Episode Book

EPISODE #5835

What Do You Call the Urge to Know Obscure Things?

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SYNOPSIS

Daniel watches Tom Scott and Yes Theory, but it's not the famous places that hook him — it's the obscure island, the strange border, the overlooked piece of infrastructure. Is that one disposition or four unrelated hobbies? And if it's one thing, does it have a name, a lineage, and living practitioners? The short answer is that there's no settled name, and the reason there isn't one turns out to be more interesting than the name would be. The vocabulary exists — epistemic curiosity, epistemophilia, the long tail, antiquarianism, polymathy, trivia — but it's split across psychology, library science, history, and literary studies, and every tradition that touches this disposition arrives with an insult attached.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

A bridge that carries cars hanging under it rather than over it. A border that runs through a library reading room. A clock signal that arrives from a satellite nobody thinks about, and every machine in the building quietly agreeing on what time it is.



Herman

You're describing my watchlist.



Corn

I'm describing Daniel's message. He's been noticing something about his own viewing habits and he's wondering if it has a name. He watches Tom Scott, he watches Yes Theory, and what draws him isn't the famous places or the new products. It's the obscure island. The strange border. The overlooked piece of infrastructure. The question underneath the buildings, the borders and the clocks is whether the pull toward all of it is one disposition or four unrelated hobbies, and if it's one thing, whether the people who have it are part of a tradition with a lineage, a vocabulary, and living practitioners, or just a scattered set of individuals who happen to like the same videos.



Herman

The short version of my answer is that there's no single settled name, and the reason there isn't one is more interesting than the name would be.



Corn

So we're doing this properly, then.



Herman

We're doing it properly. Because the vocabulary exists, it's just split across four or five different disciplines that each grabbed a piece of it. The historians took the part about old objects. The psychologists took the part about curiosity itself. The literary people took the part about breadth. And nobody has sat down and said, this is one disposition and here's what we call it.



Corn

Start with the piece the psychologists took.



Herman

Epistemic curiosity. That's the technical term, and it's defined as the desire for knowledge that's specifically attributed to humans. The contrast is perceptual curiosity, which is the exploratory behavior you see in basically every animal. A rat in a maze poking its nose into a new corridor is running on perceptual curiosity. Wanting to know what a transporter bridge is and why it was built is the other kind.



Corn

So the rat and I are running different software.



Herman

The rat is running the older version. Both are real. Perceptual curiosity gets you to investigate the new thing in front of you. Epistemic curiosity is what makes you keep going after the new thing has stopped being new, because what you want isn't the novelty, it's the explanation.



Corn

And the dictionary term?



Herman

Epistemophilia. Merriam-Webster defines it as love of knowledge, and then qualifies it in a way I find very funny. Excessive striving for or preoccupation with knowledge. The dictionary can't describe the thing without implying there's something wrong with you.



Corn

A diagnosis with a raised eyebrow built in.



Herman

That pattern is going to recur all through this, by the way. Every tradition that touches this disposition comes with an insult attached.



Corn

There's also the long tail. Chris Anderson's idea from two thousand four, originally about music sales, where the argument was that the tail of low-demand items is collectively as big as the head of hits. Somebody writing in the IFLA Journal in two thousand twenty-one borrowed it for knowledge specifically, and described the long tail as emphasizing idiosyncrasies and edge cases rather than the leading short trunk of common occurrences.



Herman

That's the phrase I'd keep. The short trunk. Most travel content lives on the short trunk. Paris, Rome, the pyramids, wherever the algorithm has decided people want to see. The long tail is everything else, and the defining feature of it isn't that it's obscure, it's that it's idiosyncratic, and idiosyncratic is a nice word for this because it doesn't carry the same insult as weird or niche.



Corn

Trunk makes it sound like a tree.



Herman

That's Anderson's metaphor and I think it's doing real work. A tree is mostly trunk, and a tree is defined by its trunk. The tail is the part you could cut off. But the argument is that when distribution stops being expensive, the tail stops being a rounding error.



Corn

Distribution stopped being expensive somewhere around two thousand six.



Herman

Which is when YouTube happened. I don't think it's a coincidence that this disposition, whatever we're going to call it, had its great popular flourishing in the period when the distribution cost of an obscure fact went to zero.



Corn

The tradition's older than that, though. Daniel's question asks for the history, so let's give it to him. What's the closest ancestor?



Herman

Antiquarianism, and it's the closest by a distance. An antiquarian studies antiquities, which means ancient artefacts, archaeological sites, historic archives, manuscripts. The essence of it is a focus on the empirical evidence of the past.



