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The Importance of Being Trivial

Mark Mason

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The Importance of Being Trivial

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Mark Mason



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BOOKS

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But the greatest thanks must go, as they always do, to Jo. I hope that one day my parallel parking might be worthy of her.

Introduction

The look or the noise. There's always either the look or the noise.

The party's going well. You're on your second or third drink, you've established how you both know James, you're familiar enough with the other person's job not to sound a complete fool. Then they mention a works outing to the dogs.

You swap stories of bets made, money lost, how there really isn't form in greyhounds like there is in horses. It's all sounding fine . . . but you know what's bubbling up. You try to contain it, keep it to yourself, smile and nod as the other person relates how much they won by sticking to trap three. It's not good, though. That fatal two-second gap arises. You find yourself looking them in the eye, opening your mouth . . . *Stop, even now it's not too late to STOP!* . . . and saying, all casual-like, 'Did you know the greyhound is the second-fastest-accelerating animal on the planet?'

That's when you get the look or the noise. It's the noise you want: the intake of breath, hold for a count of two, the whoosh as the air's expelled, possibly in the form of 'Wow' or 'Really?' The look is what you don't want: the marginal hardening of the stare, eyes glazing in discomfort, or even fear. Confusion registering in every feature, a face that says, 'But I thought this person was normal?'

Whichever it is, you plough on. 'Have a guess,' you say, either to increase their surprise or combat their disapproval, 'how many seconds a greyhound takes to go from nought to forty-five miles an hour?' If they made the noise, they'll think about it seriously, relish the challenge, try to get it right. They will give (in my experience) an answer somewhere between three and eight seconds. You hit them with the real answer – one second – and they do the noise again, only this time louder. If they gave you the look, though . . . This is where it finally goes wrong. They give you another look, this time one of real panic, awkwardness verging on disgust, as though you've just done something unpleasant to the carpet. They mumble an excuse, then rush to warn James that a nutter has gatecrashed his party.

Trivia, they call it. And depending on whether or not 'they' like it, other words are never very far away. 'Useless', for instance, applied nominally to the information itself, though with a not-very-well-hidden implication that the person spouting the information is himself without use, or indeed worth. 'Fascinating' is another. This gets used by a different group of people – those spouting the trivia in the first place. It seems the world is divided into two camps: the camp which loves the fact that a jiffy is the name given in computing to a hundredth of a second, and the camp which doesn't.

The other word that's never very far away – for obvious linguistic reasons – is 'trivial'. But it's more than the addition of a single letter. It's the question at the heart of all this: is trivia trivial? A certain successful board game has clouded the issue, or rather skewed the answer towards yes. But it's more important than plastic cheeses and competitive uncles. Trivia, I'm convinced, has to say something about us, tell us at least a little bit about who we are.

'Of what a strange nature is knowledge!' Mary Shelley has the monster say in *Frankenstein*. 'It clings to the mind, when it has once seized on it, like a lichen on the rock.' Among the lichen clinging to my mind are:

- The stretch of road between the Strand and the Savoy hotel is the only public highway in Britain ~~where you're legally obliged to drive on the right.~~
- Pete Conrad was the first man to fall over on the moon.
- An HB pencil will draw a line 35 miles long.
- Countries at the United Nations are seated alphabetically, Afghanistan coming first, Zimbabwe last.
- John Lennon's first girlfriend was called Thelma Pickles.
- Hull City is the only one of the top 92 football clubs in England whose name contains no letters you can colour in.

For years I thought it was just me. Or at least just me and my friends. Happily we gurgled away, telling each other that the S in Harry S Truman didn't stand for anything,¹ that Sting wrote *Every Breath You Take* at the same desk where Ian Fleming sat to write the Bond novels, that dolphins have more teeth than any other mammal. For the currency of our discourse to be this weird coinage called trivia didn't seem particularly significant. We just got on with it, relishing the facts we swapped, the facts that had slipped down the back of life's sofa.

1. His parents disagreed over a middle name, but both their preferences began with S, so they settled on a middle initial.

Then, a few years ago, things changed. A strange little book called *Schott's Original Miscellany* was published, and proceeded to fly off the shelves. BBC2 started broadcasting a programme called *QI*, which has spawned a website, a club and the bestselling *The Book of General Ignorance*. Now, from *The Pedant's Revolt* through *The Penguin Book of Facts* to *Does Anything Eat Wasps?*, the nation's bookshops are full of trivia. Whole radio shows are devoted to it. The Internet Movie Database has a trivia category for each film. Never before have tiny facts held such a huge fascination.

