

praise

Annals of Improbable Research

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Writing Research Issue

The features marked with a star (*) are based entirely on material taken straight from standard research (and other Official and Therefore Always Correct) literature. Many of the other articles are genuine, too, but we don't know which ones.



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How to Write 85,000 Books

A literary-technical tour de force, and the man behind it

by Marc Abrahams, Improbable Research staff

Philip M. Parker is the world's fastest book author, and given that he has been at it only for about five years and already has more than 85,000 books to his name, he is likely the most prolific.

Philip M. Parker is also the most wide-ranging of authors. The phrase "shoes and ships and sealing wax, cabbages and kings" is not the half a percent of it. He has authored some 188 books related to shoes, ten about ships, 219 books about wax, six about sour red cabbage pickles, and six about royal jelly supplements.

To begin somewhere, let's note that Philip M. Parker is the author of the book *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Bathroom Toilet Brushes and Holders in the United States*. This book is 677 pages long, sells for \$495 and is described by the publisher as a "study [that] covers the latent demand outlook for bathroom toilet brushes and holders across the states and cities of the United States."

Philip M. Parker titles include the following (this is a hastily chosen few, so they are probably not his most colorful):

The 2007-2012 World Outlook for Rotary Pumps with Designed Pressure of 100 P.s.i. or Less and Designed Capacity of 10 G.p.m. or Less

Avocados: A Medical Dictionary, Bibliography, and Annotated Research Guide

Webster's English to Romanian Crossword Puzzles: Level 2

The 2007-2012 Outlook for Golf Bags in India

The 2007-2012 Outlook for Chinese Prawn Crackers in Japan

The 2002 Official Patient's Sourcebook on Cataract Surgery

The 2007 Report on Wood Toilet Seats: World Market Segmentation by City

The 2007-2012 Outlook for Frozen Asparagus in India

Parker: Who?

Philip M. Parker is the INSEAD Chair Professor of Management Science at INSEAD, the international business school based in Fontainebleau, France.

Parker: What?

Professor Parker is no dilettante. When he turns to a new subject, he seizes and shakes it till several books,

Professor Philip M. Parker, author of more than 300,000 books. Photo courtesy of INSEAD.



or several hundred, emerge. About the outlook for bathroom toilet brushes and holders, Professor Parker has authored at least six books. There is his The 2007-2012 Outlook for Bathroom Toilet Brushes and Holders in Japan, and also The 2007-2012 Outlook for Bathroom Toilet Brushes and Holders in Greater China, and also The 2007-2012 Outlook for Bathroom Toilet Brushes and Holders in India, and also The 2007 Report on Bathroom Toilet Brushes and Holders: World Market Segmentation by City.

Amazon.com offers (on the day I am writing this) 85,761 books authored by Philip M. Parker. Professor Parker himself says the total is well over 200,000.

How is this all possible? How does one man do so much?

Professor Parker created the secret to his own success. He invented a machine that writes books. He says it takes about twenty minutes to write one.

Parker: Why?

There arises the question, “Why?” The patent (U.S. #7266767), which describes a “method and apparatus for automated authoring and marketing” and which Professor Parker wrote in the traditional, pre-Parker, non-computerized way, answers this question.



The answer appears on page 16. Professor Parker quotes a 1999 complaint by the magazine The Economist that publishing “has continued essentially unchanged since Gutenberg. Letters are still written, books bound, newspapers mostly printed and distributed much as they ever were.”

“Therefore,” says Professor Parker in this patent document, “there is a need for a method and apparatus for authoring, marketing and/or distributing title materials automatically by a computer.” He explains that “Further, there is a need for an automated system that eliminates or substantially reduces the costs associated with human labor, such as authors, editors, graphic artists, data analysts, translators, distributors, and marketing personnel.”

Parker: How?

We asked Professor Parker how he manages this Herculean output. He replied:

I started back in 1992 with the idea. Had a lot of failures, then succeeded in 2000 when I filed the patent. I have amassed huge linguistics databases (I am an avid dictionary collector, since I was 18), and have a background in mathematics, and computer programming, so I have approached this from a management science perspective. Everything is organized by genre, and within genre by topic, and within topic by sub-topic, etc., for all languages. It is a matter of organization.

The book-writing machine works simply, at least in principle. First, one feeds it a recipe for writing a particular genre of book — a tome about crossword puzzles, say, or a market outlook for products, or maybe a patient’s guide to medical maladies. Then one hooks the computer up to a big database full of info about crossword puzzles or market information or maladies. The computer uses the recipe to select data from the database and write and format it into book form.

