciousness  
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2013



Are you a pataphysician? No, you don't think so?  
Let me ask you two questions: Do you see how  
things are and ask why? Or, do you see how

things could be and ask why not? If you answered *yes* to the second question, you may be a pataphysician and don't know it, up until now. Concisely put, the science of 'pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions. Since a guide to a person's imagination presupposes a reality which is unattainable, that is, it presupposes the possibility of knowing a territory, a *terra incognita*, which exists inside of another person, any guide to 'pataphysics would be *perforce* useless, thus you have an imaginary solution to the problem of the subtitle, "A Useless Guide".

Some readers, grammatically and punctuationally inclined, will be wondering about the apparently superfluous apostrophe which precedes the instances of the word *pataphysics* above. The correct spelling of the word coined by Albert Jarré in the 18th century includes the apostrophe, thus: 'pataphysics is the correct spelling of the science when used alone; when used to indicate a practitioner of the science, a pataphysician, or in a sentence, the apostrophe may be dropped, as is also the case for adjectives and other parts of speech, such as *pataphysical*, *pataphysically*, etc. Thus said, I have demonstrated a paradox: that even *a useless guide* can be useful at some level, a possibility which seems to me to be an example of an imaginary solution. I will hazard furthering the paradox by reviewing this useless guide and further mining its uselessness for possible usefulness.

"Surely you're joking" may come to mind along with its imaginary solution or response, "Don't call me Shirley." Okay, let's get serious: "Is 'pataphysics a joke?" Obviously not — as Hugill points out in his Preamble, "Everybody knows that a joke explained is not a joke at all." So don't expect explanations or unambiguous definitions for a field which embraces diffuse explanations and is big on ambiguity. If you want to understand what pataphysics is, this review won't be much help, but at least you will have acquired a first-experience of being confused on a subject that you may not have known existed before.

**[page xv] How to write about something that exists mainly in the imagination, that constantly resists clear definition, is purposefully useless, and is regarded by many as a pseudophilosophy, a hoax, a joke, or a schoolboy prank? The enterprise is fraught with dangers. There is a risk of reduction: pataphysics is rich and complex, so anything that resembles a simplified "explanation" will fail to do it justice. Conversely, there is the problem of taking it all too seriously. Everybody knows that a joke explained is not a joke at all. Since pataphysics recognizes no distinction between humor and seriousness, there is always a possibility that any statement on the subject will end up pricking its**

**own balloon. There is the ever-present danger of factual error in a history filled with myth-making, inconsistencies, deliberate hoaxes, and, sometimes, downright lying. Worst of all, there is fear of the disapproval of the worldwide community of pataphysicians, whose deep erudition and independence of mind make them supremely intolerant of any traducement of that which they hold so dear, even if it emanates from one of their own. In the face of these perils one may well wonder why this book exists at all.**

Did you enjoy pranks when you were a schoolboy? Well, I did. Nothing which caused physical harm, but those pranks which caused a burst of surprise or sudden revelation upon my playmates. I always wanted to try the bucket of water on the top of a door, but if I did that at home, the result would have been too painful for me, so my range of schoolboy pranks was limited by my meager funds and my dad's razor strop. So it was my great delight to find that the name '*pataphysics*' was invented by schoolboys! French schoolboys!

**[page xv] Of all the French cultural exports of the past 150 years or so, pataphysics has, perhaps surprisingly, turned out to be one of the most durable, and today is attracting ever-increasing attention. The word was invented by schoolboys in Rennes in the 1880s and is most strongly identified with one of their number: the poet and playwright Alfred Jarry (1873-1907). It is generally agreed that it lies around the roots of many of the key artistic and cultural developments of the twentieth century, including absurdism, Dada, futurism, surrealism, situationism, and others.**

"I have never heard of 'pataphysics before!" you exclaim? Well, as the Author explains in his Preamble on page xvi, "The fact that relatively few people are aware of its existence is part of the secret of its success." After all, imagine flash mobs all over the major cities forming to create 'pataphysical happenings! What kind of world would we be living in? Hmmm, you know, on further consideration, perhaps that is already happening, those flash mobs, only due to the pataphysical need for sub rosa concealment, they do not advertise themselves as pataphysical flash mobs, but come up with ingenious cover stories for their existence.

