

## “Research Volunteers Wanted. Earn up to \$7000.”

“moon songs,” compliments the astronomers’ calculations about other planets’ heat, rain, and snow, and is touchingly incoherent and insane throughout.

Some letters are more commercial (“Gentlemen are you interested in separating valuable chemical compounds from the sunshine ray? Worth billions of dollars appreciate an airmail reply” reads one telegram) and others are irate: “Gravitation is not a Mystery as taught by lying scientists but contemptible lying” begins an especially passionate booklet by Mr. T. P. Stanley. Actually, this last one contains what is currently my favorite sentence in twentieth-century American literature:

The solution of gravitation seems to be true for it is impossible for any one to give a reason for teaching gravitation which is entirely void of reason but only dumb lying showing the impossibility of getting the truth about gravitation from dumb lying scientists.

There are also highly educated people who have sent in diagrams, people who have transmuted silver into gold (the government covered it up), and innocents, many innocents, who believe that because they had thoughts, they were beautiful. And they were right, but not for the reasons they assumed. It’s amazing and

heartbreaking to read an insane person’s attempt to build a case. It’s like reading a dream as it unfolds.

The book is brief (about 120 pages), it reproduces photographs of some of the original letters, and it’s out of print, which makes it lost perhaps a second time. Further, its publisher is the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Information Press, the publishing arm of the Museum of Jurassic Technology, an organization that specializes in stamping its exhibits with the authenticity of the average Borges short story. I think some people believe the book is a put-on, which is a sad way to discard desperate people’s attempts to share information that—though incorrect—feels so utterly *convinced*.

### CARL ELLIOTT *Guinea Pig Zero*

If you’ve ever been out of work and feeling desperate, asking yourself how you could possibly earn money with your philosophy degree or your creative writing MFA, you’ve probably wondered about those ads at the back of your local alternative weekly that say “Research Volunteers Wanted. Earn up to \$7000.” The ads never say where the research studies take place, or how long they take, or even who is in charge, leaving you to wonder precisely



what you must endure to earn this kind of money. What kind of drugs do they give you? Are you paid extra if they scan your brain or biopsy your liver? What exactly is it worth to let a stranger in a lab coat insert a fiber-optic tube into your rectum?

In May 1996, Bob Helms, a longtime study veteran and former union organizer in Philadelphia, began publishing a job zine called *Guinea Pig Zero*, whose subtitle was *A Journal for Human Research Subjects*, aimed mainly at the kind of subject who enrolled in studies for money. *Guinea Pig Zero* published firsthand reports on the things potential guinea pigs really wanted to know about the business of human

research: how much the studies paid, how bad the food was, whether a research unit employed phlebotomists who had trouble hitting a vein. The look of the zine was rough and handmade, as if it had been stapled together with paper stolen from Kinko's, and many issues featured an actual guinea pig on the cover. The voice of the writing sounded like a cross between Emma Goldman and Robert Crumb. One early issue featured an article about donating eggs to a fertility clinic. It was titled "Cluck, Cluck, Gimme a Buck."

When I first came across *Guinea Pig Zero*, I was teaching medical ethics at McGill University in Montreal. My duties included service on two local research ethics committees at teaching hospitals, where I would wade through stacks of research protocols each month to see if they were safe and ethically designed. The contrast between those protocols and *Guinea Pig Zero* could not have been more dramatic. The protocols called subjects "research participants." *Guinea Pig Zero* called them "medical meat-puppets," "lab rats," or "brain sluts." The protocols pretended that people were enrolling in studies to advance science. *Guinea Pig Zero* assumed that nobody in his right mind would enroll in a study for anything but the money. The protocols described the risk and discomforts of studies in oblique clinical language. *Guinea Pig Zero* was more direct. "The physicians you'll meet will throw in the old prostate exam, just for the hell of it," writes Helms in one issue. "But what's a finger up the ass between friends?"

Each issue featured a section called “The Treadmill of History,” in which Helms wrote about research abuses and disasters over the ages, but the most compelling parts of the zine were the firsthand accounts from Helms and his guinea pig field reporters. *Guinea Pig Zero* even published report cards, grading research units from A to F. In a report card on Smith-Kline Beecham, Helms writes about a psychiatric drug study from which a guinea pig “emerged with \$7,000 in his pocket and his mind on planet Zork” (earning the research unit a grade of “Dirty D”). A guinea pig identified as “Donno” writes about a sleep-deprivation study at the University of Pennsylvania where his mental condition deteriorated so much that he began to hallucinate that he was Tony Randall, guest-hosting *The Tonight Show*. Theresa Dulce, a guinea pig reporting from PPD Pharmaco in Austin, Texas, was identified as “the editrix of *Danzine*, the smart & sexy journal by and for ladies in the sex business.” Her report, titled “Spanish Fly Guinea Pig,” appeared with a photograph of a near-naked woman wearing a G-string and a pig nose.

