

by Scott LaFee

WHAT IS IT? ANSWER

A neutrophil - a kind of white blood cell - moving across a bone surface toward an infecting virus or bacterium, which it will engulf and destroy.

'TRUE FACTS'

In just one year, the perennial sea ice cover in the Arctic Ocean has shrunk by nearly 289,500 square miles - an area larger than the state of Texas.

BRAIN SWEAT

OUR IGNOBLE HISTORY - Veterinarian Robert A. Lopez's report, "Of Mites and Men" answers the question of what happens when you stick cat ear mites in your own ear. CNS Photo. What do these places - Anchorage, Alaska; Eureka, Calif.; Leadville, Colo.; and the Mauna Loa Slope Observatory in Hawaii - have in common? Hint: Think meteorological.

OUR IGNOBEL HISTORY

It wasn't great literature, not even remotely Steinbeckian, but veterinarian Robert A. Lopez's courageous report, "Of Mites and Men," finally answered a question: What happens when you stick cat ear mites in your own?

In 1968, Lopez did just that, inserting roughly 1 gram of ear mite exudate from a cat into his left ear. Twenty-five years later, he published his findings in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association.

And what did he discover? That mites generally slumber during the day but at night become incredibly active, creating so much ruckus and itchiness from biting that he found sleep to be impossible.

For his insights and heroism, Lopez won the 1993 Ig Nobel Prize in entomology.

ANTHROPOLOGY 101

In Germany, it was once thought that a rainy morning could be transformed into a sunny afternoon if all of the old women in the vicinity cleared their throats.

VERBATIM

"If the brain were simple enough for us to understand it, we would be too simple to understand it."

- Ken Hill

POETRY FOR SCIENTISTS

But beyond the bright searchlights of science,

Out of sight of the windows of sense,

Old riddles still bid us defiance,

Old questions of Why and of Whence.

- Sir William Cecil Dampier Whetham

WHODUNIT SCIENCE

Almost every murder mystery ends up the same way: The identity of the killer(s) is revealed. Sometimes it's a complete surprise, sometimes it's not.

Apparently, self-esteem helps dictate whether you prefer the former or the latter.

"Personality plays a role in whether a person wants to be confirmed or surprised when they read mysteries," said Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick, an assistant professor of communication at Ohio State University. "People with low self-esteem like to feel they knew all along who committed the crime, probably because it makes them feel smarter."

Knobloch-Westerwick came to this conclusion based on a study she conducted with 84 German students, who were given a variety of written personality tests, then asked to read a short mystery story called "Murder Because of Lust or Greed?" in which a businessman is murdered by either his wife or his lover.

Students read one of three versions of the story. In the first, both suspects are equally culpable. In the second, one suspect seems the more likely culprit and turns out to be the killer. In the third, the murderer is the least likely suspect.

Knobloch-Westerwick noted that students who were assessed with lower self-esteem tended to prefer the story with the expected ending. People with high self-esteem liked to be surprised.

Knobloch-Westerwick also noted that mysteries seem to appeal more to people with a greater "need for cognition." In other words, they enjoy thinking (e.g., solving mysteries) more than the average person.

PRIME NUMBERS

26 - Percentage increase in visits to U.S. emergency rooms during 1993-2003 (more than twice the rate of overall population growth in the same period)

3.2 - Average time, in hours, a patient spends in the E.R.

46.5 - Average amount of that time, in minutes, that is spent waiting

65 - Short-term survival rate, as a percentage, of patients who undergo cardiopulmonary resuscitation on the television show "ER"

7 to 15 - Actual survival rate, as a percentage, in real emergency rooms

Source: Massachusetts General Hospital

BRAIN SWEAT ANSWER

None of these places has ever recorded a 90-degree day. Indeed, the warmest day on record at Mauna Loa is 71 degrees.

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