

THE VOICE

MAGAZINE

Vol 20 Iss 20 2012-05-25

Clichés

Avoid them like the plague

Robograders

What in the *word*?

Pride & Prejudice

Tunisian Travels, Part III

Plus:

Health Matters

From Where I Sit

and much more!



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Magazine*

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The Voice is published every Friday in HTML and PDF format.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We love to hear from you! Send your questions and comments to voice@voicemagazine.org, and please indicate if we may publish your letter.



THIS WORLD

Wanda Waterman



Tunisian Travels, Part III

Recently Wanda Waterman spent several weeks in Tunisia, where she crossed half the country, visited several cities and villages, and stayed with a traditional Tunisian family. This travelogue series chronicles her adventures and experiences in the Maghreb. Read the first part of the series [here](#) and the second part, [here](#).

“The World is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page.”

Saint Augustine

Tourist Towns

The arms of the many-roomed El Mouradi hotel in the seaside resort town of Hammamet embrace a complex of shower stalls and changing rooms, peanut-shaped swimming pools, and white plastic lounge chairs. European tourists strip down to recline and tan, but rarely swim. I slide into a pool and after an accidental taste realize that the water is treated with salt, not chlorine. I smile; not only are my good bacteria preserved, it’s easier to float.

Dining is a self-service buffet. The food in the hotel is fresh and varied, with plenty of salads and fruits as well as some of the better-known native dishes—tajine, couscous with mutton, and *briks*—and local food items like olives, flatbread, *halva*, and dates still on their twigs. However, the cuisine lacks the robust spectrum of flavours found in more private kitchens.

As in most Tunisian cities there are many English signs, even though English is not widely spoken or understood here and the bulk of the foreigners appear to be from continental Europe and a few Gulf countries. As in Japan some of these signs are not always grammatically correct, but the only truly unfortunate mistake I see is a sign over a pizza shop in Hammamet proudly emblazoned with “Pecker’s Pizza.” Fortunately, the Tunisians I meet have no idea.

Nabeul

We visit the *souk* (marketplace) in nearby Nabeul, an important producer of North African pottery, and stroll through scores of streetside shops that sell designer knock-offs, American cartoon merchandising, and the lovely, flowing, jewel-toned garments, sheer, sequined, and embroidered, worn by the more traditional Tunisian women and girls. There are also gorgeous locally made rugs, ceramics, and metals at prices deemed steep by local standards but very reasonable by ours.

“To travel is to discover that everyone is wrong about other countries.”

Aldous Huxley

Carthageland

Carthageland, an amusement park behind the hotel, is a Disneyesque tribute to Tunisian history, complete with concrete Hannibal's elephants and cartoonlike Punic War veterans. There are rides and a small zoo with camels, lions, ostriches, foxes, and falcons. We see many young couples, the hennaed and tattooed hands of the women advertising their newlywed status.

The Limits of Propriety

On the beach a European woman with her husband and two children casually removes her bikini top, shakes out the sand, and puts it back on. My Tunisian friends don't remark on this, but do object to Arab girls seen kissing their men on the mouth in public.

There's one standard of behaviour for foreigners and another—quite different—for the local Muslim majority. But even within Tunisian society, with the unnerving exception of a few Islamists known to react angrily to displays perceived as threatening to Islam or to public decency, there's tremendous tolerance for varying styles of dress. Occasionally I would hear an Arab, seeing an Arab girl dressed immodestly even by Western standards, say, *Tch. I wish they wouldn't dress like that*; but the right to choose one's own style of dress is generally respected.

Some older women, including my hostess, do not leave the house unless wrapped in a *safsari*, a large golden piece of cloth covering a woman's head, shoulders, and body. I see other women in *safsaris* walking beside young girls in low-slung cigarette jeans and tight sweaters. Only about a third of the women I see wear headscarves, and I see no face veils.



The author browsing the marketplace.

