

odd facts

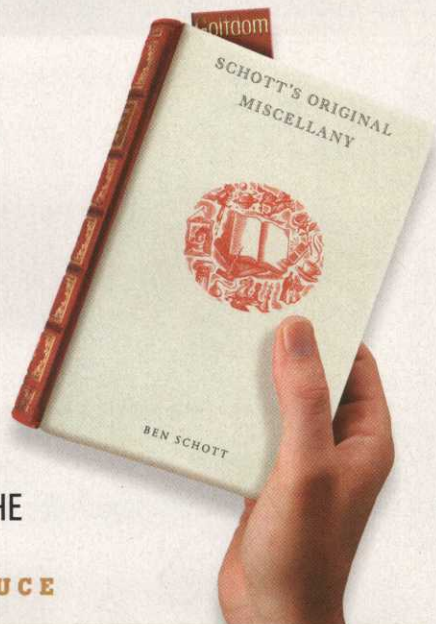
Burmese Kings have a history of rotten luck. In the 10th century, King Theinhko ate some cucumbers from a farmer without permission. The farmer killed the king and ascended the throne.

King Uzana was trampled to death by an elephant in 1254, while King Razadarit died in 1423 after getting tangled up in ropes while trying to lasso an elephant.

Such information will not help you shed the spare tire around your middle nor magically make your hair grow back, but these nuggets are historical curiosities that fit nicely into your back pocket. And the "Strange Deaths of Burmese Kings" is only one entry of the hundreds in *Schott's Original Miscellany* (Bloomsbury, \$14.95), a highly addictive, bizarre, educational and hilarious romp through all types of oddities and "unconsidered trifles." A No. 1 best-seller in England, Ben Schott's cheeky collection has finally been published for those of us across the pond.

Although the jacket flap claims the book can't be read in one sitting, it took me but a couple of hours. Afterward, I performed *fouettés* and *entrechats* (page 93, "Some Ballet Terms") through my backyard, singing the joys of knowing "aurophobia" is the fear of breezes (page 57), sharing my knowledge of "The Social Etiquette of Washington" (page 142) with squirrels, and pointing out

THIS BOOK WON'T HELP YOU
LOSE WEIGHT OR GROW HAIR –
BUT IT WILL HELP YOU EXPLORE THE
ODDITIES OF LIFE **BY MARK LUCE**



that cumulonimbus clouds (page 101) were gathering in the distance. In short, the book throws readers a state of animated giddiness that can be neither stopped nor contained.

The last time I had such a response to a compendium was as a fifth-grader, when a 1980 edition of *The Guinness Book of World Records* landed in my curious hands. It transformed a restrained kid into a first-class pain-in-the-butt who hassled teachers, parents and fellow students with outlandish facts, human oddities and annoying queries.

But where *Guinness* offers the biggest and best, Schott chooses the slyly sophisticated ("Some Shakespearean Insults"); the cultured ("Orchestra Schematic"); the sporting ("Two Dice Odds"); the colloquial ("American Diner Slang" and "Public School Slang"); the charmingly morbid ("Famous Last Words"); and the downright goofy ("Pig Latin Hamlet").

The book contains no logical arrangement, with entries running from a few words ("Declared Nuclear Powers"

or "OPEC Members") to two pages ("Presidents of the United States" and "The States"). Schott continually aims for the peculiar. So if it's not enough to know the inauguration date and political parties of the presidents, Schott tells us whether the president wed in office, was red-headed, died on July 4, sported facial hair (sideburns count), owned slaves or was left-handed — to name but a few of the fascinating facts he uncovered.

Whether using the book as a debate-settler or conversation starter, it provides whatever you need, want or are curious to know. It's perfect to have beside your favorite chair to pass commercials during the ball game. As Schott claims in his introduction, "It is, perhaps, possible to live one's life without *Schott's Original Miscellany*, but it seems a curious and brave thing to attempt." ■

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