Bunch of amateurs

A search for the american character

By jack hitt

(Crown; 280 pages; $26)

In the age of experts, amateurs are also alive and well. Consider, for example, the rise of Wikipedia. Launched in 2001 as a departure from expert-authored texts, Wikipedia now contains almost 4 million entries in English alone, prepared (and revised) by more than 100,000 regularly active contributors whose only qualification is a willingness to do the work. With an accuracy rate akin to that of Encyclopedia Britannica, it has become the largest and most popular source of general information on the Internet.

In "Bunch of Amateurs," Jack Hitt, who writes for Rolling Stone, Harper's, GQ, Wired and public radio's "This American Life," celebrates amateurism as a fundamental American characteristic. Acknowledging that amateurs can be "wrong, crazy, fraudulent, or twisted," Hitt claims that their playfulness, improvisation and willingness to challenge conventional wisdom yields "all kinds of new things." This ethos, he suggests, is responsible for the view, still widespread throughout the world, that the United States is "the coolest nation" on earth.

Hitt's accounts of amateurs in ornithology, genetic engineering, prehistoric archaeology and astronomy are irreverent and iconoclastic. And his book is chock-full of colorful characters. Jack Horner, a college dropout who bobs back and forth when he talks "like a slacker looking for his bong," Hitt reveals, is a self-taught paleontologist who demolished an assumption once taken for granted by dinosaur experts: that Tyrannosaurus rex was a vicious predator.

And the pony-tailed John Dobson, a former monk of the Ramakrishna Order in San Francisco, "who breezily disses the Big Bang and mocks Stephen Hawking," is internationally renowned for using a piece of porthole glass, a cardboard tube and an eyepiece from a pair of Salvation Army binoculars to design a telescope as effective as those found in major research universities.

Although he is right to remind us that the United States (mythically, at least) is "the land of fresh starts and second acts," Hitt's analysis of amateurism is, at times, simplistic. His first chapter, which seeks to identify "the baptismal moment" of American amateurism, misses the target. Thrown together as diplomats in Paris, in 1778, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin are not best understood as a professional and an amateur.

More importantly, although Hitt reads into the record some colossal amateur gaffes (most notably the...
embrace of the "Kennewick Man" as a "Caucasoid" who came to America 16,000 years ago), he tends to recycle romantic cliches about the motives and methods of amateurs and to demonize experts. (One of his targets is John Fitzpatrick, the director of the Lab of Ornithology at Cornell University. Although Cornell has been my professional home for more than 30 years and I have met Fitzpatrick a few times, he and I have never had a substantive conversation.)

Because amateurs "just want to know," Hitt insists that they are "more likely to see what is actually there." Anything but rugged individualists, they enthusiastically engage in "brain-storming, open-source shared debate."

By contrast, because professionals are in it for money and prestige, their ability to discern the truth is blurred. To Fitzpatrick, Hitt asserts, the ivory-billed woodpecker "was not a bird. It was a logo" for the Lab of O. Moreover, academics spend their time in "the weeds of mind-numbing specifics" - and are infected by the prejudices and biases of their "peer-review" culture.

Clearly, some professionals are hungry for fame and fortune and can fail to see the forest for the trees. But so are amateurs. And Hitt underestimates the intellectual curiosity that animates many professionals and the importance (like it or not) of specialized training in the world in which we live.

Most distressingly, Hitt misses the anti-intellectualism that can - and does - inhere in the culture of amateurism. In the United States, let's remember, a majority of adults believe in UFOs, fewer than 40 percent believe in evolution, and about one-third believe they will be directly affected by the consequences of climate change.

It's hard to resist Hitt's "hitchhiker's guide to amateurism" and his delightful tales of weekend warriors (like "gungywamper" David Barron, who believes that nine stone shelters in southwestern Connecticut are Celtic dwellings built by Irish monks 1,500 years ago) laying siege to fortresses of expertise.

And so, to put the culture of amateurism - and "Bunch of Amateurs" - in proper perspective, it is especially important not to succumb to "the usual quicksilver arguments about creativity." To find the middle ground between adulation and dismissal, it may help to keep Hitt's own words in mind. "I know how to jerry-rig a narrative," he writes, with tongue (perhaps) only slightly in his cheek, "using only a couple of wayward factoids to make it sound just right. It's something I was born to do."

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