Note that there are no pataphysicists only pataphysicians. Most "-ists" have an "ism" to which they belong: deists to deism, absolutists to absolutism, ascetics to asceticism, capitalists to capitalism, communists to communism, environmentalists to environmentalism, egoists to egoism, hedonists to hedonism, machinists to mechanisms, nihilists to nihilism, pessimists to pessimism, and optimists to optimism, just to name a few of the 234 *isms*'s compiled by *The Phrontistery* on-line.

**[page xv] Unlike other, more familiar, "isms" that have been fully documented and historicized, pataphysics has managed to retain its vibrancy by perpetually eluding "ism" ism. It has never fully become either a "movement" or a "philosophy," even though at times it shares some characteristics with both of those. It has managed to permeate both culture and society, but in ways that are somewhat shadowy.**

My career began as a physicist, evolved into a computer scientist, massage therapist, psychotherapist, philosopher, writer, photographer, cartoonist, poet, novelist, editor, and publisher and it continues to evolve(1). This points out that I have worked in many of the areas that pataphysics has had a "demonstrable impact on" listed below:

**[page xvi] . . . theater, music, painting, sculpture . . . Its influence on politics, economics, philosophy, critical theory, and the wider social sciences is less clear, but can nevertheless be traced. Its presence in the sciences is still less obvious, and yet with a little digging it can be detected. Both scientists and pataphysicians have too much to lose to admit that there are many similarities and connections between them, but the subject does pop up in**

## **quantum physics, in computer science, or in scientific research in general.**

From my reading of advances in quantum mechanic theory such as the Bell Theorem, the double slit experiment, etal, it has seemed to me at times that the theory itself was formed as a schoolboy prank by Heisenberg, Bohr, Boehm, Feynman and others. It would be laughable if it were not taken so seriously and if it were not so important to our modern technology and understanding of the world.

"Imaginary solutions? What use are they?" you may be thinking. Hmm, perhaps you have never heard of imaginary numbers. You know, the square root of minus one, the number which multiplied by itself equals -1? Sounds useless, huh? Well, a lot of people use imaginary numbers to do valuable calculation everyday, so be careful not to equate *imaginary* with *useless*. The results of quantum calculations are like imaginary numbers in the sense that they are only meaningful and useful when squared at which point they can be interpreted as the probability of a quantum event occurring. What sense does the square root of a probability make? *No nse nse* (2), as a pataphysician might opine.

Why did Andrew Hugill go through the trouble of writing this book about what may seem to some as pataphysical claptrap?

**[page xvi] It is important to understand what distinguishes pataphysics from other "radical," "anarchic," or "left-of-field" impulses. The word is often used quite loosely to evoke *anything* that seems wacky, weird, or bizarrely incomprehensible. This is a misrepresentation which this book hopes to correct. Pataphysics, although complex and difficult, is in fact quite a cogent body of exploits and ideas, which has a history and certain fixed precepts. while the contradictory and the exceptional are woven into its very fabric, the sloppy, the woolly, and the "hip" are not. Pataphysics sets no store by what it calls the "grimaces on the face of a century," the passing fads and fashions of intellectual life; rather, it is imperturbable in aspect. It may never be understood, which is perhaps why it is so frequently misunderstood. These are the academic reasons for writing this book: to contribute to knowledge and to combat ignorance.**

One can only strive to explain 'Pataphysics by pataphysical methods; those who try otherwise end with using pataphysical methods in complete unconsciousness of their doing so. True pataphysicians will not attempt to explain, but instead "to draw out themes."

