A Quite Interesting Book

THE BOOK OF GENERAL IGNORANCE

John Lloyd and John Mitchinson

faber and faber
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INTRODUCTION | John Lloyd

The company behind BBC2’s QI, the website qi.com and the book you hold in your hand was formed a decade ago.

The world was a very different place then. The dotcom boom had barely begun and the Twin Towers were still standing, there were no British or American troops dying in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the banks were as sturdy as the Bank of England.

But one aspect of the world hasn’t changed much. The moneybags who run the culture still seem to think we’re all a bit thick. Television, magazines and newspapers pump out stuff that interests practically no one and, as a result, they’re all going steadily broke. Man cannot live by celebrity dancing alone.

The principle behind QI is that everything is interesting if looked at closely enough, for long enough, or from the right angle. Along with that goes the idea that if a thing cannot be explained to an intelligent twelve-year-old, then it is either wrong or not very well explained. It’s our view that the people who watch QI are just as intelligent as the people who make it – even if they don’t know as much (well, who does?) as the National Treasure who chairs it. And all of us (host, production team, panellists, studio audience, elves) believe that it’s perfectly possible to be funny without also being nasty.
As a result of these simple theories, the programme has been a runaway success on BBC2, where it consistently beats much better-publicised, supposedly ‘trendier’ programmes in the ratings, and is watched by more young people than anything else on the channel. It is by far the most popular programme on BBC4 (and has been since the channel’s launch) and consistently tops the ratings on the thrusting commercial outfit Dave. In 2009, QI is transferring to BBC1. Stephen Fry, we regret to announce, will not be appearing in a leotard.

This edition contains an index, fifty extra questions, a smattering of new cartoons by the talented Mr Bingo, and an appendix detailing all the editions of the TV show made to date. In deference to the transfer of QI to BBC1, it also includes some sixty excerpts from the programme itself, to give newcomers a sense of how the raw information of QI research is smelted into jokes.

We hope you will enjoy reading it as much as we enjoyed researching and writing it. You will not be alone. The original edition of The Book of General Ignorance has been translated into twenty-nine languages – not just French, German, Spanish and Chinese, but Vietnamese, Turkish, Cambodian, Serbian and Finnish. It was a best-seller in the New York Times, and is the fourth best-selling book on Amazon (after two Harry Potter books and The Dangerous Book for Boys) since that company first went online in 1995. In the month of December 2006, in fact, it was the bestselling book in the world on Amazon, narrowly beating something called The Audacity of Hope by an up-and-coming American senator called Barack Obama.

We, too, believe fervently in the possibility of change.
THE BOOK
OF
GENERAL IGNORANCE

By ignorance the truth is known.

Henry Suso (1300–65), The Little Book of Truth
How many wives did Henry VIII have?

We make it two.

Or four if you’re a Catholic.

Henry’s fourth marriage to Anne of Cleves was annulled. This is very different from divorce. Legally, it means the marriage never took place.

There were two grounds for the annulment. Anne and Henry never consummated the marriage; that is, they never had intercourse. Refusal or inability to consummate a marriage is still grounds for annulment today.

In addition, Anne was already betrothed to Francis, Duke of Lorraine when she married Henry. At that time, the formal act of betrothal was a legal bar to marrying someone else.

All parties agreed no legal marriage had taken place. So that leaves five.

The Pope declared Henry’s second marriage to Anne Boleyn illegal, because the King was still married to his first wife, Catherine of Aragon.

Henry, as head of the new Church of England, declared in turn that his first marriage was invalid on the legal ground that a man could not sleep with his brother’s widow. The King cited the Old Testament, which he claimed as ‘God’s Law’, whether the Pope liked it or not.

Depending on whether you believe the Pope or the King, this brings it down to either four or three marriages.

Henry annulled his marriage to Anne Boleyn just before he had her executed for adultery. This was somewhat illogical: if the marriage had never existed, Anne could hardly be accused of betraying it.