Corn

Evidence rather than argument.



Herman

Literally the motto. Sir Richard Colt Hoare, an eighteenth-century antiquary, and his line was: we speak from facts, not theory.



Corn

That's a decent motto for a podcast. Not going to say which one.



Herman

The interesting bit is how the antiquary defined himself against the historian. Jan Broadway's formulation is that an antiquary studied the past on a thematic rather than a chronological basis. Arnaldo Momigliano, who's the person who actually theorized all this, defined the antiquarian as the type of man who is interested in historical facts without being interested in history.



Corn

That sounds like an insult too.



Herman

It's often read as one. It can also be read as a research program. If you're interested in history, you have to build a narrative, and narratives require you to decide what matters, and once you've decided what matters you've already lost some of the evidence. The antiquary's refusal to build the narrative is a way of keeping their hands off the material.



Corn

Momigliano's line lands exactly on Tom Scott, though. He shows you the Newport Transporter Bridge, and the thing that makes the episode work is that he doesn't tell you what the bridge means. He tells you how it works, and who built it, and why the town needed it, and there's no thesis.



Herman

There's a thesis, it's just underneath. It's usually something like: this was built by people who were solving a problem you've never considered, and they solved it.



Corn

That's a thesis about competence. Which is fine.



Herman

The antiquarians had a more specific ambition, which was to collect a great number of possible explanations with less emphasis on arriving at a truth than on compiling the evidence. Roman antiquarians, Varro, Aulus Gellius, Macrobius, all worked this way. The emperor Claudius wrote antiquarian works, and they're lost, which is a small tragedy.



Corn

Lost is what happens to most of it.



Herman

Then the Renaissance puts the same instinct into objects. The cabinet of curiosities, the Wunderkammer, emerges in the sixteenth century, and the defining feature is that it's an encyclopedic collection of objects whose categorical boundaries were yet to be defined. That last part is the whole thing. You had a room where a narwhal tusk and a piece of coral and a Roman coin sat next to each other, because nobody had decided yet which category the narwhal tusk belonged to, or even whether the tusk was a tusk.



Corn

A room organized by the absence of a filing system.



Herman

Exactly that. William Camden, John Aubrey, Elias Ashmole, Thomas Browne, Ole Worm, Athanasius Kircher. Kircher is the great cautionary case, because he collected widely and was wrong about almost everything, and he's still useful, because his wrongness records what a serious person could believe at the time.



Corn

Wrong facts are still evidence about the person doing the believing.



Herman

There's a modern version of that argument. Robert Gehl wrote in two thousand nine that YouTube is a modern wunderkammer, although in danger of being refined into capitalist institutions just as professionalized curators refined Wunderkammers into the modern museum.



Corn

The refinement is the problem.



Herman

The refinement is always the problem. Once something becomes a museum, it becomes a set of rooms with a prescribed route through them, and the prescribed route is set by whoever decides what matters. The wunderkammer had no route. You wandered.



Corn

Then there's the encyclopedists.



Herman

Pliny the Elder, and his Natural History is the archetype. Written between seventy-seven and seventy-nine, thirty-seven books in ten volumes, and it's the largest single work that survived from the Roman Empire. Astronomy, geography, ethnography, zoology, botany, pharmacology, mining, mineralogy, art history.



Corn

How much of it is true?



Herman

That's the wrong question, but it's the right question. In his preface Pliny claims to have stated twenty thousand facts gathered from about two thousand books and a hundred select authors. The authority lists that survive cover more than four hundred sources. The quality ranges from accurate observation to complete fabrication written down in perfect confidence.



Corn

And he wrote at night.



Herman

His motto was Vita vigilia est. To be alive is to be watchful.



Corn

That's very tidy for a man who died investigating a volcano.



Herman

He died investigating the Vesuvius eruption in seventy-nine, and the reason he went out was curiosity. There's a version of the story where he goes ashore to get a closer look and to help evacuate people, and the curiosity is entangled with the duty and you can't untangle them.



Corn

So the patron saint of the disposition dies of it. That's the top of the episode.



Herman

The polymath is the adjacent tradition but it's different. A polymath's knowledge spans many different subjects, so the axis is breadth. The word is Greek, poly for many and manthanein for to learn. The first work to use polymathy in the title was Johann von Wowern's De Polymathia tractatio in sixteen oh three, and the definition is knowledge of various matters drawn from all kinds of studies, ranging freely through all the fields of the disciplines. Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy in sixteen twenty-four is the earliest recorded English use.