I ask a young teenage girl if she wants to wear the *hijab* (headscarf) one day. She answers "Yes!" with alacrity. "At what age?" I ask, and she replies that she'll probably start wearing it in her mid-20s. I wonder if she sees the *hijab* as something worn when one is ready to take on the responsibilities of religious and family life. On the other hand, this girl's religious mother and several married aunts with children and careers don't wear the *hijab*, yet aren't subject to familial disapproval.

The men are respectful and polite. I've heard that foreign women who walk alone here are often subjected to unwanted attention, but this harassment consists mostly of polite flirtation and not the degree of rudeness women sometimes

experience on North American city streets. I'm never alone on my many strolls through Tunisian towns, but I witness no disrespect except at the wedding dance. There, what looks like a foreign tourist—tall, blond, and swaggering—joins the women and gets a little cheeky with one of them. He's soon sent sheepishly from the dance floor.

(To be concluded next week.)

Wanda also penned the poems for the artist book *They Tell My Tale to Children Now to Help Them to be Good*, a collection of meditations on fairy tales, illustrated by artist Susan Malmstrom.

CLICK OF THE WRIST

All the World's a Stage

Summer's a hot time to buy or sell a home, and competition is fierce. One aspect of home selling that's grown hugely in popularity in recent years is home staging. Simply put, home staging means setting up your house so it looks more attractive to prospective buyers—and it may not always be as simple as you think. This week's links offer some staging tips, strategies, and discussion.

On the Small Screen

HGTV's hit show *The Stagers* says that staging is all about "making people really want to live [there]." Watch clips from the show to see how the experts transform a room by creative painting, decorating, and furniture rearranging.

A Smaller Scale

Maybe we don't have million-dollar homes like the clients on *The Stagers*, but staging is important for the rest of us, too. Here, HGTV offers several recommendations for making your home look more attractive to potential buyers. Most of the suggestions are at a reasonable cost, too.

Clutter Buster

One of the top tips in home staging is, of course, to get rid of the clutter. And while we may not be hoarders, most of us have plenty of excess *stuff* that's just lying around unused. The simple living guru at the zenhabits blog gives his top tips for decluttering your space.



So You Want to Be a Better Writer: Clichés

Maxie van Roye



It's *crunch time*, and you've been a bit overwhelmed. You've been *burning the candle at both ends* and finally your *blood and sweat and tears* have *paid off*. You don't have *delusions of grandeur*, but you think what you wrote turned out fairly well.

Ignorance is bliss . . . until the grades arrive. That's when you discover *to your horror* that, despite your *Herculean efforts*, your essay *fell flat*.

That's *hard to swallow*.

Whether you're writing *for business or pleasure*—or it's an academic requirement—the words you use matter. *So here's the deal*. It *goes without saying* that spelling errors, improper grammar, and the like will create a poor impression. Almost worse, though, is when impeccable grammar is combined with heavy reliance on trite popular expressions. *I hate to say this*, but you may be *sabotaging yourself* with the overuse of clichés.

Clichés are easy to spot: they're those *tried and true* expressions that everyone knows and everyone uses, because they're usually *on the tip of the tongue*. The problem is, of course, that these *tried and true* expressions have been, well, tried. Many, many, many times—enough that their truth is no longer relevant, and now they've just become annoying.

Clichés, unfortunately, kill reader interest. Although you can *use them to your heart's content*, you may find that despite your great ideas, no one will *take you seriously*. Your written work could be *a diamond in the rough*, but no one may ever know because they can't make it past the first few paragraphs without cringing. In this *dog-eat-dog world*, where competition is high and *first impressions matter*, the *movers and shakers* are the ones who stand out. You don't want to stand out as being intensely unoriginal.

So here's a good *rule of thumb*: *avoid clichés like the plague*.

Maybe you're thinking *I'm making a mountain out of a molehill*. But *when all is said and done*, *I happen to know a thing or two* about what readers (and editors) want—and what they don't.

It's time to *get down to brass tacks*. Learn the most common clichés, and keep them out of your writing. Clichés can spoil the flow of your piece—and obscure your thoughts, even if they're otherwise brilliant. Find new, original ways of saying things instead of leaning on trite popular expressions.