**[page xvii, xviii] Ruy Launoir observed that "there is no key to 'Pataphysics . . . To pretend that one can explain (i.e., *reduce*) 'Pataphysics by methods that are not pataphysical, is a little, even greatly, pataphysical" (Launoir 2005) The aim of my book is therefore modest: *to trace the lineaments of pataphysics* and, in doing so, to offer some critical insights. . . . It attempts to draw out themes, be they philosophical, literary, artistic, historical, anecdotal or analytical. However, it does so in the full knowledge that it is merely describing an outline, nothing more than an imprint that the idea of pataphysics has left on our culture to date. These are merely the swaddling clothes that surround the invisible body of pataphysics itself. When you have read this book you will not "understand" pataphysics. You will know somewhat better the extent and reach of its influence, and the depth and richness of its insights. you may also perhaps understand why the "crying need" for it, first identified by Jarry, continues to be felt to this day.**

In other words, if you want to know what 'Pataphysics is — this book won't be much help, but you will learn why the subtitle calls this book "A Useless Guide". Try to reduce 'Pataphysics to its essence and you will be left with what the Cheshire Cat left for Alice: an enigmatic smile.

**[page 1] For some, pataphysics is a cosmic fart, an ultimate spoof, a schoolboy prank, a**

**raucous piece of nonsense; for others it is an attitude of mind, a way of life, a discipline, a doctrine, a deeply ironic religion, even. It is profoundly useless or, as pataphysicians prefer to say, *inutilious*, but nevertheless manages to inform and inflect the world. To this day, when physicists make questionable science, their colleagues will shout: "That's not physics. That's pataphysics!"**

**To understand pataphysics is to fail to understand pataphysics. To define it is merely to indicate a possible meaning, which will always be the opposite of another equally possible meaning, which, when diurnally interpolated with the first meaning, will point toward a third meaning which will in turn elude definition because of the fourth element that is missing.**

Those who are academically inclined might take some brief solace in the statement that pataphysics is to metaphysics what Aristotle's metaphysics was to physics. We will excuse you from this review while you ponder that relationship. . . . For the rest of you who have managed to life-surf over the often murky waters of academia, this statement might be of some comfort and insight: "Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions."

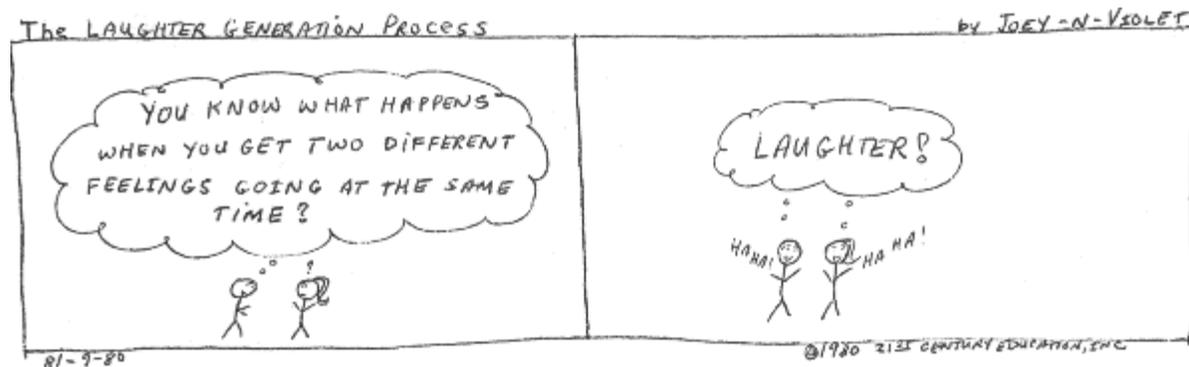
But there's more. As everyone who survived eighth grade science knows: science deals with the general: it creates laws which apply to general categories, such as Newton's Laws of Motion applies to all bodies in general and without exception. Where's the science of the specific and the laws governing the exceptions? 'Pataphysics deals with those, and thus, one might see it as the ultimate complement of all the fields which call themselves "science." 'Pataphysics claims the orphaned offspring of the specific cases and exceptions which science disclaims and discards as unworthy of their attention. If it did nothing else but this, 'Pataphysics would be a worthy study for any true generalist. The very word 'Pataphysics has an invisible and unknowable complement because the leading apostrophe is said to be there "so as to avoid a simple pun," but we have no clue as what the simple pun might be. (Page 7)

There are other explanations of the origin of the word, but I like this one: *pas ta physique*, which means "not your physics". It reminds me of a TV commercial for a new model of automobile which went something like this: "This is *not* your father's Oldsmobile." Since I owned an Oldsmobile, was a father, and also began my academic career as a physicist, I feel qualified to appreciate this suggested origin of the name 'Pataphysics.