And so those of us who were there all along ask: why? Those who would dismiss trivia mutter the usual charges ('useless . . . waste of time . . . pointless information'), presumably as they read Proust while waiting for Kissinger to pick up. But millions of trivia hounds can't be wrong. Or at least, if they are, it says something about them that they go *on* being wrong. 'Don't sweat the small stuff,' they always say. I never got that. The small stuff is where life's *at*. Trivia keeps me, and lots like me, firmly in its grip. Like moths we flutter at its flame, like junkies we suck on its pipe. It provides the background music to our lives, peppering our conversation, attracting our gaze whenever it appears on a page, a TV, a computer screen. Trivia is *there*, it is a part, however small or large, of who and what we are. To write all this off with a snarled 'trivial' just doesn't do it justice. It may not be the most important thing in our lives, but it is *something* in our lives.

I resolved to find out what. As many people in the first week of January will tell you, though, making a resolution and knowing how to carry it out are two different things. Initially my mind was pulled in several directions, question upon question clamouring for its attention, thoughts piling up like sheep in a too small pen. Most of them had never occurred to me before. The notion, for instance, that as surprising as the trivia we do know can be the trivia we don't. George W. Bush spends two full terms as US President, a position which guarantees you a certain degree of attention at the best of times but which he has occupied in such a way as to catapult his name into virtually every news bulletin for nigh on a decade – and yet how many people know what the W stands for?² Starbucks

embarks on a programme of global domination that makes *War of the Worlds* look restrained – and yet how many people, as they queue for their tenth grande latte of the week, know where the name Starbucks comes from? Curious what we don't find curious.

2. No, it's not that.

Then the key appeared. It concerned the *quality* of facts. All day every day my brain is presented with facts. Newspapers, the net, the books I read, the people I talk to . . . all are giving me facts. This has been happening since shortly after I was born, and will carry on until the day I die. These facts (What do they number? Tens of thousands? Hundreds? Millions?) are all taken in, then some are remembered while others are not. If we discount what might be called the important stuff – what my name is, where I live, what the right-hand pedal in a car does – we're left with what's usually called trivia: the name of John Lennon's first girlfriend, how long the line drawn by an HB pencil would be . . . What makes me remember a piece of trivia – or, put another way, what attracts me to it – is its quality as a fact, how good I find it. That the greyhound is the second-fastest-accelerating animal on the planet (beaten only by the cheetah) I find a very good fact. That the sheep is the fifty-ninth I do not.³ Some facts are, to be brutal about it, simply better than other facts.

3. Not least because I've just made it up for the purposes of this example. But you take the point.

From which it follows that there must be one fact which is better than all the others. Or at least a group of facts tying for first place, for the hallowed title Best Fact. But could you take this one step further? Could there be a fact that was not only the best, but was actually perfect? Could there be a fact so fascinating, so beautiful, so compelling that it flawlessly embodied the very notion of trivia? This was the question that would form the theme of my journey.

I was in search of the perfect fact.

A note on TOPOTs

Throughout this book you will find TOPOTs: Tangentially Occurring Pieces of Trivia. None of these have been specially researched, or even checked; they are all facts already known to me. This is not intended to impress – indeed I'm aware that for many it will have precisely the opposite effect. The inclusion of these facts is simply to illustrate the amount and range of the trivia that can be held in a single human brain.

Better not look down

It starts, as so many things do, in a pub.

My chosen terrain is vast and yet curiously intangible. I need an entry point, a platform nine and three quarters, a wardrobe not into Narnia but into Trivia. What better place than the event in which trivia most clearly crystallises itself: the pub quiz?

My partner for this journey is the *Spectator's* pop critic Marcus Berkmann. I first heard of him several years ago, when we shared an editor. One day the editor handed me a copy of a village cricket memoir called *Rain Men*, saying it was the book he was most proud of publishing, ever. (This the week after my first novel came out. Thanks, Richard.) He was right, though. The book is a gem, and ever since we've been saying how Marcus and I really should get together for a drink. What prompts me into action now is that another of Marcus's books is called *A Matter of Facts*, and concerns quizzes. Marcus loves quizzes. Every Tuesday night he attends, and often runs, the Prince of Wales quiz, generally recognised as north London's toughest. He has appeared on Radio Four's *Masterteam* (several times), and on Channel Four's *Fifteen To One* (several times). He runs quizzes for literary festivals, for corporate clients . . . I can think of no better man with whom to sit in a pub in Muswell Hill trying to guess how many Shakespeare plays are in print.¹

1. 38. We guessed 37. Damn.

We arrange to do a quiz, but not at the Prince of Wales; Marcus says he 'd be too distracted there. I'm a bit worried as the evening approaches. For a start there's the fear that Marcus will be nothing like the man you'd imagine from *Rain Men* – funny, self-deprecating, at ease with a pint of lager and discussion about whether Matt Prior will be dropped by England. This fear disappears within seconds of our greeting each other, a greeting I initiate. Marcus, as he will happily admit later, is quite shy, and avoids asking me if I'm Mark. I know he's Marcus because, as his email predicted, he's the only person there reading a book. It was a confident prediction – he knows the pub. Soon we're two blokes a few years either side of forty (Marcus has seniority), chatting away about that day's play in the Test match. But my other worry still lurks: Marcus will know more than me. My woeful showing when it comes to the actual quiz will probably disgust him, lose me his respect. This guy writes for the *Spectator*, after all.

