



Thoughts from Linda:

Scott's Original Miscellany

by Ben Schott
2002

Merriam-Webster defines *miscellany* as “a mixture of various things.” That perfectly describes this short, entertaining book written in England in 2002 by Ben Schott.

During COVID, many of us in our family played an online version of Trivial Pursuit. As most readers would know, Trivial Pursuit is a board game focused on trivia and popular culture questions developed in 1981 by a group of Canadians. Since the game's first release, numerous themed editions have been released, and today there are 'pub games' and national competitions among teams from the nation at large and on a global basis. It has undergone a revival of sorts during and post-COVID.

Whether or not you play the board game, this book will be of interest if you are looking for a break from intense work or dense study. If you are curious and interested in minutiae, you will be thoroughly entertained by Schott's work, as it is simply filled with short pieces of trivia. Fittingly and rather interestingly, there is no *Introduction*, *Preamble*, *Author's Note*, *Table of Contents*, *Chapters*, or any organizing structure. However, fortunately, there is an *Index* at the end of the book.

Just browsing through the *Index*, you will get a glimpse of what is inside with entries such as shoelace lengths, sign language, and the seven deadly sins. Entries include the names of golf strokes, nouns of assemblage, cats and dogs of famous people such as John Lennon, the supplier of bagpipes to the Royal Household, and the labors of Hercules. Additionally, you'll find entries on dueling and dwarves, the hair colors of Miss America, and a history of the Hat Tax in England.

Here's a little piece on Palindromes: “Sotades of Maronea (275 BC) is credited as one of the early inventors of the palindrome, which means words or phrases that read the same backward as forwards. He is thought to have employed the device in many of his writings—writings that were often so obscene and defamatory that finally, having

insulted Ptolemy II, he was encased in lead and drowned.” He goes on to mention several:

Sums are not set as a test on Erasmus.

Go deliver a dare, vile dog!

Madam, in Eden, I’m Adam.

Do geese see God?

Murder for a jar of red rum.

Are we not drawn onward, we few, drawn onward to new era?

Able was I ere I saw Elba.

Ben Schott is a British writer and photographer and, in addition to this book, has authored *Schott’s Almanac Series*. He is from Northern London, the son of a neurologist father and a mother who was a nurse. He attended schools in England, including University College School in Hampstead and Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge (the 4th oldest of Cambridge’s 31 colleges.) While there, he earned a ‘double first’ in both Social and Political Science domains. Following Cambridge, he spent four months inside a large organization, J. Walter Thompson, where he worked as an account manager for the Nestle company. He soon realized that his diverse interests would not be served there and left to form his own company as a freelance photographer, specializing in portraits of politicians and celebrities. He was commissioned by a range of editorial and commercial clients, including *The Independent*, *The Sunday Times*, *Reader’s Digest*, and *Sunday Business*.

The story of how this book came to be is an interesting one. The idea first originated with some cards he made to send to friends. The cards contained booklets of what he considered vital but hard-to-find information. He typeset his first book himself and did a private printing of the first 50. With a few left over after sending these to friends, he sent one to the CEO of Bloomsbury Publishing (known thanks to publishing *Harry Potter*), Nigel Newton. He has been quoted as saying, “I was completely bowled over when it arrived on my desk. It was a work of striking originality, and it was remarkable to receive an unsolicited submission like this in the mail. I immediately passed it to one of our editors, who signed it up.”

It was described in the *Guardian* as the “publishing sensation of the year” in 2002 and, within a few weeks, emerged as the number one best seller in the U.K. The Observer’s Robert McCrum said, “Originality is like charisma. It’s hard to define, but we know it when we find it. ...this book is, without doubt, the oldest and possibly merriest title

you will come across in a long day's march through the shimmering desert of contemporary publishing."

And, in closing, and just in case you were wondering, here are words with all the vowels in alphabetical order: abstemious, abstentious, arsenious, caesious, facetious, and fracedinous.

There is much to love in this little book. He often refers to Samuel Johnson, the 18th-century English author, and he offers a quote from him on the last page:

"There is nothing, Sir, too little for so little a creature as man. It is by studying little things that we attain the great art of having as little misery and as much happiness as possible."

This book simply makes me happy. I highly recommend it to you!