Discouraged? *Look on the bright side*: *if you had a dollar for every time this article used a cliché, odds are you'd end up filthy rich*.

HEALTH MATTERS

Katie D'Souza



Alkalinity

Acid and alkaline. You may remember these terms from your high school chemistry class, but odds are you haven't thought about the concept of pH in years. But did you know that acidity and alkalinity play an important role in our everyday lives—and in our bodily health?

Chemistry and Your Health

In fact, acidity and alkalinity may be key in determining your current health, and, more importantly, your predictive health—the chances of your incurring chronic diseases, cancer, osteoporosis, and other poor health conditions. Let's first discuss a little background chemistry.

The concept of pH (power of hydrogen) is a quantitative one; it measures how acidic or alkaline a substance is. Acidic substances have a low pH (i.e., under 6.0); conversely, alkaline substances have a higher pH (over 6.0). The human body operates best under mildly alkaline conditions, with the ideal range being a pH between 6.2 and 7.4. Note that pH levels fluctuate depending on the time of day; for instance, the body's pH is lower in the morning. Blood itself is an alkaline substance.

The Food Connection

All foods have either an acidic or alkaline potential. This simply means that when you consume these foods, they will either raise your body's pH (make it more alkaline) or lower it (make it more acidic). Why? This effect occurs because after our food is broken down and digested, there's a residue left that needs to be excreted. If this residue is acidic, the body has to take an extra step and buffer it with various vitamins, minerals, and other substances before it can be excreted safely. If the body can't produce adequate buffers (because they're lacking in your diet, for example), then you will remain in a more acidic state. Likewise, if your diet is overflowing with vitamins and minerals, you'll have plenty of buffers available when an acidic food comes your way.

Why Worry?

Here's the problem: if your body's constantly receiving an influx of acidic foods and it is unable to buffer and excrete this acidity properly, health problems can result. Often these problems aren't noticed immediately, but show up as chronic conditions (like arthritis and osteoporosis) or, in more extreme cases, as diseases like cancer.

Eat this, not that: certain foods mean that your body has to work harder to maintain a healthy pH. Consuming more alkaline foods, like green vegetables, and avoiding more acidic foods, like red meat and dried fruit, can optimize your pH—and your health.

Fortunately, there are many things you can do to keep your body functioning optimally—and alkaline. The foods we eat have been rated on the potential renal acid load (PRAL) rating system, which measures the acid/alkaline-forming potential of different foods. Here are some brief, basic guidelines on which foods to eat and which foods to avoid:

- *Acidic (avoid)*: red meat, processed soybeans, barley, peanut butter, dried fruit, pastries, and sweets.
- *Alkaline (consume)*: vegetables (especially green vegetables), whole grains, honey, and beans.

Beyond Food

Another item to keep in mind: it's not only the foods we eat that can contribute to our body's pH. In fact, our mindset is a big player, too. Stressed? Irritable? These negative emotions and feelings can harm our body's alkaline balance, causing increased whole-body acidity.

How Can I Tell?

Possibly the quickest way to estimate your body's pH is to give your diet a closer look. How frequently do you consume acid-forming foods? What about alkaline foods? What's your vitamin and mineral intake?

To get a little more accurate, you can also assess your urinary or salivary pH by purchasing pH paper from a health food store and checking your secretions at the same time in the morning and evening. If you notice you tend toward the acidic side of the scale, you might consider swapping out more alkaline foods, and tracking your pH for change. By carefully following an alkaline diet, you will usually notice a change from acidic to alkaline in two to three weeks.