He did the same with his fifth wife, Catherine Howard. All the evidence suggests she was unfaithful to him before and during their marriage. This time, Henry passed a special act
making it treasonable for a queen to commit adultery. Once again, he also had the marriage annulled.

So that makes four annulments, and only two incontestably legal marriages.

Apart from Henry’s last wife, Catherine Parr (who outlived him), the lady who got off lightest was Anne of Cleves. After their annulment, the King showered her with gifts and the official title of ‘beloved sister’. She visited court often, swapping cooks, recipes, and household gadgets with the man who had never been her husband.

JEREMY CLARKSON  He had major, major commitment problems, didn’t he? I imagine, every time, he said, ‘Oh, it’s not you. It’s me.’ And then, I suppose, they had a trial separation, which involved a brief trial and a very major separation!

How many nostrils have you got?

Four. Two you can see; two you can’t.

This discovery came from observing how fish breathe. Fish get their oxygen from water. Most of them have two pairs of nostrils, a forward-facing set for letting water in and a pair of ‘exhaust pipes’ for letting it out again.

The question is, if humans evolved from fishes, where did the other pair of nostrils go?

The answer is that they migrated back inside the head to become internal nostrils called choannae – Greek for ‘funnels’. These connect to the throat and are what allow us to breathe through our noses.

To do this they somehow had to work their way back
through the teeth. This sounds unlikely but scientists in China and Sweden have recently found a fish called *Kenichthys campbelli* — a 395-million-year-old fossil — that shows this process at its half-way stage. The fish has two nostril-like holes between its front teeth.

*Kenichthys campbelli* is a direct ancestor of land animals, able to breathe in both air and water. One set of nostrils allowed it to lie in the shallows and eat while the other poked out of the water a bit like a crocodile’s.

Similar gaps between the teeth can also be seen at an early stage of the human embryo. When they fail to join up, the result is a cleft palate. So one ancient fish explains two ancient human mysteries.

The most recent research on noses, incidentally, shows that we use each of our two external nostrils to detect different smells, breathing different amounts of air into each to create a kind of nasal stereo.

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**Where is the driest place on earth?**

Antarctica. Parts of the continent have seen no rain for two million years.

A desert is technically defined as a place that receives less than 254 mm (10 inches) of rain a year.

The Sahara gets just 25 mm (1 inch) of rain a year.

Antarctica’s average annual rainfall is about the same, but 2 per cent of it, known as the Dry Valleys, is free of ice and snow and it never rains there at all.

The next-driest place in the world is the Atacama Desert in Chile. In some areas, no rain has fallen there for 400 years and
its average annual rainfall is a tiny 0.1 mm (0.004 inches). Taken as a whole, this makes it the world’s driest desert, 250 times as dry as the Sahara.

As well as the driest place on earth, Antarctica can also claim to be the wettest and the windiest. Seventy per cent of the world’s fresh water is found there in the form of ice, and its wind speeds are the fastest ever recorded.

The unique conditions in the Dry Valleys of Antarctica are caused by so-called katabatic winds (from the Greek word for ‘going down’). These occur when cold, dense air is pulled downhill simply by the force of gravity. The winds can reach speeds of 320 kph (200 mph) evaporating all moisture – water, ice and snow – in the process.

Though Antarctica is a desert, these completely dry parts of it are called, somewhat ironically, oases. They are so similar to conditions on Mars that NASA used them to test the Viking mission.

**STEPHEN** The Dry Valleys, in Antarctica, are free from ice and snow, and haven’t seen rain for two million years. So it’s a long way clear of its closest contender, the Atacama, parts of which haven’t recorded rain for a mere 400 years. The Sahara is lush by comparison.

**ALAN** Lush.

**STEPHEN** ‘Lush’ is often shouted at you, I know. I’m going to shout it again.
Where are you most likely to get caught in a hailstorm?

The Western Highlands of Kenya in Africa.

