

are actually two extant Benheim Torahs. And she hears stories that confirm that brave acts by non-Jews weren't confined to her father's village. One Benheim survivor, a woman named Ilse Loew, tells Schwartz about a woman from Holland she met recently who had hidden Jews during the war: "One day someone knocked on her door—it was either the Dutch police or a Nazi—and demanded she hand over the Jews. She offered him a cup of coffee and while he drank, she got a gun and killed him." An undertaker friend stowed the body in a coffin with another corpse.

But good neighbors are not the whole story, either. There were many seemingly nice local ladies who moved into vacant Jewish homes and live there still, tending flowers. Gradually, Schwartz pieces together the story of who let who hide whom. The pharmacist who initially sheltered Loew and her future husband during Kristallnacht soon sent them out into the streets, where Nazi thugs roamed. Benheim men sent to Dachau all returned in March 1939—thin, but alive. Most sent to concentration camps later did not return. Of the 89 Benheimers who were deported in 1940–41, 87 were murdered.

Those who read widely in the crowded field of Holocaust studies will find some facets of this book familiar. Like Daniel Mendelsohn, author of *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* (2006), Schwartz goes to elderly neighbors and relatives, and finally travels thousands of miles, to hear the stories she was "allergic to" as a kid. These stories may be less reliable than historical data, she admits, but "I liked how one person's memory bumped another, muddying the moral waters of easy judgment." This book of moments and little stories surprises and horrifies, soothes and disturbs. But it is, above all, a beautiful read by a charming writer. And it reminds us that behind every story is the flawed human being who told it.

AVIYA KUSHNER is the author of the forthcoming book *And There Was Evening, And There Was Morning*, about the experience of reading the Bible in English for the first time after a lifetime of reading it in Hebrew.

ARTS & LETTERS

Organization Man

Reviewed by Barbara Wallraff

WE OWE A GREATER DEBT TO mental illness than is commonly recognized. An inmate in an asylum for the criminally insane made important contributions to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

The eminent lexicographer Samuel Johnson exhibited "odd

compulsions, such as pausing to touch every lamp-post as he walked down Fleet Street," as Joshua Kendall mentions in *The Man Who Made Lists*. The subject of Kendall's biography, Peter Mark Roget, exhibited obsessive-compulsive behavior more than a century before his diagnosis was coined. Evidently, people with mental illness are gravely at risk for compiling language-reference books.

Not that Roget (pronounced ro-zhay) thought of his 1852 *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* as anything so modest. His ambition was to classify all knowledge. His wasn't the first book of English synonyms—that was published in 1766 by one John Trusler—but it was original in that it listed the user's options without commentary or editorializing. An English physician and scientist born in 1779, Roget lived in an age when much science consisted of classifying and taxonomizing—plants, animals, "electrical bodies," human intellectual faculties, and so forth. Kendall writes,

Just as his hero, the 18th-century naturalist Carl Linnaeus, divided animals into six classes, Roget divvied up his one thousand concepts as follows:

- I. Abstract Relations
- II. Space
- III. Matter
- IV. Intellect
- V. Volition
- VI. Affections

That outline for the thesaurus, together with the range of Roget's accomplishments, might lead one

THE MAN WHO MADE LISTS:
Love, Death, Madness, and the Creation of Roget's Thesaurus.

By Joshua Kendall.
Putnam, 297 pp. \$25.95



Peter Mark Roget

to suspect the good doctor of megalomania—though the truth is more nearly that he was just doing what well-educated men of the time did. Over the years, Roget developed a new laboratory test for arsenic poisoning; published a mathematical paper on the slide rule, inventing the log-log scale, “the centerpiece of the modern slide rule”; discovered that “the retina typically sees a series of still images as a continuous picture,” thereby laying the theoretical groundwork for movies; and, as the capstone on a successful career as an academic physiologist (though some accused him of plagiarism and playing favorites), published a 250,000-word treatise on animal and vegetable physiology that earned him renown in America for the first time. Not until he was 73 did he get around to publishing his thesaurus, and he edited new editions of it until his death 17 years later, in 1869. This retirement project of his has gone on to sell nearly 40 million copies.

Roget traveled in interesting circles. As a young man, he worked for the jurist and philosopher Jeremy Bentham and the chemist Humphry Davy. He crossed paths with Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, Madame de Staël, and Erasmus Darwin, Charles’s grandfather, who not only translated Linnaeus but set him to verse. He met William Franklin, Ben’s son, and chatted with

him about kites and electricity. He helped to organize a book club that Isaac D’Israeli, Benjamin Disraeli’s father, was invited to join.

Obsessiveness, anxiety, and depression can shadow even the sunniest of lives, but into Roget’s life much rain did fall. He was four when his father died, more or less permanently unhinging his mother. Over the years, he watched his mother and daughter go mad and his sister battle chronic depression, and he had much to reproach himself for when his beloved uncle, Sir Samuel Romilly, committed suicide by slitting his throat with a razor. Cancer robbed him of his wife after less than 10 years of marriage. Kendall emphasizes—even harps on—Roget’s MO of using intellectual activity to cope with emotional problems and tragedy.

As befits a book about a man who strove to help us find exactly the words we want, *The Man Who Made Lists* is for the most part elegantly written. Occasionally, though, Kendall’s brain goes on autopilot, with results such as “the entire city was then down in the dumps” and “By August, Peter’s recovery was in full swing.” And I would have preferred if Kendall had either used his imagination less or told us where he got scene details such as “After saying a quick goodbye to his mother . . .” and “Roget’s jaw dropped.” But these are cavils/quibbles/trivial objections, to quote from the illegitimate offspring of *Roget’s* that resides on my computer. All in all, *The Man Who Made Lists* is an absorbing account of a remarkable man.

BARBARA WALLRAFF writes columns on language for *The Atlantic Monthly* and King Features Syndicate, and is the author of *Word Fugitives* (2007), *Your Own Words* (2004), and *Word Court* (2000).

Net Gains

Reviewed by David Robinson

TWO YEARS AGO, CULTURAL critic Lee Siegel found himself thrust by his editors at *The New Republic* into the rough-and-tumble world of blogs, where anonymous readers could (and did) level harsh attacks against his every word. He rightly saw these

AGAINST THE MACHINE:

Being Human in the Age of the Electronic Mob.

By Lee Siegel.
Spiegel & Grau.
182 pp. \$22.95