*Guinea Pig Zero* was a creature of a particular cultural moment. It appeared at a time when computers had made desktop publishing cheap and easy, but before the Web had made blogging even cheaper and easier. Drug companies had begun to move their studies out of universities and into the private sector, often at for-profit, stand-alone testing sites. Competition to attract research subjects had begun push-

ing up payment, making it possible for the first time to make a living as a professional guinea pig. Not a great living, of course—on the pay scale for selling your body, Helms ranks guinea-pigging as somewhere below a porn-film performer and above a crack whore—but still enough to make it look better than ordinary wage slavery. In comparison to a minimum wage job working the deep fryer at Burger King, or temping for a petty tyrant wearing a clip-on necktie, spending three weeks in a drug-testing site didn’t seem so bad.

In its own small way, *Guinea Pig Zero* was revolutionary. Before *Guinea Pig Zero*, nobody had really ever thought about research subjects as a kind of community. Nobody had thought of guinea-pigging as a job, or that guinea pigs might band together and agitate for better pay and better conditions. It also offered a window into a world that most of us never see, even those of us who work in hospitals and medical schools. Its black humor came from the contrast between the sunny, “saving the world through biomedicine” rhetoric of the research establishment and the darker reality of the enterprise itself, where guinea pigs bend over and submit themselves to anonymous strangers to qualify for the privilege of being fed and bled in an urban industrial park.

Helms published the last issue of *Guinea Pig Zero* in 2001, and a few years later he retired from drug testing. Garrett County Press has published an anthology of essays from the zine, but no real successor to *Guinea Pig Zero* has emerged. Perhaps this

should not be surprising. *Guinea Pig Zero* got Helms banned from several research units, and in 1997, when some *Guinea Pig Zero* report cards were reprinted in *Harper's*, Helms was sued by one of the units given a failing grade. *Harper's* apologized immediately; Helms stood firm. The suit was dropped only when the sponsor of the research unit went bankrupt.

## ELIZABETH BENEDICT *Shrink-Wrapped in Heartache*

*The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*  
by G. B. Edwards

All books published posthumously come to us shrink-wrapped in heartache, from a voice we know has already been extinguished. There is more sadness still in a subgroup of this category: books that come from manuscripts abandoned during wartime or hidden for safekeeping and discovered when the fighting is over, when the text is all that's left of the author. A brief list: *The Diary of Anne Frank*; Irène Némirovsky's *Suite Française*; Charlotte Salomon's autobiographical notebook-sized gouaches with text, 769 individual pages, that she called *Life? Or Theatre?* The last is not a book in the old-fashioned sense—its pages are exhibited in museums and Salomon arranged them as acts in a play—but I'm comfortable thinking of it as an early graphic novel. It tells the story of a gifted young artist in Berlin whose Jewish parents send her to live with relatives in

France before the occupation, certain she will be safe there. It is only when they go to find her in 1947 that they learn she has died at Auschwitz—and that she has left a carton containing an illustrated account of her life, including her harrowing final years in a world gone mad. “Keep this safe,” she told a friend. “It is my whole life.”

The story of G. B. Edwards's posthumous and only novel, *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*, is less dramatic but heartbreaking in its own distinctive way. “There may have been stranger recent literary events than the book you are about to read,” writes John Fowles in the essential introduction to the book, first published in both the United Kingdom and the United States in 1981, “but I rather doubt it.”

Edwards's biography is sketchy, deliberately so; over the years he burned all but the few documents that would be necessary after his death. What's important to know is that he was born, in 1899, on Guernsey one of the two larger Channel Islands; that he left the island permanently in about 1926 for London, having been disinherited by his father and so losing the family house; that in London he had a wife and four children, whom he abandoned when they were young and had virtually nothing to do with for the rest of his life; and that he spent his last five years in a rooming house just outside Weymouth, writing and rewriting this novel whose every line burns with love and longing for Guernsey—the remote, unsullied island of his youth, not the tourist destination and tax haven it became. In the mid-1970s, he tried without success to get