Now to a matter equally serious and less serious. Placing a bar or a tilde over a letter of the alphabet in logic design indicates a negation of the value: **A**, which can indicate a change from True to False, 1 to 0, Yes to No, or +5 volt to 0 volt, etc. What happens in life, when after years of studying logic design, you get a value which is both **A** and  $\tilde{A}$ ? Well, you laugh! It's as if this equation were true: **A +  $\tilde{A}$  = HA HA!**

My theory about how this happens is that we humans have two sides to our bodies, Left and Right, which are controlled

by the two hemispheres of our brain (cross-connected, Left hemisphere to Right side of body, and vice-versa). When one side of our brain understands **A** and simultaneously the other side understands  $\tilde{A}$ , the



incompatible signals reach each side of the body and at the midline of the body they are unable to resolve into each other except by a quaking, jiggling, shaking, spasmodic tremulous series of events we call, **Laughing**, that is, the **HA HA!**(3)

Fr. Leonard Feeney earlier, unbeknownst to me, nodded his agreement with my position with both sides of his brain:

**[page 14] Humor consists of seeing an incongruity between fact and an imitation of the fact. [...] The incongruity observed is not complete, but only partial; because a likeness as well as an unlikeness must exist in the bogus. [...] The mind half accepts, half rejects what is being offered to it for recognition. At one and the same moment, it sees a darkness and a light, a nothingness and a somethingness; it becomes simultaneously aware of its own madness and its own sanity. (Fr. Leonard Feeney 1943, 169)**

Here is another echo of agreement as a time wave from the past from Bergson:

**[page 17] As early as 1884, Bergson had begun his investigation into the meaning of comedy that was to lead to the essay *Le rire. Essai sur la signification du comique* (Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic). In his consideration of the comic and the human imagination, Bergson was to note that humor arises when the inflexibility of a mechanism, such as the behavior of a human body under certain conditions, is revealed in the context of the flexibility of life. The comedy is created by our imaginations working on the contrast between the two states.**

Laughter occurs, in other words, when one's inflexibility meets the flexibility of life. Here's an example of when inflexibility meets flexibility. When is one the most flexible in life? — It's when one is operating spontaneously, is it not? E.g., a child is playing happily. Suppose its mother wants a photo of the smiling child at play and comes by with her camera and says, "Smile!" What happens? the child stops playing and having fun, and if it has already been well-trained offers its mother an *ersatz* or pretend smile. The child has been put by its mother into a Be Spontaneous Paradox, that is, a command to do something which cannot be done and the child creates the opposite of what its mother intended. She wanted a photo of her child at play with a beaming smile, but got a posed smile instead of a child who is inwardly upset because its fun has been interrupted! As a teenager a dozen years later, its response will morph into some choice words like "Buzz off, Mom!"(4)

On a recent trip to Brooklyn my friend, Dr. Kevin Dann, took me to a lecture at a place called *Proteus Gowanus* for a lecture by a famous cryptographer. What I found there was a Library of Morbid Anatomy (full of colorful framed photos which resembled work on the tables of Dr. Mallard's famous autopsy room on NCIS), a shortwave radio receiving coded messages from ET's, an informal museum of various artifacts (e.g., a stuffed deer head lying on its side with its tongue hanging out), a Writhing Project based on the Oulipo (writing constrained by a set of explicit rules, or what I would call, *Writhing for fun & prophet.*) Basically I was inside of a hotbed of pataphysical activity as the author describes below, even though no one ever mentioned 'Pataphysics or even displayed the name in any of its exhibits, so far as I could tell.

