

Confessions of a Wild Bore

For the first half-century of this country's existence, there were apparently no such things as bores or boredom. At least, there is no recorded use in English of the word "bore" until 1812, of "boredom" until 1852. Once Americans woke up to the endless possibilities of boring and being bored by one another, of course, they more than made up for the deficiencies of their forebears. In this classic 1960 essay, John Updike lightheartedly examines from a bore's perspective the joys of nonstop talking.

by John Updike

Pity the poor bore. He stands among us as a creature formidable and familiar yet in essence unknowable. We can read of the ten infallible signs whereby he may be recognized and of the seven tested methods whereby he may be rebuffed. Valuable monographs exist upon his dress and diet; the study of his mating habits and migrational routes is well past the speculative stage; and statistical studies abound. One out of 312 Americans is a bore, for instance, and a healthy male adult bore consumes *each year* one and a half times his own weight in other people's patience.

But in all this vast literature one grave defect persists: The bore is always described externally, in a tone of distance and distaste. Hence the central question—what makes a few people bores when the rest of us are

so fascinating—remains cloaked in mystery. Yet bores, unlike Red Indians, were not here to greet the Pilgrims. They do not, like rabid bats, come up from Mexico. No: The shameful truth, suppressed by both the public press and the spokesmen of our federal government, is that bores are created *out of our own number*. Each year, a few healthy Americans, whether by alchemy, infection, or unscrupulous recruiting methods among the alumni, are converted into bores.

How can this happen? The riddle of borogenesis has defied solution for several reasons. For one thing, by their very natures bores are the most difficult and unappetizing class of society to interview, and have been shunned where prostitutes, alcoholics, and juvenile delinquents have been (sociologically) embraced. For

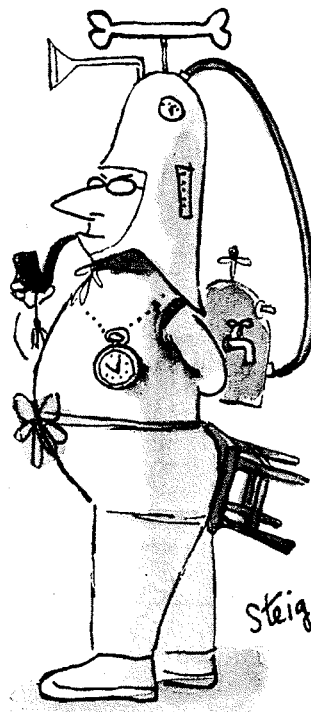
another, bores have themselves *heavily infiltrated* the very psychological sciences that should be grappling with the problem! But the chief, and most impressive, obstacle is that *bores are oblivious of being such*. A mature, fully feathered bore absolutely believes that he is just like anybody else—if anything, cuter; so he has no recollection of becoming one. Hence superstition continues to hold court, and what is actually a disease is still widely regarded as a vice.

I have been prompted to these reflections by a remarkable document pressed upon me, with a wild, pleading look of apology, by an insufferable person as I was leaving a dinner party he had utterly ruined with his ceaseless prattle. Though it will strike some tastes, no doubt, as too morbid for print, I submit it in the interests of sunlight, reason, and mercy:

How innocently (*the document, written in a fluent hand on several hundred sheets of lawyer's yellow foolscap, begins*) it all began! I noticed a faint, not disagreeable itching in the back of my throat whenever anyone else talked for as long as two or three minutes. I would shake my head vigorously, and think that the sensation would pass, but by the fourth minute the itching became so unbearable that I *had* to interrupt. At first, my remarks bore a deceptive pertinence to the topics under discussion, and I flatter myself that in those early months no one but my wife, whose canny blue eyes developed a defensive narrowing tic, noticed anything amiss.

My first total blackout occurred toward the end of August. It had been a very warm August, but that evening a little breeze sprang up off the bay, and my wife and I attended a dinner

party with a few of our dearest friends. Never, I thought, had the food been so delicious, the wine so subtle, the ladies so lovely, and the gentlemen so sturdy, acute, and wry. Our conversation on the veranda seemed a veritable dance of ideas, counterthrusts, and graceful laughter. I was dazzled to think that here, in this specific house on the North American continent, Mankind's tortuous climb toward civilization had at last borne fruit. Imagine, then, my amazement when, in the private closeness of our car, as I hummed a popular air in celebration of a perfect night, my wife turned to me and snapped, "Why did you talk so much? You bored everybody silly."