Professor Parker estimates that it costs him about 23 cents to write a new book, with perhaps not much difference in quality from what a competent wordsmith or an MBA or a physician might produce.

Nothing but the title need actually exist until somebody orders a copy, typically via an online automated bookseller. At that point, a computer assembles the book’s content and prints up a single copy.

Best-Selling Books



Among Professor Parker’s best-selling books (as ranked by Amazon.co.uk) one finds surprises.

His fifth-best seller is *Webster’s Albanian to English Crossword Puzzles: Level 1*.

No. 6:

The 2007 Import and Export Market for Ferrous Metal Waste and Scrap Excluding Waste and Scrap of Cast Iron and Alloy Steel in United Kingdom.

No. 21: *The 2007 Import and Export Market for Seaweeds and Other Algae in France.*

No. 25: *Oculocutaneous Albinism—A Bibliography and Dictionary for Physicians, Patients, and Genome Researchers.*

No. 44: *The 2007 Import and Export Market for Fresh or Chilled Whole Fish in Lithuania.*

The 2007-2012 Outlook for Chinese Prawn Crackers in Japan, mentioned above, is Professor Parker’s 66th-best seller.

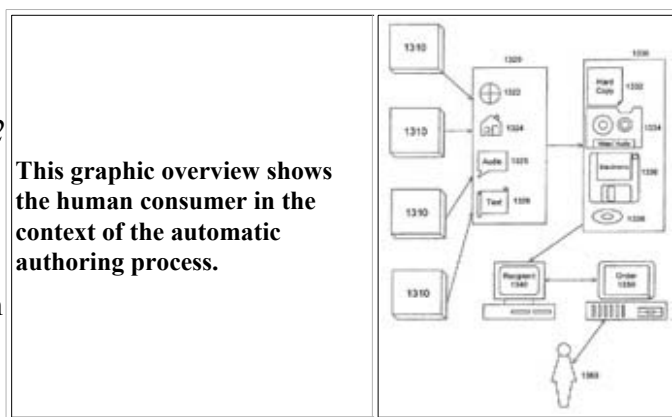
In the 93rd spot comes *The 2007 Report on Cat Food: World Market Segmentation by City*.

Rounding out the list, at number 100, is *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Edible Tallow and Stearin Made in Slaughtering Plants in Greater China*.

Professor Parker is also enthusiastic about books authored the old-fashioned way. He has already written three of them.

The books are in a way just the beginning. Professor Parker also plans to use the same method to produce video programs—thousands upon thousands of them—and video games. He tells us:

If I am lucky, this will allow the creation of content (educational material, books, software, etc.) for languages (or for subject areas) that simply do not have enough speakers, or economies that can support traditional publishing or content creation. For example, in health care, some diseases have fewer than 1,000 people who get the disease worldwide per year. Of those, only 1 or 2 might want a reference book. Using this method, the break even for a book is 1 copy, with no inventory cost (all books are either printed on demand, or distributed via ebook). Some languages have only 100,000 speakers, so no “Hollywood” producer would envisage creating programming to such a narrow audience, etc. This approach allows for this level of production (I am starting with an educational game show, and 3D personal computer games).

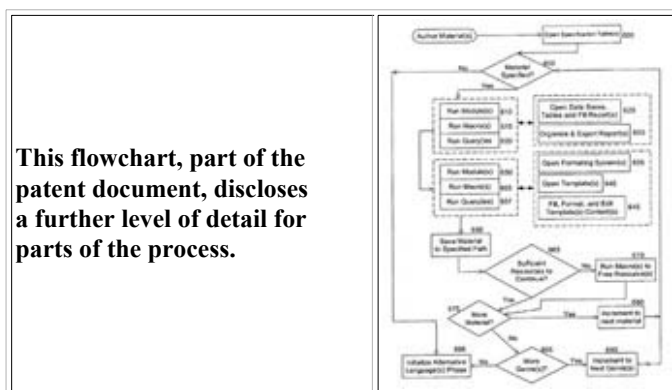


This graphic overview shows the human consumer in the context of the automatic authoring process.

For More Parker

For a vivid introduction to Professor Parker and some of his works, see the video he has put online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SkS5PkHQphY>.