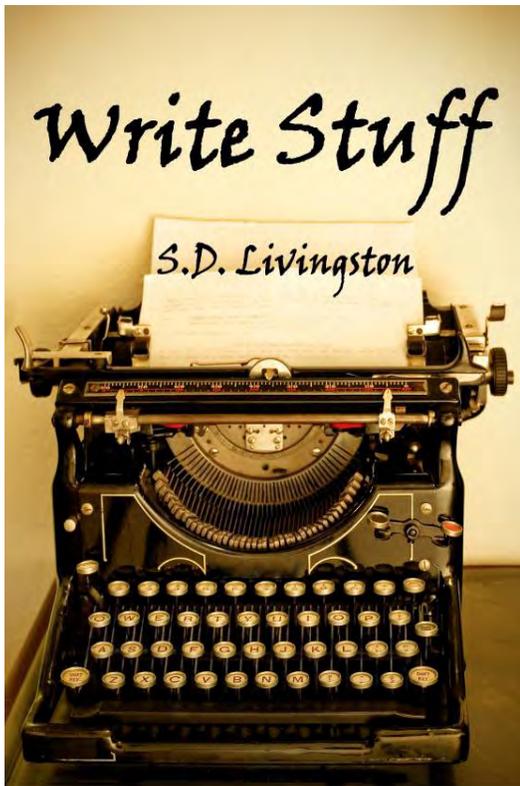
At the same time, you should feel a big difference in how you feel.

Katie D'Souza is an AU graduate and a licensed naturopathic doctor. She currently practices in Ontario.



Disclaimer: The information contained in this article is for personal interest only; it is not intended for diagnosis or treatment of any condition. Readers are always encouraged to seek the professional advice of a licensed physician or qualified health care practitioner for personal health or medical conditions.

How acidic is your diet, and how might it be hurting you? For more information on acidic and alkaline foods, browse [this chart](#).



Robograders

It's the stuff of every neo-Luddite's worst nightmare: machines and computers that replace human workers. Computers that can replicate human expertise, and even perform tasks thousands of times faster. In education, robograders seem to fit that bill, but the technology has a long way to go before it gets a passing grade.

The word "robograders" doesn't refer to rows of robots sitting at desks and grading papers. Instead, it's a catch-all term for various computer programs that use algorithms to score students' work. Robograders work fine if you're grading multiple-choice quizzes, but things get a lot murkier when it comes to handing out grades for essays.

It's true that essay writing—and grading—has always been rife with subjectivity. Whether it's the subject matter (Shakespeare's sonnets, for example), the students who write

them, or the teachers who grade them, essays don't lend themselves to the same type of consistency as, say, the multiplication tables.

And these days even human graders can be expected to churn out essay marks at impossible rates. As a recent *New York Times* article [notes](#), "the Pearson education company expects readers to spend no more than two to three minutes per essay." Working at top speed, those graders might be "capable of scoring 30 writing samples in an hour." Not exactly a formula for thoughtful, accurate evaluation.

Still, the typical human grader, whether she's a fourth grade teacher or a Harvard professor, has something that robograders simply can't match: the ability to evaluate a student's ideas.

Suppose you've written an essay full of long, complex sentences and hundred-dollar words. Your vocabulary's great, but your paper doesn't make a lot of sense. In fact, you've slipped in some clearly faulty facts, like World War II starting when Canada invaded New Zealand.

According to that same *New York Times* article, at least one robograder would probably love it. As the article explains, Les Perelman, a director of writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, tested an error-ridden essay with a program called e-Rater. Among other conclusions, he found that a "nonsensical" 716-word essay received a higher score than a well-written paper of only 567 words.

The reason? The e-Rater program likes longer essays, whether they make sense or not. It also prefers long words over short ones, meaning that "gargantuan words are indemnified because e-Rater interprets them as a sign of lexical complexity."

Now let's take things to the other end of the spectrum. Suppose you're a teacher who's received an essay riddled with spelling errors. The language is well below the student's grade level. Based on those criteria, e-Rater would likely give it a failing mark. But there's a core of brilliance in that essay; some innovative thoughts on the global financial system, or perhaps a groundbreaking theory on English literature.