Corn

The difference is that the polymath is a portfolio and this disposition is a pile.



Herman

Say more.



Corn

The polymath is measured by how many fields he can hold. This thing is measured by how deep down a single overlooked subject you'll go. Ouyang Xiu is a better example of the second than of the first, and he's a Song dynasty scholar, so he's a thousand years before any of the Europeans we've been naming.



Herman

Ouyang Xiu analyzed ancient bronze and stone inscriptions and preserved about four hundred rubbings. Lü Dalin's Kaogutu, with a preface from ten ninety-two, is one of the oldest known catalogues to systematically describe and classify ancient artefacts.



Corn

That's a Chinese antiquarian tradition running in parallel, with the classification instinct intact.



Herman

Same instinct, different civilization, no contact. That's evidence the disposition is a thing humans do rather than a thing one culture invented.



Corn

So the disagreement isn't whether the tradition exists, it's where the line runs. And the piece that draws the line for us is the one about trivia.



Herman

This is the sharpest finding and I want to get it right. The word trivia as we use it means information and data considered to be of little value. Its modern usage dates to college quiz contests in the nineteen sixties. And the people who ran those contests, Ed Goodgold and Dan Carlinsky, wrote the trivia books, and they drew the line themselves. They criticized practitioners who were indiscriminate enough to confuse the flower of trivia with the weed of minutiae.



Corn

Flower and weed.



Herman

Their argument was that trivia is concerned with tugging at heartstrings, while minutiae deals with unevocative questions.



Corn

So the tradition's own defenders say the thing that matters isn't the fact, it's whether the fact is connected to anything.



Herman

And that's what makes a fact stay with you. Learning that the Falkirk Wheel lifts boats between two canals with a two-hundred-foot height difference is trivia in the good sense, because the fact carries the whole problem it solved inside it, and the problem is legible to anyone. Learning the serial number of the third production run of the Falkirk Wheel's gearbox is minutiae, because nothing connects to it.



Corn

Except for the person who owns one.



Herman

Exception granted. But the general rule holds, and it's why the whole category carries an insult. Antiquarianism was the same way. The word is often used pejoratively to refer to an excessively narrow focus on factual historical trivia, to the exclusion of a sense of historical context or process.



Corn

John Earle.



Herman

Sixteen twenty-eight. Hee is one that hath that unnaturall disease to bee enamour'd of old age, and wrinkles, and loves all things, as Dutchmen doe Cheese, the better for being mouldy and worme-eaten.



Corn

That's a very specific insult.



Herman

And Horace Walpole in seventeen seventy-eight, on the Society of Antiquaries. Facts, dates and names will never please the multitude, unless there is some style and manner to recommend them. I have no curiosity to know how awkward and clumsy men have been in the dawn of arts or in their decay.



Corn

Walpole is on our side of the line, though. He's not saying the antiquarians are stupid, he's saying they have no style.



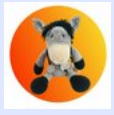
Herman

He's saying the material needs a voice. Which is what we're doing. And to close the loop, Peter Burke, in The Polymath, published by Yale in twenty twenty, argues that specialization from the seventeenth century onward produced what he calls passive polymaths, people who consume broadly but contribute narrowly.



Corn

That's the viewer.



Herman

That's us. And Burke's line about it is that it takes a polymath to mind the gap and draw attention to the knowledges that may otherwise disappear into the spaces between disciplines.



Corn

So the passive polymath is the audience, and the active one is the person who notices the gap.



Herman

Which gets us to the people doing it now, because Daniel asked for them specifically.



Corn

Tom Scott first, because he's the obvious one and there's a reason.



Herman

English presenter, born in the mid-eighties, active since two thousand fourteen. His series are Things You Might Not Know, Amazing Places, Language Files, and The Basics, and the subject list is exactly Daniel's list. The Newport Transporter Bridge, which he calls the weirdest bridge in Wales. Reaction ferries on the Rhine. The Falkirk Wheel. The Thames Barrier. Tokyo's flood tunnels. The tiny trains on the Hallig islands.



Corn

The flood tunnels are the one that gets people.



Herman

Because the scale is absurd and the purpose is boring. It's a cathedral built to handle a problem nobody wants to think about. As of April this year his five channels have eight point one million subscribers and two point oh four billion views. He stopped weekly uploads in January two thousand twenty-four and said, I am so tired. There's nothing in my life right now except work. And he came back in March this year with a forty-one-episode series called Tom Scott: England.



