

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

HUMOR

by Dave Barry

It's getting late on a school night, but I'm not letting my son go to bed yet, because there's serious work to be done.

"Robert!" I'm saying in a firm voice. "Come to the kitchen right now and blow-dry the ant!"

We have a large ant, about the size of a mature raccoon, standing on our kitchen counter. In fact, it looks kind of like a raccoon, or possibly even a mutant lobster. We made the ant out of papier-mâché, a substance you create by mixing flour and water and newspapers together into a slimy goop that drips down and gets licked up by your dogs, who operate on the wise survival principle that you should immediately eat everything that falls onto the kitchen floor, because if it turns out not to be food, you can always throw it up later.

The ant, needless to say, is part of a Science Fair project. We need a big ant to illustrate an important scientific concept, the same concept that is illustrated by all Science Fair projects, namely: "Look! I did a Science Fair project!"

(I know how we can solve our national crisis in educational funding: Whenever the schools needed money, they could send a letter to all the parents saying: "Give us a contribution right now, or we're going to hold a Science Fair." They'd raise billions.)

Our Science Fair project is due tomorrow, but the ant is still wet, so we're using a hair dryer on it. Science Fair judges *hate* a wet ant. Another problem is that our ant is starting to sag, both in the front (or, in entomological terms, the "prognosis") and in the rear (or "butt"). It doesn't look like one of those alert, businesslike, "cando" ants that you see striding briskly around. It looks depressed, like an ant that has just been informed that all 86,932 members of its immediate family were crushed while attempting to lift a Tootsie Roll.

While Robert is drying the ant, I get a flashlight and go outside to examine the experiment portion of our project, which is entitled "Ants and Junk Food." On our back fence we put up a banner that says, in eight-inch-high letters, WELCOME ANTS. Under this is a piece of cardboard with the following snack substances scientifically

arranged on it: potato chips, a spicy beef stick, a doughnut, a Snickers candy bar, chocolate-filled cookies, Cheez Doodles, Cocoa Krispies, and Screaming Yellow Zonkers. If you were to eat this entire experiment, you would turn into a giant pimple and explode.

We figured this experiment would attract ants from as far away as Indonesia, and we'd note which junk foods they preferred, and this would prove our basic scientific point ("Look! I did a Science Fair project!"). Of course you veteran parents know what actually happened: The ants didn't show up. Nature has a strict rule against cooperating with Science Fair projects. This is why, when you go to a Science Fair, you see 200 projects designed to show you how an electrical circuit works and not one of them can actually make the little bulb light up. If you had a project that was supposed to demonstrate the law of gravity using heavy lead weights, they would fall *up*. So when the ants saw our banner, they said: "Ah-hah! A Science Fair project! Time for us to act in a totally unnatural manner and stay away from the food!"

The irony is, I knew where some ants were: in my office. They live in one of the electrical outlets. I see them going in there all day long. I think maybe they're eating electrons, which makes me nervous. I seriously considered capturing one of the office ants and carrying it out to the science experiment, and if necessary giving it broad hints about what to do ("Yum! Snickers!"). But I was concerned that if I did this, the ants might become dependent on me, and every time they got hungry they'd crawl onto my desk and threaten to give me electrical stings if I didn't carry them to a snack.

Fortunately, some real outdoor ants finally discovered our experiment, and we were able to observe their behavior at close range. I had been led to believe, by countless public-television nature shows, that ants are very organized, with the colony divided into specialized jobs such as drones, work-

ers, fighters, bakers, consultants, etc., all working together with high-efficiency precision. But the ants that showed up at our experiment were total morons. You'd watch one, and it would sprint up to a Cocoa Krispie, then stop suddenly, as if saying: "Yikes! Compared with me, this Cocoa Krispie is the size of a Buick!" Then it would sprint off in a random direction. Some-

times it would sprint back; sometimes it would sprint to another Cocoa Krispie and act surprised again. But it never seemed to do anything. There were thousands of ants behaving this way, and every single time two of them met, they'd both stop and exchange "high-fives" with their antennas, along with, I assume, some kind of ant pleasantries ("Hi Bob!" "No, I'm Bill!" "Sorry! You look just like Bob!"). This was repeated *millions of times*. I watched these ants for two days, and they accomplished nothing. It was exactly like high-

wouldn't have surprised me if some ants started waving orange flags to direct other insects around the area.

But at least there were ants, which meant we could do our project and get our results. I'd tell you what they were, but I really think you should do your own work. That's the whole point of a Science Fair, as I keep telling my son, who has gone to bed, leaving me to finish blow-drying the ant.

A CLOSER LOOK

1. Note some of the activities, human and otherwise, to which Barry compares the behavior of the ants. Why are the comparisons funny?
2. What are some adjectives that describe the quality of Barry's humor? Is it biting? satiric? Or does it have some other quality? Who does Barry make fun of most in this piece?
3. What would you say is Barry's worldview? How would you describe his general view of people?