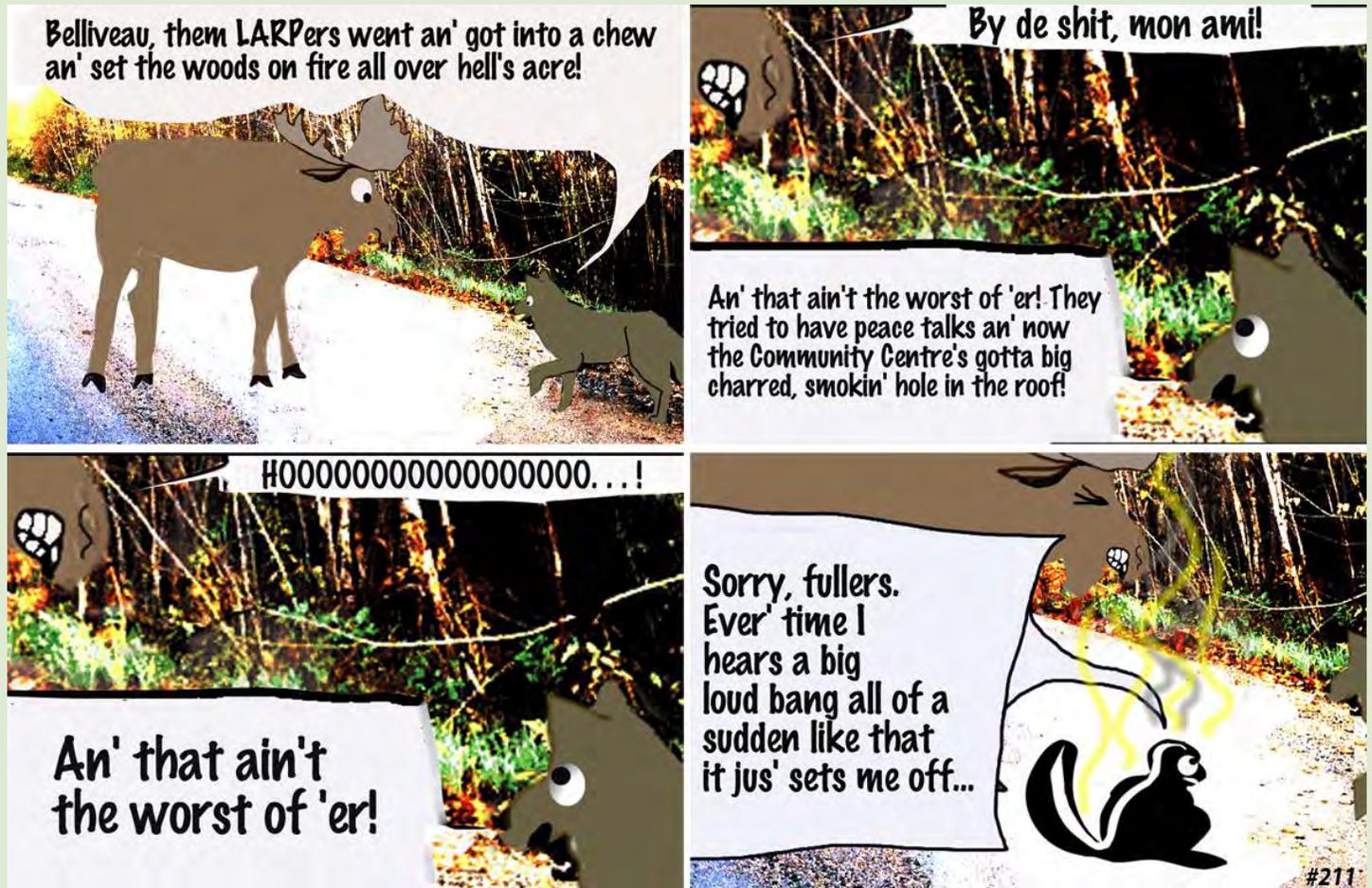
Will the robograder spot it? Probably not. Will the professor or his assistant see the merit in it? Perhaps not, since we can't deny that the art of essay grading is inherently subjective, and poor spelling often raises red flags.

But we cannot remove that critical part of the process—the evaluation of a student's *ideas*, not just the language she uses to express them. Otherwise, we've failed before we've even begun.

S.D. Livingston is the author of several books, including the new suspense novel Kings of Providence. Visit her [website](#) for information on her writing (and for more musings on the literary world!).