In terms of annual downpour, Kericho in Kenya has more hail than anywhere else on earth, since it falls on average 132 days each year. By comparison, the UK averages only fifteen hail-days in a year and the worst affected area in the US, the eastern Rockies, experiences an average of forty-five hail-days a year.

What causes the abundance of hail is not fully understood. Kericho is the home of Kenya’s tea plantations, and a 1978 study showed that organic litter from the tea plants gets stirred into the atmosphere, where it acts as a nucleus around which hailstones can grow.

Another theory is that the high altitude of the region could be to blame, as the shape of the terrain causes a large uplift of warm air which quickly condenses. This, and the reduced distance between the freezing level (about 3 miles up) and the ground, reduces the chance of hailstones melting.

The average hailstone is about quarter of an inch across, but they can grow large enough to dent cars, shatter greenhouses and even injure people.

The largest single hailstone ever recorded in the United States was 7 inches in diameter, 18.75 inches in circumference, and weighed in at just under a pound. It fell into the back yard of a house in Aurora, Nebraska, in June 2003. This is off the end of the official US scale for describing hailstones which starts at ‘pea’ and rises progressively through ‘mothball’, ‘walnut’ and ‘tea-cup’ to ‘softball’. The Aurora hailstone was the size of a small melon and would have hit the ground at 100 mph.

Hail costs the US a billion dollars each year in damage to property and crops. A hailstorm that struck Munich, Germany,
in July 1984 caused an estimated billion dollars’ worth of damage to trees, buildings and motor vehicles in a single afternoon. Trees were stripped of their bark and whole fields of crops were destroyed. Over 70,000 buildings and 250,000 cars were damaged and more than 400 people were injured.

However, the world’s worst hailstorm occurred in the Gopalanj district of Bangladesh on 14 April 1986. Some of the hailstones weighed over two pounds and at least ninety-two people were killed.

Where is the highest mountain?

It’s on Mars.

The giant volcano Mount Olympus – or *Olympus Mons* in Latin – is the highest mountain in the solar system and in the known universe.

At 22 km high (14 miles) and 624 km (388 miles) across, it is almost three times the height of Mount Everest and so wide that its base would cover Arizona, or the whole of the area of the British Isles. The crater on the top is around 72 km (45 miles) wide and over 3 km (nearly 2 miles) deep, easily big enough to swallow London.

Mons Olympus doesn’t conform to most people’s idea of a mountain. It is flat-topped – like a vast plateau in a sea drained of water – and its sides aren’t even steep. Their slight incline of between one and three degrees means you wouldn’t even break sweat if you climbed it.

We traditionally measure mountains by their height. If we measured them by their size, it would be meaningless to isolate one mountain in a range from the rest. That being so, Mount Everest would dwarf Olympus Mons. It is part of the
gigantic Himalaya–Karakoram–Hindu-Kush–Pamir range which is nearly 2,400 km (1,500 miles) long.

What’s the name of the tallest mountain in the world?

Mauna Kea, the highest point on the island of Hawaii.

The inactive volcano is a modest 4,206 m (13,799 feet) above sea level, but when measured from the seabed to its summit, it is 10,200 m (33,465 feet) high – about three-quarters of a mile taller than Mount Everest.

As far as mountains are concerned, the current convention is that ‘highest’ means measured from sea level to summit; ‘tallest’ means measured from the bottom of the mountain to the top.

So, while Mount Everest, at 8,848 m (29,029 feet) is the highest mountain in the world, it is not the tallest.

Measuring mountains is trickier than it looks. It’s easy enough to see where the top is, but where exactly is the ‘bottom’ of a mountain?

For example, some argue that Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania – at 5,895 m (19,340 feet) – is taller than Everest because it rises straight out of the African plain, whereas Everest is merely one of many peaks topping the enormous base of the Himalayas, shared by the world’s next thirteen highest mountains.

Others claim that the most logical measure ought to be the distance of a mountain’s peak from the centre of the Earth.