For now, though, we talk trivia. Starting, for the sake of somewhere to start, with what the word actually means. I know its derivation was given in *A Matter of Facts*, and ask Marcus to reprise it. He takes a sip of his pint, obviously preparing for the explanation.

'Erm . . .' he says. Another sip. 'Er . . .' He puts down the glass. 'I can't remember?'

This is encouraging. Perhaps the quiz won't be so daunting after all.

'Wasn't it something to do with the seven university subjects?' I prompt.

'Oh, that's it, yeah.' We gradually piece it together from memory: medieval universities taught seven

'artes liberales', three of which – grammar, rhetoric and logic, known as the 'arte triviale' or 'trivium' – were seen as less challenging, a sort of media studies for the fifteenth century.² Going further back, the actual Latin derivation is *tri*, meaning three, and *via*, meaning road: 'where three roads meet', or the street corner. The adjective *trivialis* meant 'commonplace or vulgar'. The English 'trivial' came to mean 'of little importance or significance'. Lop off the l and you find yourself in a pub in Muswell Hill trying to guess how many Shakespeare plays are in print. But could you say that Shakespeare was of little importance?

2. The four more difficult subjects, the 'quadrivium', were arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy.

Having sorted the dictionary definition, I ask Marcus how *he* would characterise trivia.

'I'd say it's those things that stick in your head when other more important things have gone. For instance, I spent three years in the late seventies and early eighties doing a maths degree. Now I can remember virtually nothing about it. But the other day, when I walked past the cricket pitch in Highgate Woods with my five-year-old son and he asked me if I'd ever played there, I knew that I had. Even though it was twenty years ago, I remembered that my friend Stephen forgot to bring his box, so I went out to bat with a scrunched-up Skol can stuffed down his pants. Note how I remembered it was a *Skol* can. I also remembered that he got his highest-ever score – fourteen?'

By now it's time for my round. We're drinking Carlsberg, as the pub, for some strange reason, doesn't serve strong lagers. (Actually, given the number of rounds in the quiz and the fact that Marcus and I will continue discussing trivia – and cricket – long after the quiz has ended, this is probably a good thing.) Seeing the logo on the pump reminds me of a great fact. Carrying the drinks back, I debate whether to tell Marcus. Will trivia about a brand of lager seem *too* trivial? Then I remember this is the man who's just recalled a Skol can from two decades ago.

'Pint of Carlsberg,' I say, handing it over. 'By the way, do you know the thing about Carlsberg Special Brew?'

'No,' says Marcus. 'What thing?'

'It was invented for Winston Churchill?'

The glass stops an inch from his mouth, which now hangs open in amazement. 'No?'

'Carlsberg brewed it as a thank you from Denmark for Britain's help in the war. Churchill had said no lager was strong enough for him. Norway gives us a Christmas tree for Trafalgar Square every year, Denmark gives us a brand of lager that's usually drunk in shop doorways?'

'That's amazing?'

It's the reaction that truly great trivia always produces. The astonishment, the wonder, the pause to savour.

'That's going straight in my next quiz,' he says. "'For which British Prime Minister—?'

We're interrupted by a tap on the microphone. 'All right, ladies and gentlemen. Round one?'

Oh God. This is it. No sooner have I earned credibility by knowing one fact than I'm going to lose it by not knowing any others. But it transpires that this worry is just as unfounded as my first. Marcus knows pretty well the same amount of stuff as I do. We both know who had an eighties number one with 'I Owe You Nothing' (Bros); we're both uncertain of our guess as to the location of Rockefeller University (New York, which turns out to be right) and both certain of our guess as to whether it was six, 26 or 60 cars that started the US Grand Prix in 2005. (Twenty-six, which turns out to be wrong. It was six. Argument over tyres, apparently.) Marcus knows that the country represented at tennis by Elena Baltacha is Great Britain, while I provide our guess that the pop singer who played Adrian's mother in *The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole* was Lulu. It was.

Between rounds, I delicately broach the subject of how much Marcus knows. 'I suppose you must guess questions you've heard before' I ask. 'What with having done so many quizzes in the past?'