For a few more of Professor Parker’s memorable

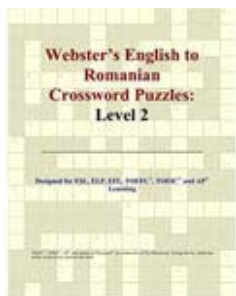
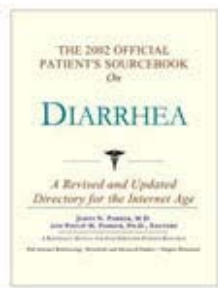


This flowchart, part of the patent document, discloses a further level of detail for parts of the process.

books, see the article “May We Recommend: Parker Titles,” elsewhere in this issue of the Annals of Improbable Research. Also elsewhere in this issue is “Dr. Parker’s Latent Library and the Death of the Author,” a discussion of the philosophical implications of Professor Parker’s accomplishments.

(Thanks to Peter Carboni for bringing the first toilet brush outlook book to our attention, and to Chris

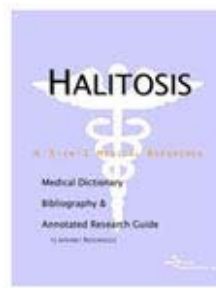
McManus for alerting us to the several hundred medical books.)



The 2007-2012 Outlook for Frozen Apparatus in India



Author Philip M. Parker, Ph.D., Executive Director of Improbable Research



The 2007-2012 Outlook for Golf Bags in India



Author Philip M. Parker, Ph.D., Executive Director of Improbable Research

Dr. Parker's Latent Library and the Death of the Author

A philosophical inquiry

by Chris McManus

University College London

2002 Ig Nobel Biology Prize winner (for his study "Scrotal Asymmetry in Man and Ancient Sculpture")

The death of the author has been a fundamental constant of post-modern literary criticism ever since Roland Barthes' essay of 1967. Now an economist, Professor Philip M. Parker, has turned the entire question on its head. The really interesting question about someone who has been described as "the most prolific author in history" now concerns the trickier question of whether, in any meaningful sense, this author—or what Barthes would call a "scriptor"—has ever actually been alive.

Roland Barthes, author of the 1967 essay "The Death of the Author." Painting by Nan Swift, Improbable Research staff.



Books used to be simple things. An author writes, a printer prints, a bookseller sells and a reader then reads what the author wrote, the printer printed and the bookseller sold. Such a description is worlds away from the 142,152* titles which Parker and his ICON Publishing Group have published. Even if the 47-year-old Professor Parker had written solidly, 12 hours a day, 365 days a year, for the past 20 years, he would have had to produce a new title every 37 minutes to create such an oeuvre. Such productivity is over two orders of magnitude greater than that of the Guinness Book of Records' most prolific author, the South African writer Mary Faulkner (1903-1973), whose 904 titles hardly begin to compete with Parker.

Not that it can be said that any of Parker's books have been "written" in any usual sense of the term. Instead we find thousands upon thousands of books that indeed have Parker's name on the cover, but the author not only can never have written, but in all likelihood can never have read them all (and if each book takes just 37 minutes to read, then it would take 20 years, 12 hours a day—you get the idea!). More problematic, in most or perhaps even nearly all cases these books seem never to have been printed, seen by their ostensible publisher, or seen by a single reader. Maybe there are even titles that have never been clicked upon on Amazon.com. Now that really is post-modern.

The Question of Existence



Do Parker's books exist then? Perhaps, as Jean Baudrillard would have put it, "These books did not take place." Let's take at random one of Parker's typical exotic and yet utterly paradigmatic titles, *The 2007 Import and Export Market for Wool Grease, Fatty Substances Derived from Wool Grease, and Lanolin Excluding Crude Wool Grease in Brazil*. Nowhere on Amazon is there any sign that anyone has ever bought this (never mind added it to their Wedding Registry or Wish List). Neither is it in any university or other library that I can find. If you want the book (and for a mere 28 paperback pages it is expensive at \$56.00) then, and it seems only then, will a computer program be activated, a text generated, a printer will start printing, a binding will be attached and a paperback volume will emerge ready to be read. But did *The 2007 Import and Export Market for Wool Grease* [and so forth] exist until that moment? There lurks a philosophical conundrum. As with the tree that falls to the ground in a lonely forest, unheard by any sentient being, can it be said to make a sound? Or in the koan's 21st century form, if such a title evokes from Google the response "did not match any documents," does it exist?

The Question of Value

A few thought experiments show the plurality of potential problems lurking here. Could I, for instance, register millions of titles of possible books with Amazon, stating that they are available if readers want them, but not actually provide any of them until someone coughs up their \$56? More specifically, could I register as titles, *The {n} Import and Export Market for Wool Grease, Fatty Substances Derived from Wool Grease, and Lanolin Excluding Crude Wool Grease in Brazil*, where {n} takes all possible values from 2009 to 3000? And can I count all of these titles as part of my scholarly output?