CHRONICLES OF CRUISCIN LAN

Wanda Waterman





We Are What We Eat

Regular readers know how I love books and all they offer. My passion isn't limited to the latest and greatest, though, so I was tickled to find an old coil-bound book called *Edmonton Hospital Diet Therapy Manual*. I am both amused and amazed by how much things have changed—and how much they've stayed the same.

I'm not likely to alter all my eating habits based on this slim 1960s-era book. Not because it's necessarily bad information, but because none of the foods they reference still exist in the composition and format available at that time. Today's bread is not the same bread that existed 52 years ago. The author of *Wheat Belly* would argue that the base ingredient, wheat, is nothing like 1960s wheat either, because of genetic modification. In fact, grandma wouldn't recognize many of the meats, vegetables, or staples filling our pantries and freezers today.

As I leafed through the book some things leapt out at me. Others required more study. Terminology was one thing. This manual was the product of a joint committee of six hospitals, including a "sanatorium" and an "Indian hospital." No one would dare use those terms today.

The tables which make up the Canadian Dietary Standard for Adults (1948) only go up to 160 pounds for women and 200 pounds for men. Today there are kids whose weight pushes those upper limits. Add another 100 pounds to the chart, and you get closer to today's reality.

Somewhere along the way carbs became a bad word. Yet the 1950 Canada Food Rules advise eating "one serving of whole grain cereal AND at least four slices of bread (with butter or fortified margarine)." The same document recommends one serving of meat, fish, poultry, or meat alternatives per day plus eggs and cheese at least three times a week each.

The pages on infant feeding urge parents to give their babies diluted orange juice or vitamin-enriched apple juice daily, beginning at two to four weeks! How could that be good? More than one baby ended up with rotten teeth when juice pooled in her mouth after she fell asleep with a bottle. High sugar content is a big no-no today among enlightened parents.

Under the miscellaneous foods to exclude for children are peanut butter, nuts, olives, pickles, popcorn, coconut, and condiments. Did they know something we don't about allergens?

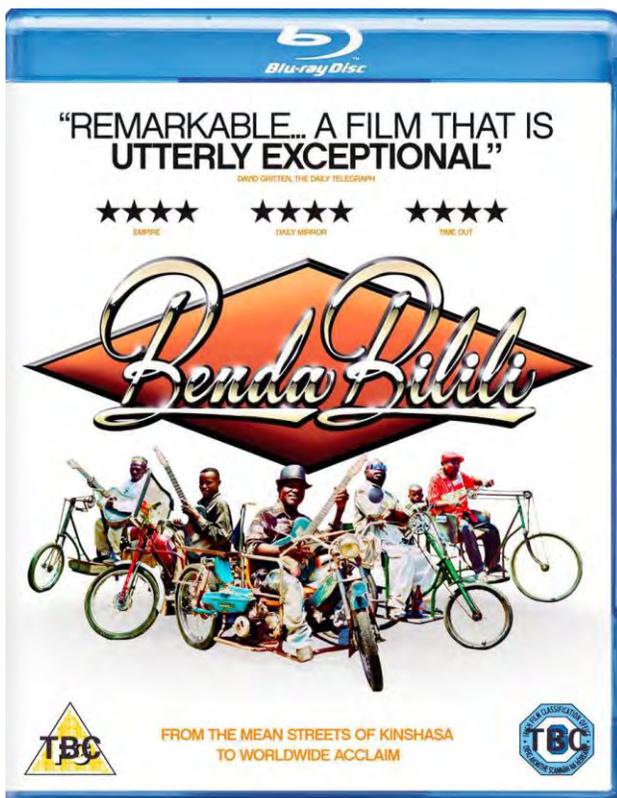
With gluten-free foods now getting special mention on menus and being widely available even in places like Walmart, I assumed, incorrectly, that celiac disease was something new. This manual devotes a couple of pages to the gluten-free diet. There are more foods excluded than included.

This book is just another tool (and a fun read), from where I sit.