Because the Earth is a flattened rather than a perfect sphere, the equator is about 21 km (13 miles) further from the centre of the Earth than the poles.
This is good news for the reputation of those mountains that are very close to the equator – like Mount Chimborazo in the Andes – but it also means accepting that even the beaches in Ecuador are ‘higher’ than the Himalayas.

Though massive, the Himalayas are surprisingly young. When they were formed, the dinosaurs had been dead for 25 million years.

In Nepal, Everest is known as Chomolungma – ‘Mother of the Universe’. In Tibet, it is called Sagamartha – ‘Forehead of the Sky’. Like any healthy youngster, it is still growing – at the not very exciting rate of 4 mm (less than a quarter of an inch) a year.

ALAN Do you know that one in eight of people who’ve tried to climb Everest die?

PHILL So, when you’re putting your party together to go up Everest, just . . . If there’s seven of you, just get one really . . . someone you don’t like. Preferably with asthma . . . ‘Lead on, Wheezy!’

What’s the largest living thing?

It’s a mushroom.

And it’s not even a particularly rare one. You’ve probably got the honey fungus (Armillaria ostoyae) in your garden, growing on a dead tree-stump.

For your sake, let’s hope it doesn’t reach the size of the largest recorded specimen, in Malheur National Forest in Oregon. It covers 890 hectares (2,200 acres) and is between 2,000 and 8,000 years old. Most of it is underground in the form of a massive mat of tentacle-like white mycelia (the mush-
room’s equivalent of roots). These spread along tree roots, killing the trees and peeping up through the soil occasionally as innocent-looking clumps of honey mushrooms.

The giant honey fungus of Oregon was initially thought to grow in separate clusters throughout the forest, but researchers have now confirmed it is the world’s single biggest organism, connected under the soil.

**STEPHEN**  What, or which, is the largest living thing on earth?

**BILL**  France.

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**What’s the biggest thing a blue whale can swallow?**

- a) A very large mushroom
- b) A small family car
- c) A grapefruit
- d) A sailor

A grapefruit.

Quite interestingly, a blue whale’s throat is almost exactly the same diameter as its belly button (which is about the size of a side plate), but a little smaller than its eardrum (which is more the size of a dinner plate).

For eight months of the year, blue whales eat virtually nothing, but during the summer they feed almost continuously, scooping up three tons of food a day. As you may remember from biology lessons, their diet consists of tiny, pink, shrimp-like crustaceans called krill, which slip down a treat. Krill come conveniently served in huge swarms that can weigh over 100,000 tons.
The word krill is Norwegian. It comes from the Dutch word *kriel*, meaning ‘small fry’ but now also used to mean both pygmies and ‘small potatoes’. Krill sticks have been marketed with reasonable success in Chile but krill mince was a bit of a disaster in Russia, Poland and South Africa owing to dangerously high levels of fluoride. It came from the krill’s shells which were too small to pick off individually before mincing.

The narrow gauge of a blue whale’s throat means it couldn’t have swallowed Jonah. The only whale with a throat wide enough to swallow a person whole is the sperm whale and, once inside, the intense acidity of the sperm whale’s stomach juices would make survival impossible. The celebrated case of the ‘Modern Jonah’ in 1891, in which James Bartley claimed to have been swallowed by a sperm whale and rescued by his crew mates fifteen hours later, has been nailed as a fraud.

Aside from its throat, everything else about the blue whale is big. At 32 m (105 feet) in length, it is the largest creature that has ever lived – three times the size of the biggest dinosaur and equivalent in weight to 2,700 people. Its tongue weighs more than an elephant; its heart is the size of a family car; its stomach can hold more than a ton of food. It also makes the loudest noise of any individual animal: a low frequency ‘hum’ that can be detected by other whales over 16,000 km (10,000 miles) away.

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**STEPHEN** Yes? Now there’s an interesting thing, their genitalia.

Give me the length of a blue whale’s penis.

**CLIVE** ‘Give me the length of a blue whale’s penis?’

**STEPHEN** I know what I’m saying! Give it to me now!
Which bird lays the smallest egg for its size?

The ostrich.