Hazards

What if Parker's program goes wrong (and software bugs are one of the few certainties of our world)? Who would be responsible if, instead of generating a lucid account of wool grease and lanolin, the program errs and some unfortunate lanolin expert inadvertently receives between his paperback covers some random text, such as 28 pages of Victoria Beckham's *That Extra Half an Inch: Hair, Heels and Everything in Between*? Would Parker or his program then claim to be the author of that as well? Does Parker check every book before it is dispatched, ever vigilantly watching for glitches? What if a software glitch results in 28 pages endlessly repeating the immortal words, "and yes I said yes I will Yes"? Caveat emptor, inevitably, but perhaps also, author beware! What are the limits of the author's responsibility? Does he, as so many authors do, "assert his moral right", etc., or does he perhaps have no moral rights? What if the book should—we are but speculating, of course—contain a libelous account of the President of Brazil, which would then be gossiped about and disseminated throughout grease-speaking circles all over the Amazon region? Would Parker be responsible for that? And how might Parker avoid an inadvertent fatwa through software error, when one of his books perhaps talks of the burgeoning market for pig products in certain countries where pigs should be vanishingly scarce?

Unstoppability?

These problems would not even disappear with the actual death of the supposed author, for Parker (or rather his programmatic instantiation) could presumably continue to produce ever further volumes long after his demise. How will copyright laws cope with such works? And does Parker perhaps have another program, at this moment on the digital stocks, for generating interviews with his posthumous self? Will those interviews perhaps interact with yet further

Professor Philip M. Parker, author of surprisingly (and perhaps uncountably) many books. Photo courtesy of INSEAD.



Parkersoft products generating the verbose products of an infinitude of virtual journalists, together producing a million-fold computer-generated articles for an exponentially increasing number of latent, specialist journals, devoted to such specialist markets as the Brazilian grease industry, each number commenting and speculating endlessly on the past, present and future of almost anything Brazilian and greasy except, it need hardly be said, that pariah of the aficionados, crude wool grease? Perhaps the one certainty is that Google's

web-crawlers will cope, if necessary, by buying up ICON Publishing Group. O Douglas Adams, thou shouldst be living at this hour!

Note

* Some sources say Professor Parker's total now exceeds 200,000. The question "How many books has Philip M. Parker written?" deserves to be addressed in a separate essay, or perhaps in a numerous series of essays. The question "How many books will Philip M. Parker write?" may be unanswerable, except by time but possibly not even with that.

Parker's Bird Books

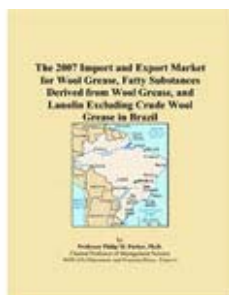
by Kees Moeliker

Curator of Birds

Natuurhistorisch Museum Rotterdam, The Netherlands

2003 Ig Nobel Biology Prize winner (for documenting the first scientifically recorded case of homosexual necrophilia in the mallard duck)

Professor Philip M. Parker's collection of books on birds—like his nearly innumerable other series on other subjects—appears to be comprehensive and detailed almost beyond imagining.



Egging It On

Consider his treatment of eggs (to take a single topic from among the many that relate to birds).

The basic entity "egg" is included in 201 intriguing book titles (as of January 25, 2008), including Professor Parker's recent *The World Market for Unshelled Birds Eggs Excluding Dried Eggs: A 2007 Global Trade Perspective*, of which the author says in the introductory chapter:

Which countries are supplying unshelled birds' eggs excluding dried eggs?...How much do the imports of unshelled birds' eggs excluding dried eggs vary from one country to another?... Which countries supply the most exports of unshelled birds' eggs excluding dried eggs?

Once you know the answers to those questions, your newly-inflamed curiosity will force you to dig into *The 2007 Import and Export Market for Unshelled Birds Eggs Excluding Dried Eggs in Denmark* and its equivalents that cover—to mention but one example—Slovakia.

A scientific novelty can be found in *The 2007-2012 World Outlook for Frozen and Liquid Whole Eggs* (it was news to me, an ornithologist, that whole eggs can be liquid), not to be mistaken for the detailed survey *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Frozen or Liquid Mixed Eggs in India*. Undoubtedly of equal importance is *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Whole and Parts of Egg-Producing Hens and Fowl in India*, and the corresponding volume dealing with whole and parts of egg-producing hens and fowl in Poland.

Not really related to birds, but similar in scope is *The 2007-2012 World Outlook for Chocolate Easter Eggs* and its companion, though basically much different, *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Chocolate-Shell Easter Eggs in India*.