Hazel Anaka's first novel is *Lucky Dog*. Visit her [website](#) for more information or follow her on Twitter @anakawrites.

THE MINDFUL BARD

Wanda Waterman



Books, Music, and Film to Wake Up Your Muse and Help You Change the World

Film: *Benda Bilili!* (National Geographic Entertainment)

Genre: Documentary, Art House

Cast: Coco, Roger, Ricky, Theo

Writers/Directors: Florent de la Tullaye, Renaud Barret

Looking Beyond—in Amazement

A group of homeless Congolese boys sits on a grassy slope near a stream, reading what looks like a Jehovah's Witness brochure. One boy is holding forth on the subject of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, explaining to the others the story the pictures illustrate. Suddenly he announces with authority: "I was here before they ate the fruit. It was wonderful. You'd eat and the next day you wouldn't be hungry."

An old soul, he's internalized the myth and embedded it in his own experience of life as a street kid in Kinshasa. In this way he echoes the artist's sense of having emerged from an ideal world into a reality which falls far short. This is the famous existential disappointment that goads the artist into creating something of beauty to make the post-temptation Garden inhabitable.

But for some the first order of the day is survival, and one way these street kids survive is by pushing the four disabled (from polio) Benda Bilili musicians around on their homemade tricycles—a job for which they're rewarded with money, food, and good counsel. The kids come to see the musicians as patrons in turn, albeit with limited capacity to provide.

In order for the members of this mishmash street family to keep on and pursue their spare hopes they must engage in continual mutual encouragement and exhortation, pushing each other to rise from want and hopelessness. They're not permitted to be prima donnas—it's simply not an option, and they can't afford to indulge in the intellectual luxuries, like angst and ennui, for which rich and bourgeois artists are notorious.

Barret and Tulaye came to Africa to look for music to document and were coming up dry. So they were ecstatic when they discovered this group of excellent players who were only too glad to record an album and document their lives on film.

The shelter where the band members live with their families and many other people with disabilities burns down while they're all in the studio, forcing recording of their first album to a halt. Watching how these heroes rise above it all while creating superlative sounds is breathtaking. You'll never again complain about lack of government funding for the arts.

Great visuals capture an authentic, joyous warmth in the midst of human cruelty and selfishness. The music is an exciting and original blend of African and world genres, including reggae.

Optimism can seem trite, but when Ricky sings *"Nobody is ever doomed"* from his handmade tricycle, surrounded by homeless children setting up their cardboard sleeping mats, you really have to believe him.

Benda Bilili! fulfills eight of the Mindful Bard's [criteria](#) for films well worth seeing: 1) it is authentic, original, and delightful; 2) it poses and admirably responds to questions that have a direct bearing on my view of existence; 3) it harmoniously unites art with social action, saving me from both seclusion in an ivory tower and slavery to someone else's political agenda; 4) it provides respite from a sick and cruel world, a respite enabling me to renew myself for a return to mindful artistic endeavour; 5) it is about attainment of the true self; 6) it inspires an awareness of the sanctity of creation; 7) it displays an engagement with and compassionate response to suffering; and 8) it makes me appreciate that life is a complex and rare phenomenon, making living a unique opportunity.

"Not only do physically disabled people have experiences which are not available to the able-bodied, they are in a better position to transcend cultural mythologies about the body, because they cannot do things the able-bodied feel they must do in order to be happy, 'normal,' and sane . . . If disabled people were truly heard, an explosion of knowledge of the human body and psyche would take place."

Susan Wendell

GREEN LIGHT

Sun Screen

Summer's fast approaching, which means it's time to look out for your skin. Protecting yourself from harmful UV rays is essential to good skin health, but many sunscreens on the market contain toxic chemicals that are damaging both to your health and to that of the planet.

Fortunately, there's an easy way to determine the safety of the sunscreen you've got in your cupboard. Advocacy organization Environmental Working Group (EWG) has just published its annual [Sunscreen Guide](#), and it's easy to use; just run a traditional search or scroll through brands and types. There are ratings for 1,800 sunscreens and SPF lip balms, moisturizers, and makeup.

