

Saturday 23rd of May 2009

Twixt the cup and the lip

I have just finished reading the novel *Ulysses* by James Joyce. It was my third attempt to get through the book, and it took me 15 months. By comparison, I wrote my own novel, from start to finish, in four months. This proves it is easier to write your own novel than to read *Ulysses*.

For anyone who has not read *Ulysses* but has wondered what happens in the book, here is a plot spoiler for you: nothing. It is the story of one day in the life of Leopold Bloom.

While bugger all occurs for the first 789 pages, on page 790, Bloom makes a cup of cocoa for his guest, Stephen Dedalus. In what Joyce calls a "supererogatory mark of special hospitality", Bloom gives Dedalus a teacup, and uses an identical teacup for his own cocoa, even though he would usually take his hot drinks in a "moustache cup".

A "moustache cup"? Surely that could not be what it sounded like. I used all my skills as an investigative journalist - i.e., I Googled the words "moustache cup" - and discovered that, gloriously, it was indeed a cup with a special lip guard to save people with moustaches from the embarrassment of wearing the milky leftovers of a hot drink as a dewy adornment to their whiskers.

Regrettably, some people seem to find the idea of a moustache cup a source of juvenile humour. The previously impeccably factual (and very short) entry for "moustache cup" in Wikipedia was revised in March 2009 to include the following misleading information:

"World War II British soldiers called these cups Ham Steamers because they could be used to steam various potted meats that were available to them in the fields. This is where the saying 'Steaming the Ham'* comes from. To this day moustache cups are still outlawed in several German villages**. This is because it is a sign of masculinity in Germany to have a wet moustache***. It is also partly due to Winston Churchill's [sic] semi-autobiographical novelette entitled 'Steam the Ham and Kill the Krauts'****."

This kind of mindless vandalism will only lead to deepening misunderstandings between the clean-shaven majority of the population and the moustachioed minority. There is already enough confusion in the lives of moustache-cup enthusiasts. A collector on eBay complains, "I am so often frustrated by those other sellers and/or buyers who DO NOT know the difference between moustache cups and shaving mugs ... One can spend a great deal of time looking up an object that is not classified correctly."

It seems to me that this uncertainty will continue until the moustache cup regains its rightful place in popular culture (somewhere between the nose and the chin). For this to happen, the moustache cup probably needs a celebrity champion, a brand ambassador like those Hollywood stars who are paid to wear running shoes or drive sports cars. Sadly, however, there are few Australians in the public eye who (a) have a moustache; and (b) are not Merv Hughes. In fact, I can only think of two: Chopper Read and that comedian who, against all odds, and surely against the advice of his accountant, has set out to make a living as a Chopper Read imitator.

I didn't feel either of these would be a suitable "face of the moustache cup", and I had almost given up hope of a revival when, last week, I met an internationally famous, Australian-born entertainer who owned not one but two moustache cups!

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The first reader to guess the identity of this coif-lipped king of cool wins the drawing he made for me to illustrate how the moustache cup works.

An expression that does not exist.

** A prohibition that does not exist.

*** A mark of manhood that does not exist.

**** A literary work that does not exist.

Saturday 16th of May 2009

Good news week

Great news for readers! This month offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to meet your favourite columnist in the flesh! Yes, Andrew Bolt will be making a personal appearance at a shopping mall near you.

Actually, I have no idea where Bolty (as his friends perhaps call him) might be this month, but he is unlikely to be at a mall near you unless you live near the mall where he shops. In which case, you'll probably have seen him before.

I, on the other hand, will be speaking at the Sydney Writers' Festival this Thursday, May 21, and next Sunday, May 24, in an attempt to promote my book *Strange Country*. I have had mixed success with this strategy in the past.

Regular readers may remember I sold only one new book at Sydney's Newtown Writers' Festival, and might be interested to learn I sextupled my total to six at the Perth Writers' Festival - shifting only about 1000 volumes fewer than the former head of MI5, Stella Rimington, who was in Perth flogging her latest thriller.