'Not really,' he says. 'I don't view quizzes like that. I have a real prejudice, for instance, against numerical questions. Like that Shakespeare one just now. No one's going to know it, so you're just guessing, and even if you guess right it's no real triumph. A really good question should contain the clue to its own answer. You should be able to work it out. Like that Churchill fact. If I ask, "For which British Prime Minister was Carlsberg Special Brew invented?" people will be able to go through the Prime Ministers, working out which ones liked strong drink, how long Special Brew has been around . . . Eventually you'll get to Churchill?'

I'm feeling quite pleased with myself at this point.

'The perfect question,' continues Marcus, 'is one where no one knows it, but they argue about it for ten minutes, and work their way towards an answer, and then when you read out the right answer everyone goes "Yes."'

'So you never sit down to learn facts, just because they might come up in a quiz?'

Marcus nearly chokes on his beer. 'That is somewhere I *never* want to go. I've got this code with my friends Chris and Sally- Ann: "Barry From Leeds". One of the times we did *Masterteam* we played a side from Leeds. Barry had these ledgers full of facts. He'd sit there reading them before every recording. It was sad. Very sad?'

I'm reminded of the Amazon reviews for *Schott's Original Miscellany*. One of the first books to spark off trivia's noughties renaissance, *Schott's* was a beautiful (in every sense of the word) collection of trivia, ranging from the odds on poker hands to the specifications of Noah's ark. Utterly pointless, utterly brilliant. Most of the reviews are raves, five-out-of-five jobs, citing facts from the book as evidence of its genius. The fact, for instance, that three of the first five US Presidents died on the same date.³ Only one review is a stinker. It's from 'A Quiz Fanatic' – his/her chosen name – complaining that *Schott's* is no use in preparing for quizzes. You might as well complain that an orchid is no use in changing a car tyre.

3. Bizarre enough in itself. The fact that that date was 4 July is uberbizarre.

Marcus clearly relishes setting quizzes as much as – perhaps even more than – taking part in them. This is something I can relate to. A couple of years ago, owing to what can only have been an administrative error, I was given a weekly one-hour programme on BBC Radio Suffolk.⁴ Asked what

they wanted me to do, they said 'whatever you like'. The slot was three o'clock on a Sunday afternoon. Pubs were likely to be full. A quiz it was: two pubs, against each other, on the phone (local radio doesn't run to satellite links). Setting the questions became a weekly treat, a chance to put all my trivia to use for once. 'Which crucial role in the history of English football,' for instance, 'was played by Tofic Bakramhov?' You could hear the regulars at the Bear and Bells trying to work it out: 'English football? With a name like that? He can't have been English. What sort of name is it? East European? Russian? Hang on, Russian . . . Russian . . . Was he the Russian linesman who gave the goal in the 1966 World Cup Final?' He was indeed. Two points.^{TOPOT}

4. I'd recently moved to the county from London, and was citing 'local author' credentials in a shabby attempt to plug a book.

TOPOT

Had the 1966 World Cup Final still been level at the end of extra time, it would have been decided by the toss of a coin.

Sometimes, however, working the trivia in required excessive use of the crowbar. Questions were usually in matching pairs: if one team got 'What is Sting's real name?' the other would get 'What is Adam Ant's real name?'⁵ A piece of trivia I was dying to include, all the more preeningly because I'd worked it out for myself, was that the text alert sounded by many mobile phones – three short beeps, two long, three short – is Morse code for SMS.⁶ So one pub was asked 'What's the Morse code for S?' the other 'What's the Morse code for M?' Cue smart-arse explanation from yours truly. Except, it dawned on me as I was asking the first question, everybody knows S, because of the SOS signal. No one knows M. Not even the armed services; they haven't used it in years.⁷ This was a really unfair question. What's worse, incompetence compounded my guilt: asking the second team about M, I forgot to fade down the first, so you heard their captain saying 'That's a much harder question than ours?'

5. Gordon Sumner and Stuart Goddard respectively.

6. SMS standing for Short Message Service.

7. When the French navy abandoned Morse code in 1997, the last message sent was 'Calling all. This is our last cry before our eternal silence?'

Later in the evening Marcus will mention that he compiles *Private Eye's* 'Dumb Britain' column, the stupid answers given by quiz contestants. I tell him about the team who answered my question 'Which Liverpool club became famous as the venue for many of the Beatles' early gigs?' with 'Everton.' He relates 'Name the funny men who once entertained kings and queens at court. Contestant: Lepers?'

Round two gets underway. We know which road inspired Chris Rea to write 'The Road To Hell' (the M25), we think we know which TV character had a Morris Minor called Miriam (Nurse Gladys Emmanuel in *Open All Hours* – it was actually Lovejoy), we have no idea which ball game was invented by Dr James Naismith (we guess baseball – it was basketball). Question seven – 'Which coloured day of the week was a hit for New Order?' – highlights one of the most famous pieces of pop trivia, namely that 'Blue Monday' is the best-selling 12-inch single of all time. What I don't know, but

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