The Bore

"I?" I protested. "I said little, but that little, well."

"Stuff!" she snapped. "Your tongue didn't stop for four hours. You drove poor Maggie Wentworth absolutely to sleep. And as for Horace, you brought on a bilious attack that had him hiccupping like a cricket." Even now, I find it difficult to believe that her impression of the evening is the correct one. One piece of evidence, however—admittedly circumstantial—emerged to support her case. The Wentworths never had us back, though *they owe us*.

After this seizure I was more watchful of myself. I deliberately curtailed my conversational offerings, even in relation to subjects upon which I was plainly the best informed and possessed the most lively and intricate opinions. I made myself, as it were, a mere supplier of footnotes, and artificially withheld from my fellow humans the riches of information and nuance I knew to be within me.

I was on the verge of shucking this (as I thought) foolish and inhibiting cocoon when late one night, as I was briefly qualifying something someone else had said—scarcely, indeed, qualifying; merely restating his gist in more lucid and understandable terms—I noticed, to my horror, that a delicate but distinct glaze had overspread the faces of my auditors. It is impossible to convey the macabre effect. It was not so much that their eyes had gone out of focus (for some eyes were staring fixedly at me)

or that their mouths had sagged open (for some mouths were rigidly clamped shut): It was the curious uniformity of complexion, as if with one swipe their faces had been painted with the same lacquer. And, though I paused, gagging on my terror at this disgusting omen, *I went right on talking*. It was then that I realized that I was a hopelessly ill man.

My subsequent decay was not without its pretty phosphorescences. One of the most vivid, and in a way mystical, sensations is that of *repetition*. As words issue from one's mouth, one is conscious of having said them before, but with no idea of whether it was an hour ago, a week ago, or in another world altogether. The feeling is not unlike the universally experienced intuition of having been in a strange place at a previous time, which offers to some a comforting proof of the doctrine of reincarnation. The bore's repetition wears a kindred nimbus of romantic reassurance; though I know I have pronounced these words before, perhaps to this identical company, yet I have no inclination to stop. Indeed, the words seem enhanced by repetition, as in some aesthetic credos furniture and utensils are improved in beauty by the marks of wear left upon them by humble thumbs.

Becoming a bore is far from a simple, simultaneous decline of the mental and sensory faculties. On the contrary: Some are unhealthily heightened. As one's stock of anecd-

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dots and topics dwindles to a precious few, one's ability to relate these obsessive subjects to a running conversation increases. It is truly astounding with what ease the mind of the bore creates an illusory relevance! If, as has been said, the mark of the rational mind is the ability to perceive connections between unlike things, then the bore is truly in the forefront of rational beings.

For instance: I am oppressed by a peculiar vague emotion, or circular set of propositions, about my hometown that, boiled down to its essence, might go as follows: "It seems extraordinary to me that the town where I was born, and spent all my formative years, had nothing extraordinary about it. Yet is not this, in a sense, extraordinary?" Not that I ever state it so baldly. My effort to unburden myself of this strange message usually takes the form of a sentence beginning, "In the town where I grew up," and going on to describe some innocuous condition like the way the mailman walked up one side of the street and then down the other.

Nonbores can have no conception of how many opportunities I perceive in the course of an hour to intrude this kind of information. A conversation on, say, cybernetics seems to my deranged but active brain an immense sieve full of holes crying to be plugged with a sentence

beginning, "In the town where I grew up." The glaze on the faces around me is no longer a deterrent, since that particular varnish is applied now the moment I enter a room. I am indifferent to it; I am indifferent to sniggers, to yawns, to the creeping net of ostracism that is tightening around me and my family. There is one delight left in my life, one music toward whose enchanted strains my whole being is bent. My throat itches, my larynx inflates with air, my tongue contorts; and I am drowned in bubbling syllables of bliss.

Yet, between the luminous day of normality and the ecstatic night of boringness there exists a twilight, brief for some, agonizingly long for others, in which the sufferer flitters ambiguously among phantasmal shapes of embarrassment and shame. While his tongue happily lopes along, a remote corner of his mind involuntarily observes the dismal effects he is producing; in intervals of extreme lucidity he is even bored himself. It is in such a twilight moment that I have sat down to pen, before the black curtain falls finally, these hasty words, this quick cry. In the town where I grew up. . . . (*The remaining hundred and eighty thousand words of the confession, while of indubitable interest to the specialist, are well in excess of the needs of the general reader.*)