**[page 22] . . . there are: dozens of social media groups devoted to pataphysics, with many hundreds of members; innumerable blogs on the subject; a host of variously "wacky" Web pages that trumpet a pataphysical view of subjects as diverse as sociology, psychology, computer programming, calculus, meditation, metallurgy, and cuisine; several online pataphysical Institutes, Collectives, and other groupings; extensive academic research into and using pataphysics; and many collections or museums that have explicitly pataphysical content or which are pataphysical apparently without realizing the fact.**

Certainly *Proteus Gowanus* at first glance qualified as being pataphysical without realizing the fact. Its profusion of objects on shelves, some in glass cases, many with a card with a name and/or explanation of the object gave it the aura of being a pataphysical museum. Walking through the five or six small rooms for the first time, I was bombarded with objects which evoked unanswered questions inside me, only a few of which I dared to even ask and got mostly answered, all of which provoked further unanswered questions(5).

**[page 30] Alongside its digital developments, the twenty-first century has seen a profusion of pataphysical museums. Somehow the very concept of a museum seems particularly fertile of pataphysics. Perhaps this is because museum visitors so often have to create imaginary solutions to the questions of the meaning or origins of the objects they view.**

Another pataphysical object, the *clinamen* — "a slight swerve" shows up in curious places such as the side of a packing box from amazon.com, looking very much like a wry smile, and the new symbol McDonald's has recently adopted to replace their formerly ubiquitous "Golden Arches". The new symbol, I learned from a friend who worked for their corporate office, is called "The Brow", and looks like a clinamen swerve rendered across the top of boxy new McDonald's in the classic yellow color. A slightly raised eyebrow has replaced the high arched eyebrows apparently, but to a pataphysician the clinamen shape is instantly recognizable.



When I worked at a nuclear power plant, all plant procedures had to be reviewed by the Plant Operating and Review Committee or PORC, pronounced "pork", of course. Any procedures had to meet all federal standards before being passed by the PORC. But a little nuclear pataphysics slipped into a PORC-approved procedure

whose title was *Procedure for Inadvertent Loss of Gravity*. Naturally this was a big HA-HA event for everyone who got a much-xeroxed copy of the famous procedure. No specific nuclear plant took credit for PORC-approval of this procedure, but there was a marked loss of gravity and increased presence of levity fostered by the arrival of this procedure at many nuclear plants.

We are constantly told to "think outside the box" to get a creative solution to a problem, but a pataphysical construct has arrived to formalize the process called Jootsy which stands for Jump Out Of The System. One Jootsy example to ponder is this one from page 37:

**2 teacups + 2 teacups = 40 cups**

The author mentions many pataphysical magazines, but leaves out my own favorite magazine dealing with imaginary solutions, namely, the *Journal of Irreproducible Results*. I have had published in that prestigious scientific journal an article on the *Piezo-Photoc Effect* and a poem entitled, "The Postman Kicked the Dog." The *JIR* certainly has a name which

## GREAT MOMENTS in SCIENCE

### PADRE FILIUS INSPECTS VANISHING POINT

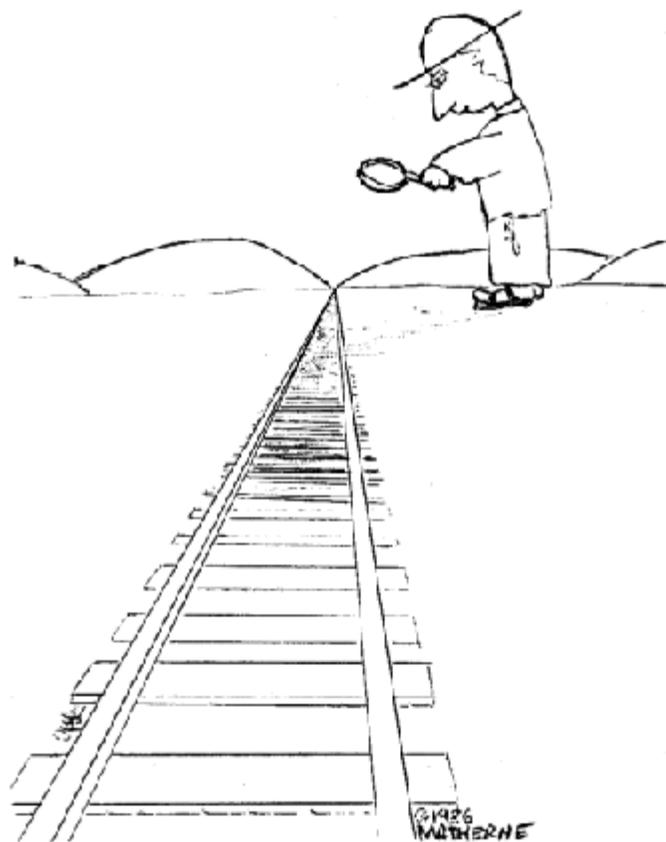
reveals its pataphysical nature, dealing as it does with events which are exceptional and imaginary by virtue of being incapable of being reproduced, but each issue of *JIR* does carry a megaton or so of unexploded **HA+HA**.