You can also read their [report](#) to find more detailed information on their findings, and (for a small donation) download a summary to take with you when you go sunscreen shopping.

If all the information seems overwhelming, take it slow: this [summary article](#) is an excellent start.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS DESK



At Home: The Family Jewels

A would-be thief got a little more than he bargained for when a jewellery heist went awry. Now he's waiting for the evidence to show up—and it won't be pretty.

As *The Toronto Star* [reports](#), the 52-year-old Richard Matthews has been accused of possessing a diamond worth \$20,000. The catch? It's still inside him, police maintain.

Matthews entered a jeweller's shop and "allegedly tried to switch some fake diamonds . . . for the real thing." However, when the theft was spotted, police say that Matthews "swallowed the diamond along with two fake stones." The store's surveillance video seems to back up this claim.

Now both police and accused are waiting for the evidence to "[make] its way through his digestive system." So far he's passed one of the fake stones.

In the meantime, he's being kept in a special cell with no plumbing and is being fed a much more gourmet diet than the typical jailhouse fare. "He wants this thing out of him as much as we do," a police spokesperson told reporters.

Around the World: Zombie Apocalypse

Spend your spare time daydreaming about fighting zombies? Now you can do it in real life, too, thanks to an innovative British attraction.

As the BBC [reports](#), an abandoned mall in Reading, UK, has been transformed into the zombie apocalypse.

Daring visitors can pit their survival skills against the zombies—actors, professionals, and makeup artists who come "crawling out from disused shops, staircases and public toilets."

These "zombies," event organizer Lee Fields told reporters, "take it very seriously . . . [and] really know how to get inside people's heads."

Visitors receive a special briefing and are equipped with "airsoft" guns to aid in their battle. For the next two-and-a-half hours, they're plunged into "a movie-like scenario which unfolds in real time" as they try to "stay alive . . . and . . . outwit the zombies."

Although there's no real danger, it's a thrilling and even terrifying experience, and there have been "times when frightened participants had to be rescued." As Fields told reporters, "Fear affects people in different ways and [it] often can be quite surprising who are the ones that buckle."

AUSU UPDATE



AU Students urge candidates to improve university funding

AU students are concerned about the financial health of Athabasca University and the effect of recent news stories on the reputation of the AUSU membership.

A recent CBC report notes that in recent years the university has made a series of reserve draws to cover budget shortfalls, draining the once \$30-million reserve fund.

Tuition and fees at AU, meanwhile, continue to increase despite the concerns of AUSU that education is becoming increasingly unaffordable in Alberta.

“I’m very concerned about AU’s financial situation,” says AUSU President Bethany Tynes. “AU is increasing student fees, observing hiring freezes, denying sabbaticals, delaying projects, and downsizing their offices due to a lack of available funds. We don’t want to see the quality of our education diminish.”

“At the same time,” Tynes continues, “I am confused by AU Board Chair Barry Walker’s comment to the CBC that AU is ‘in a very sound financial position,’ as the concerns we’ve noted do not support the notion that we’re financially sound.”

Chronic underfunding of public post-secondary education is a factor in AU’s financial stress. AU students have lobbied Alberta in recent years to address the shortfall; our members call on the candidates in Alberta’s provincial election to make post-secondary funding a priority in their platforms and to ensure that all Alberta universities are funded equally and sufficiently. Public post-secondary institutions need a reliable, predictable funding model that provides sufficient base operating funds to support a world-class education.

Athabasca University Students' Union is the largest students’ union in Alberta, representing nearly 40,000 undergraduates annually.

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This column is provided by AUSU to facilitate communication with its members. The Voice does not write or edit this section; all content has been exclusively and directly provided by AUSU, and any questions or comments about the material should be directed to ausu@ausu.org.

CLASSIFIEDS

Classifieds are free for AU students! Contact voice@voicemagazine.org for more information.

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Publisher Athabasca University Students' Union
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www.voicemagazine.org

The Voice is published every Friday in HTML and PDF format.

Contact *The Voice* at voice@voicemagazine.org.

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