My ambition for Sydney is to reach double figures, and I intend to number every copy I sign, thus providing readers with a special, limited "signed and numbered" edition. If you're at the festival, come up and say g'day- or if you are an estate agent, come up and punch me (you'll get one back). Going by my record to date, you are unlikely to have to fight your way through a crowd to reach me, unless the Real Estate Institute of NSW (which no longer accepts complaints about its members) pickets the event with a load of deliberately misleading signs.

I'm not sure how I feel about writers' festivals, which have become an increasingly large part of my life. Obviously, I approve of the concept of author worship, but I think the audience could perhaps be a bit more fawning and sycophantic, ask more questions, shorter questions, and questions that are easier to answer, and buy two copies each of my book.

On May 21, I will be chairing a discussion on "irreverence" that includes *The Chaser's* Dominic Knight. I met Dominic a couple of weeks ago and said, "I will be compering your session at the writers' festival."

"Comparing it with what?" he asked.

"Something a lot funnier," I said, thinking he was joking, but it turns out he really did misunderstand me - so listen out for hilarious wrongly-stressed-syllable mix-ups at our debate.

On May 24, I'll be appearing with my Good Weekend colleague Danny Katz, whom I have never met. This will give me a chance to clear up a certain widespread misconception. A lot of people see the photo accompanying this column and say I look short. Well, here's some more great news for you: the picture is not actual size! I am neither nine centimetres tall, nor black and white.

If every issue of the magazine were to include an actual-size photograph of me with my arms folded, it would be five pages high, and 2 1/2 pages across at the shoulders, narrowing to two pages from my waist to my feet. You would need the best part of one extra page for my head, but no additional surface area for my hair.

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If readers were to clamour for a Mark Dapin pull-out poster - and there has been no sign of this as yet - the mechanics of printing dictate that it would have to take up 10 spreads, or 20 full pages of the magazine. Among the readers who might think this was a good idea are (a) my mum, and (b) me.

For the record, I am actually 178 centimetres tall, and I hope that sets everybody's minds at rest. Danny Katz, on the other hand, really is only nine centimetres high, from the soles of his feet to the crest of his hair.

Saturday 09th of May 2009

Behind closed doors

My girlfriend Claire and I have moved house with the two kids, and it was twice as much fun as having gout, but not quite as enjoyable as dropping a 20-kilogram dumb-bell on your index finger. We no longer live in a top-floor unit. We own a real house, with stairs and everything.

Gone are the days of strata fees and special levies, and re-posting my junk mail into the neighbours' letterboxes. In their place are a feeling of general grown-upness, no TV reception, and the unimaginable joy of once again sharing a home with a variety of insects and gastropods. I have so far spotted ants (124*), cockroaches (20-plus), moths (six), slugs (one), and unidentified-but-looks-a-bit-like-the-devil (one). The moths are a particular concern because even in the unit, where they were comparatively rare, my nine-month-old daughter ate one.

The night we moved in, I fell into bed, exhausted but anaesthetised by rosé and Peroni (drunk from two separate glasses) at 11.30pm. We were eased back to consciousness at 2am by the soothing trill of a fire alarm.

The last time an alarm went off in a place where I lived, I rolled onto my good ear and went back to sleep, thereby failing to notice that somebody had firebombed Claire's car. This time, I thought I'd better get up and make sure our house wasn't on fire. But it turned out the alarm belonged to the boarding house next door, and some of its elderly residents came out to escape from the noise. Everyone was friendly, and it was a bit like a street party for fully dressed bearded men, which I had mistakenly attended clean-shaven and wearing only a pair of shorts.

After 40 minutes, the fire brigade arrived and turned off the fire alarm, and we all went back to bed. Until 6am, when the f...ing thing went off again.

Claire wanted to change the locks on our new doors, an expense I was keen to avoid because (a) it was an expense, and (b) it seemed easy to avoid. Claire was worried that there might be a lot of spare keys floating around, so I rang the former owners and asked if they had any others. They said they did, and quickly dropped them around.

Unfortunately, however, I had asked the wrong question. I should have said, "Have you got any other keys to the house that you have just sold me?"

Claire picked up one of the new keys and drove me to a meeting. We came home to find we couldn't turn the key in the lock. I rang the former owners to ask if there was a trick to opening the door. They didn't answer their mobile, but if they had done so, they would've advised that the trick was to have the right keys.