Corn

The break is the part I find interesting. The disposition has a cost.



Herman

There's a version of this where the curiosity is a renewable resource and you just keep going. There's another version where the person who has it most purely is the person who gets exhausted first, because they've been running full throttle for a decade on a thing most people only do on a Sunday.



Corn

What's the second name?



Herman

Roman Mars. The podcast is 99% Invisible, launched September third, two thousand ten, and the tagline is about all the thought that goes into the things we don't think about. The name comes from a Buckminster Fuller quote. Ninety-nine percent of who you are is invisible and untouchable.



Corn

That's a better formulation of the disposition than anything the dictionary has.



Herman

It's the best one-line version. Six hundred twenty-five episodes as of April last year. It won a duPont-Columbia Award in two thousand twenty-two. And the companion book, The 99% Invisible City, was a New York Times bestseller in two thousand twenty.



Corn

That's the same territory as Tom Scott with the opposite subject matter. Scott does engineering, Mars does design and the built environment, and the target is the same.



Herman

Atlas Obscura is the third and it's the most explicitly encyclopedic of the modern ones. Founded in two thousand nine by Joshua Foer and Dylan Thuras, cataloguing unusual and obscure travel destinations. Daily podcast, books, the two thousand sixteen explorer's guide, group trips. And there's a recent development that's worth knowing about because it shows the tension we've been talking about.



Corn

The mission against the business.



Herman

In April of last year Louise Story became CEO. In November, Foer and Thuras, the founders, were removed from the board by shareholder vote after disagreements with her direction.



Corn

Of course they were.



Herman

That's the refinement Gehl predicted. The wunderkammer gets a strategy department, and then the people who built it because they found the objects interesting get outvoted by the people who own it because they find the audience interesting.



Corn

Yes Theory is the odd one out.



Herman

Founded two thousand fifteen by Thomas Brag, Ammar Kandil, Matt Dahlia and Derin Emre. The mantra is Seek Discomfort. Nine point nine one million subscribers and one point two seven billion views as of April this year. Won the Streamy for First Person in two thousand twenty-one.



Corn

That's a different thing.



Herman

Yes Theory is about the experience of the person doing it. Tom Scott is about the object. The discomfort in Yes Theory is the subject, and in Tom Scott the discomfort is the audience's, because they've been made to care about a bridge.



Corn

So one of the names Daniel listed is actually a different genre wearing the same coat.



Herman

It's adjacent. Both are long-tail content. Both refuse the short trunk. But the long tail of experiences and the long tail of knowledge are two different tails.



Corn

So to answer the third part of Daniel's question directly. Is this one tradition or a collection of interests?



Herman

I think it's one disposition with several historical expressions. The disposition is epistemic curiosity pointed at the long tail. The expressions are antiquarianism, encyclopedism, the wunderkammer, the modern YouTube explainer, and the podcast about design. Each one has a different object and a different method, and they're all downstream of the same thing, which is believing that a fact about an obscure subject is worth having on its own terms.



Corn

And the difference between this and trivia collecting is evocation. Goodgold and Carlinsky already said it. The trivia that stays with people is the trivia that tugs at something. The minutiae is the stuff that sits there being true.



Herman

Which means the disposition has a moral dimension that nobody wants to admit to. You're not just collecting facts, you're collecting facts that connect to something, and the something is usually a human problem.



Corn

A bridge exists because a town needed to cross water. A border exists because somebody drew a line. A clock signal exists because machines need to agree. Every obscure fact in the category is a fossil of a human problem.



Herman

That's the answer, and it's a better answer than a name would have been.



Hilbert

I agree with most of that.



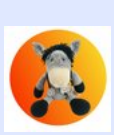
Corn

Most.



Hilbert

You've got the mechanism right. You've got the scale wrong. It's not a tradition of a few hundred people who make videos. It's a trade.



Herman

The trade being what.



Hilbert

Knowing how things work so you can fix them when they break at three in the morning. There's a name for it on the floor. Janitorial epistemology.



Corn

That's not in Merriam-Webster.



Hilbert

Merriam-Webster doesn't work nights. I spent a stretch as the night man at a museum of obsolete technology. Twelve to eight, five nights, a building with no windows on the second floor and a boiler that talked. Most of the job was walking. The rest of it was the collection.



Herman

What was in the collection.