In addition to my pataphysical writing, I drew a cartoon in which its character was performing pataphysical research, namely, searching for the famous vanishing-point on the horizon. A photo, as we say pataphysically-speaking, is worth a thousand words.

My pataphysical roots go way back to 1953, on the memorable day when a couple of thirteen-year-old pals of mine introduced me to the first issue of *Mad* — a new Comics Book which had just appeared. I began reading it like a regular Batman or Superman comic book when suddenly I realized it was making fun of things that our parents took seriously! We all roared at each page. I discovered my love of satire on that very day, and I knew that my life would never be the same again, that no matter how serious things got, I could always find something humorous in them. Later in my twenties, I discovered Italo Calvino and struggled with his writings, too young for them, I expect because recently I read his "[If on a winter's night a traveler . . .](#)" and enjoyed it immensely, especially its pataphysical aspects of imaginary solutions, even though I had not consciously encountered the concepts and techniques of 'Pataphysics until I read Hugill's book a year or so later. Also recently I viewed the movie, "Idiocracy" and it blew me away with its imaginary (i.e. pataphysical) solutions to the problems of the world. It hinted at such solutions by simply depicting the ultimate end of the path that we are currently embarked upon where our world will be run by such idiots that an average person of today, projected a hundred years into future, would be deemed the smartest man in the world. People will be sprinkling Gator-Aid on plants ("What? Use water? That's for the toilet!") and the huge warehouse stores will get immense ("BBQ Sauce? Aisle G at Mile 17."), just to name a few quirks of the future path we're heading upon.

Before we step off onto one of M. C. Escher's pataphysical staircases and depart this review, may I remind you that there are no rules for 'Pataphysics, only exceptions; rightly understood, a "rule" is an exception to an exception. Those of you who take exception to anything the author or I have written in this review should follow that rule.

In closing, I hope by now you may have acquired a nascent sense of humor (or increased one already present) and that you will know how to respond if someone ever asks you, "How can you take pataphysics seriously?" The answer as proposed by the author is simple, elegant, and easy to remember, unless you inflexibly answer a question by asking a question. Do you? If you immediately responded to my "Do you?"



" by saying, "Well, do *you*?" then you will know to respond to the question, "How *can* you take pataphysics seriously?" with the question, "How can you *not* take pataphysics seriously?"

----- *Footnotes* -----

**Footnote 1.**

Note the number of "-ists" in the list of occupations that I have life-surfed through, up until now.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

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**Footnote 2.**

Pronounced *No ensie ensie*, it spells *Nonsense* and demonstrates that punctuation and spacing matters.

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**Footnote 3.**

It would take an essay the size of this review to delineate how all the important and fun things in life occur along the midline of our bodies, so I provide it as an unanswered question, which you may take as homework to be explored in the privacy of your bedroom at home with a consenting adult companion.

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**Footnote 4.**

A complete explication of how the failure to understand the Be Spontaneous Paradox destroys relationships and produces unintended consequences would require a text as long as the "Joy of Sex" book. That failure leads to falling out of love ("Tell me you love me."), impotence ("Get it up, Big Boy!"), insomnia ("Go to sleep now, Junior."), and many other ingenious failure ploys.

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**Footnote 5.**

[What is the power of an unanswered question?](#) is one of my basic rules and nowhere have I ever found a place so devoted to creating them in so many ways.

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