

Prizes that make you go hmm

By Marc Abrahams, MARC ABRAHAMS, founder of the Ig Nobel Prize Ceremony, is author of "Ig Nobel Prizes 2" (Dutton, 2005) and editor of the Annals of Improbable Research magazine.

THERE HAVE always been things — call them achievements — that deserved some sort of official acknowledgment but were unlikely to get any. Almost all the world's honors are reserved either for the very best (best athlete, best scientist, employee of the month) or the very worst (worst movie, ugliest outfit, most wasteful use of public money). But for the inventor of karaoke, for the founder of the Assn. of Dead People, for the man who used magnets to levitate a frog, for Murphy of Murphy's Law, for the doctors who treated a man who pricked his finger and smelled putrid for five years, there was nothing before 1991.

That was the year the Ig Nobel Prize Ceremony was founded. The prizes are specifically for achievements that first make people laugh — and then make them think. All the usual distinctions are irrelevant. Good or bad, valuable or worthless, important or trivial — the achievements can have none or all of these qualities.

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Here are a few of the past winners:

Scientists in Stockholm who showed that chickens prefer beautiful humans to Plain Janes or Average Joes. An entrepreneur who made it possible to rent an entire country (Lichtenstein) for corporate conventions, weddings and bar mitzvahs.

Scandinavian volunteers who assessed the effects of wet underwear on thermal comfort in the cold. A Swiss-Japanese-Czech team that noted the effects of chewing-gum flavor on brain waves. An inventor in Tokyo who photographed every meal he consumed during a period of 34 years.

A Canadian doctor who did a comprehensive study of injuries caused by falling coconuts. Three physicians who formed guidelines for dealing with the zipper-entrapped penis.

An engineer in South Carolina who calculated the exact odds (710,609,175,188,282,000 to 1) that Mikhail Gorbachev is the Antichrist. A Dutch ornithologist who observed the first known case of homosexual necrophilia in the mallard duck.

Each of these achievements deserved acknowledgment, of some kind, from someone. Now they have been acknowledged.

Californians have done well over the years. Robert Citron, the former Orange County treasurer whose aggressive investment strategy was blamed for the county going bankrupt, shared the 1995 Ig Nobel Economics Prize. The 1991 Economics Prize went to Michael Milken, father of the junk bond. Robert Klark Graham, founder of the sperm bank that originally accepted deposits only from Nobelians and Olympians, won a Biology Prize. Hagop Akiskal of UC San Diego won for the discovery that, biochemically, romantic love may be indistinguishable from severe obsessive-compulsive disorder.

The achievements of this year's winners range from creating artificial replacement dog testicles, to inventing an alarm clock that runs away and hides, to monitoring the activity of a brain cell in a locust while that locust was watching selected highlights from the movie "Star Wars."

Sometimes the Ig Nobel Prizes can bring clarity to puzzling events in the news. Why do certain leaders doggedly do the things they do? Perhaps the answer can be found in David Dunning and Justin Kreuger's 1999 Ig Nobel Prize-winning study, "Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments."

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