We were locked out. It was 5.45pm, and Claire had two small children in the car, both of whom needed feeding, one by the breast.

We parked near the boarding house with the incontinent fire alarm, and waited for the locksmith to come from the hardware shop.

He was, he said, in the second year of his locksmith course, and I got the uncomfortable feeling he was learning by correspondence. He told me he wasn't licensed, but I assured him I wouldn't report him. He tricked the door open in five minutes.

The next day, the former owners said they must have mistakenly given us an old key to

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alock they'd since had changed. And, because they are lovely people who just happened to hire an unlovely estate agent, they offered to pay for the locksmith, and sent us some chocolate and a bottle of 2004 Kalimna Shiraz.

The lesson of this story, of course, is that any wound, no matter how fresh, can be healed instantly with alcohol, the great antiseptic, although apparently it kills you in the end.

Based on a visual estimate.

Saturday 2nd of May 2009

Same name, but different

I have a mate called Chris Ryan, who regularly faces the kinds of problems that don't occur to somebody called "Mark Dapin". For a start, he is not the most famous Chris Ryan in the world. This distinction is held by a British SAS-trooper-turned-thriller-writer who wrote a memoir entitled *The One That Got Away*, about his escape from behind enemy lines in the 1991 Gulf War.

Chris is not even the most famous Chris Ryan in Australia. That guernsey belongs to a former rugby league player who turned out for the Manly Sea Eagles and Perth's Western Reds in the 1990s.

Like most of my friends, Chris is a journalist. Despite performing stunts, such as eating a kebab while standing on his head, that have redefined the parameters of journalism to include eating a kebab while standing on your head, Chris is not the best-known Australian journalist called Chris Ryan. That byline is the property of a slightly older Chris Ryan, who writes about cricket and, to confuse matters, is often known as Christian Ryan.

As a boxer, my friend Chris had more than 100 fights, so he could reasonably expect to be the most famous Australian boxer called Chris Ryan. Sadly, however, he only entered the ring as an amateur, so his record will always be overshadowed by a Queensland light welterweight who fought twice as a professional in Brisbane in 1944. Chris had never heard of the earlier boxing Chris Ryan until I found his name on a website.

When I told him he was not the first boxing Chris Ryan, he asked me, "Who's the other one?"

Well, er, his name's Chris Ryan.

"Wherever I go in my life," said Chris, "another Chris Ryan's got there first."

Recently, Chris made his movie debut as a man who wanders past in the background of a scene in the new Australian movie *Samson and Delilah*. He also worked as unit manager on the film, so his name had to be entered in the Internet Movie Database website. When he found out he was at least the 23rd Chris Ryan to try to make it in the movies, he decided to be credited as "Christopher Ryan", of which there were only 11 already on the site.

As unit manager, Chris was responsible for towing the Portaloo between locations, and keeping it out of shot. He was not entirely successful at this last task, as the toilet does, apparently, make a fleeting "Hitchcock appearance" in the final cut.

Chris did not find the movie business as glamorous as he had hoped.

"I was unit manager but I had no one to manage," he said. "Maybe on the big shoots the toilets are cleaner, and I'd be in charge of a team of toilet wranglers."

Confident that I would at least enjoy the Portaloo's cameo, I went to a preview of *Samson and Delilah*, which did not sound like the kind of film that I would normally watch, since it was not about (a) a gang of mismatched thugs and criminals assembled by an underworld mastermind to pull off an audacious bank robbery; or (b) a professional killer lured out of retirement to do "one last job".

Instead, *Samson and Delilah* is the story of two young indigenous people who leave a

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remote desert community to live with a homeless alcoholic under a bridge in Alice Springs. Unless I missed something, the two leads never say a word to each other, although several meaningful hand gestures, and a number of significant glances, do pass between them. There is probably more petrol sniffing than in any other film in the history of cinema, but - against heavy odds - it all adds up to a compelling and beautiful movie, in which the Portaloos is, for the most part, expertly managed. Every Chris Ryan excels at something, and Chris has finally found a place where no other Chris Ryan can touch him: on the toilet.