Although it is the largest single cell in nature, an ostrich egg is less than 1½ per cent of the weight of the mother. A wren’s egg, by comparison, is 13 per cent of its weight.

The largest egg in comparison with the size of the bird is that of the Little Spotted kiwi. Its egg accounts for 26 per cent of its own weight: the equivalent of a woman giving birth to a six-year-old child.

An ostrich egg weighs as much as twenty-four hen’s eggs; to soft-boil one takes forty-five minutes. Queen Victoria tucked into one for breakfast and declared it among the best meals she had ever eaten.

The largest egg laid by any animal – including the dinosaurs – belonged to the elephant bird of Madagascar, which became extinct in 1700. It was ten times the size of an ostrich egg, nine litres in volume and the equivalent of 180 chicken’s eggs.

The elephant bird (*Aepyornis maximus*) is thought to be the basis for the legend of the fierce *roc* that Sinbad battles in the *Arabian Nights*.

How long can a chicken live without its head?

About two years.

On 10 September 1945, a plump young cockerel in Fruita, Colorado, had his head chopped off and lived. Incredibly, the axe had missed the jugular vein and left enough of the brain stem attached to the neck for him to survive, even thrive.
Mike, as he was known, became a national celebrity, touring the country and featuring in *Time* and *Life* magazines. His owner, Lloyd Olsen, charged twenty-five cents for a chance to meet ‘Mike the Headless Wonder Chicken’ in sideshows across the USA. Mike would appear complete with a dried chicken’s head purporting to be his own – in fact, the Olsens’ cat had made off with the original. At the height of his fame, Mike was making $4,500 a month, and was valued at $10,000. His success resulted in a wave of copycat chicken beheadings, though none of the unfortunate victims lived for more than a day or two.

Mike was fed and watered using an eyedropper. In the two years after he lost his head, he put on nearly six pounds and spent his time happily preening and ‘pecking’ for food with his neck. One person who knew Mike well commented: ‘He was a big fat chicken who didn’t know he didn’t have a head.’

Tragedy struck one night in a motel room in Phoenix, Arizona. Mike started to choke and Lloyd Olsen, to his horror, realised he’d left the eyedropper at the previous day’s show. Unable to clear his airways, Mike choked to death.

Mike remains a cult figure in Colorado and, every May since 1999, Fruita has marked his passing with a ‘Mike the Headless Chicken’ Day.

What has a three-second memory?

Not a goldfish, for starters.

Despite its status as a proverbial fact, a goldfish’s memory isn’t a few seconds long.

Research by the School of Psychology at the University of Plymouth in 2003 demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt
that goldfish have a memory-span of at least three months and
can distinguish between different shapes, colours and sounds.
They were trained to push a lever to earn a food reward; when
the lever was fixed to work only for an hour a day, the fish
soon learned to activate it at the correct time. A number of
similar studies have shown that farmed fish can easily be
trained to feed at particular times and places in response to an
audible signal.

Goldfish don’t swim into the side of the bowl, not because
they can see it, but because they are using a pressure-sensing
system called the lateral line. Certain species of blind cave fish
are able to navigate perfectly well in their lightless environ-
ment by using their lateral line system alone.

While we’re dealing with goldfish myths, a pregnant gold-
fish isn’t, hasn’t and can’t be called a ‘twit’. Goldfish don’t get
pregnant: they lay eggs that the males fertilise in the water.

In principle, there could be a word for a female fish with egg
development — such as ‘twit’, ‘twat’ or ‘twerp’ — but none is
listed in any proper dictionary.

STEPHEN Well, there is this fallacy that goldfish have a three-
second memory —

ALAN It’s not a fallacy!

STEPHEN It is a fallacy. They’ve done tests.

ALAN Oh, they haven’t.

STEPHEN They have. A man from Plymouth University did a
wonderful test —

ALAN There isn’t a Plymouth University; that’s made up.

SEAN It’s just a sweet shop with a copy of The Times in it.