Hilbert

Clocks. Dead ones. A room of them, and every one of them had stopped, and the whole point of the room was to show how each one had tried to keep time and failed. Water clocks, mercury clocks, a shelf of verge escapements. I catalogued them because nobody had, and the inventory was a photocopied sheet with about a third of the entries blank.



Corn

You filled it in.



Hilbert

Took four months. Nobody asked me to. There was one brass mechanism on the top shelf, about the size of a bread box, and the tag said one word. Computer's grandfather. That's the whole label.



Herman

So you opened it.



Hilbert

No. That's the only thing in that building that ever made me feel stupid. I stood in front of it on and off for a year, and I couldn't tell you how it knew when to chime. There was a verge, there was a weight drum, there was something in the middle that wasn't a verge and wasn't a drum, and the chiming was correct. I stayed three hours past my shift one morning trying to work it out. It was the only time in eleven years I did that.



Corn

Three hours past a night shift. For a clock.



Hilbert

There's an inscription on the base. Small, worn. Latin. Time is a river, but this is a ditch.



Herman

What does that mean.



Hilbert

I don't know. I never found out what the thing was or who made it. That's what I came out to say, is that you can't count it. Whatever you're calling this tonight, the number of people who do it is bigger than the number of people who film it.



Corn

And the museum director told you what it was.



Hilbert

He told me it was a replica. The original was a device that got lifted from the Vatican in the eighteen hundreds by a Jesuit clockmaker who'd been disgraced and left for Patagonia. He said the original was still down there, and he said it like it was a fact about the weather.



Herman

Ticking in a cave.



Hilbert

His words. I wrote them down.



Corn

You kept the logbook.



Hilbert

Every night man keeps the logbook. Mine's in a box in my flat with the rest of them. On my last day I wrote an entry saying the mechanism chimed at four forty-four in the morning.



Herman

You were there at four forty-four.



Hilbert

I was. That's the point. It had no power source. No weight on the drum, no spring, nothing wound. It chimed anyway. I wrote it down and I signed it and I went home.



Corn

And nobody ever asked you about it.



Hilbert

Nobody reads the log. That's the job.



Herman

The thing that strikes me is that you didn't open it.



Hilbert

You don't open a clock you're being paid to watch. You watch it. That's the whole night.



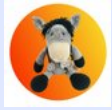
Corn

I think what Herman's getting at is that you have the disposition more purely than Tom Scott does, because Scott gets to explain the thing and you never got to. You just had to stand next to it.



Hilbert

Standing next to it is the job. That's what I keep trying to tell you. Everyone who's ever fixed anything has a version of that brass box. You don't get to know what it is. You get to know that it's there.



Herman

You know, that connects to something Gehl said about the wunderkammer being stripped of its function. You kept a piece of it. The museum had a label that said Computer's grandfather, and everybody walked past it, and you stood there for a year.



Corn

The room was a wunderkammer and you were its only visitor.



Hilbert

I was its night man. Different thing.



Corn

Same thing, on the roster.



Hilbert

...Alright. Same thing.



Corn

So the thing I keep coming back to is the etymology. Antiquarian started as an insult. Trivia started as an insult. Epistemophilia, in the dictionary, includes the word excessive. Every tradition that names this disposition ends up apologizing for it.



Herman

It's the pattern of the whole history. Walpole satirized the antiquaries in seventeen seventy-eight for caring about mouldy cheese, and two centuries later we're making videos about brine shrimp and the third-longest escalator in Europe.



Corn

Is that because the disposition looks silly from outside, or because the people who have it don't know how to explain why it matters?



Herman

I think it's the second one, and I think Hilbert's clock is the answer to it. The mechanism had no wiring and no weight and it still chimed. He doesn't know why and he wrote the entry anyway.



Corn

You don't need to know how the water clock works to know you should be in the room.



Herman

That's what I'd land it on. The tradition isn't the facts. It's the willingness to be in the room with something you don't understand, long enough that it stops being strange to you and starts being the point.



Corn

Then the question for Daniel is whether the name matters at all. And I think the answer, having spent the hour going through all of them, is that the names are for other people.



Herman

The names are for other people. The thing itself doesn't have a name that fits, and the four word version we've got is fine, because it's doing the same work the antiquarians were doing with a worse vocabulary. We speak from facts, not theory.



Corn

I want to make one prediction about where this goes. The more algorithmic the recommendation gets, the more the long tail becomes both easier to reach and easier to cut off. Reach it and the platform is doing more of this work than the universities ever did. Get cut off and the lot disappears.



Herman

The trunk is safe. The tail is fragile.



Corn

The trun

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