



Brian Lake on truly awful books that you can't put down

By Brian Lake

It often happens like this. When going to value a collection of books in Norfolk, I'm early, so there is time to kill in a bookshop. The layout is chaotic; customers for the teasalop that shares the space fight for chairs and tables with steeping piles of books and racks of pictures. Browsers have to fight with the tea-drinkers to get at the books. And the books are just no good – the sort that clog up internet sites – and will never sell. So, with a commercial purchase an impossibility, my bookselling brain shifts into bizarre mode. Instead of looking for Dickens's first editions, or unconsidered 18th-century pamphlets, it's...Lost on Brown Willy, by Arthur Malan, £3.50.

As a rather rubbed and worn first edition of a bad novel set on Exmoor, published in Frederick Warne's 'Attractive and Interesting Stories' series in 1890, the price was right, but as a 'Bizarre Book'... The idea started more than 20 years ago when antiquarian booksellers were encouraged to display their 'Dud Books of All Time' at a book fair in York. Some were indeed unsaleable dogs – but others were very funny: The Common Tease as a Carnivorous Plant (1922), Briefs Calmly Considered by 'A Layman' (1826), The Big Problem of Small Organs (1966), The Romance of Leprosy (1949) and Ostrich Egg-shell Cups of Mesopotamia and the Ostrich in Ancient and Modern Times (1926.)

This successful exhibition ultimately spawned Frog-Raising for Pleasure and Profit and Other Bizarre Books in 1985. My collaborator, Russell Ash, carefully monitored new books for similar unintentional humour: The Joy of Chickens, Last Chance at Love – Terminal Romances and The Book of Marmalade all vied for space on bookshop shelves in the mid-Eighties. 'Bizarre books' fall into a fairly small number of categories. The most immediately funny are old titles which, because of changes in our usage of language, mean something quite different now: Drummer Dick's Discharge, Erections on Allotments, Two Men Came Together (The story of Mr Rolls and Mr Royce), Shag the Pony (or Shag the Caribou, for that matter), Invisible Dick.

Process of linguistic change can be quite fast: Queer Shipmates was published in 1962. There is a lot of fun in matching an author's name to the title – 'Over the Cliff', by Eileen Dover, is fictional, but these are all real: William Battie wrote his Treatise on Madness in 1758, Supt James Bent reminisced on Criminal Life: Forty-two Years as a Police Officer in 1891 and Wilhelmina Stitch wove Silken Threads in 1927. The original Fish Who Answer the Telephone, 1937, from which we steal the title of our new collection of bizarre books, is a classic example of a serious book parading under an apparently bizarre title. Professor Frolov, a colleague of Pavlov, writes of animal experiments in which even a goldfish can 'learn' that the sound of a telephone will mean an electric shock. There are also the plain weird – Atomic Bombing: How to Protect Yourself of 1950 or Did the Virgin Mary Live and Die in England? (1985) (Jesus's grandmother was Cornish, apparently). There are the strangest of theories, such as Samuel Cort's Cancer: Is the Dog the Cause? of 1933. And there is nothing 'politically correct' about all this – John Murray, the publisher of Fish Who Answer the Telephone and Other Bizarre Books, did not like an illustration of one-armed blind canoeists racing on the Thames ('There is absolutely nothing funny about this') but this ended up as the only victim of the blue pencil on grounds of taste.

Big Dick, The King of the Negroes (1846), It's a Wog's Life, by Golly (1966) and

Fighting the Fuzzy-Wuzzy (published by Murray, 1886) all made it into print – again. My personal soft spot is for the books that Smanaged to get published – against all odds. Only misplaced vanity or favouSrs to the publisher can account for Gilbert Anderson's There Must be a Reason, 1993, the anonymous Not a Success, 1879, Joseph Halliday's Just Ordinary But ... 1959, William Stavert's A Chapter in Mediocrity, 1896 and the ultimate winner, Sir George Compton Archibald Arthur's Not Worth Reading, of 1914. Two of the really great bizarre books result from mistranslation. Min Hou and Lin Yutong helped establish the 'Correctly English Society' at Shanghai and promised their readers Correctly English in Hundred Days in their publication of 1934. But the most lasting and endearing of all 'bad language' books is Pedro Carolino's New Guide of the Conversation in Portuguese and English, 2nd edition, 1869, which managed completely to mash English into an unintelligible but often very amusing pulp.

It is sometimes possible to work out what Carolino was trying to say: his 'Idiotisms and Proverbs' include 'The walls have hearsay' and 'Belly famished has no ears', but what of: 'Its are some blu stories', 'After the paunch comes the dance' or 'To craunch the marmoset'? In 'Dialogue 35: With a Bookseller' it is possible to divine, and possibly agree with, the sentiments: 'But why, you and another bookseller, you does not imprint some good works? There is a reason for that, it is that you cannot to sell its. The actual-liking of the public is depraved they does not read who for to amuse one's self ant but to instruct one's. But the letter's men who cultivate the arts and the sciences they can't to pass without the books. A little learneds are happies enough for to may to satisfy their fancies on the literature ...' By doing such a bad job, Carolino's phrase book has become one of the most celebrated bizarre books of all time, rather than being just secondrate and forgotten. It stars in Fish Who Answer the Telephone which I hope will, in its own way, provide some amusement for the depraved, the 'lettersmen' and 'little learneds' and satisfy their fancies. If not, you can go and Play with Your Own Marbles (J.J. Wright, 1865). 'Fish Who Answer the Telephone and Other Bizarre Books', by Brian Lake and Russell Ash, John Murray, £9.99 Lake The End

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