I'll Take the Place of Any Hostage Mia Farrow Doesn't Take the Place Of

I would prefer a place without snakes, even though I imagine Mia Farrow bravely took snakes into consideration when she offered to exchange herself for "Suleiman Jamous, the humanitarian coordinator of the Sudan Liberation Movement."

The Darién Gap is a 30,000-acre area between Colombia and Panama. In the 19th Century, the Gap referred to the dreamed-of gap in the mountains that would make a canal from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific possible. Now, the Gap is the gap in the Pan-American Highway, which is why you can’t drive from Alaska to the bottom of Chile. In the same way that there is a Northwest Passage, sort of, if you have an icebreaker, it is possible to get from the Atlantic to the Pacific via Darién, but the way is too zig-zaggy for a canal to be an option.

Another problem: paramilitary guerrillas. The paramilitary groups include two left-wing groups, ELN and FARC; and one right-wing group, AUC. You may ask yourself, If I have to be kidnapped by a paramilitary group in or near the Darién Gap, which should I choose? Two books that could help you decide are Leszli Kalli's *Kidnapped: A Diary of My 373 Days in Captivity* and *The Cloud Garden*, by Tom Hart Dyke and Paul Winder.

Leszli Kalli was not exactly in the Gap when the small plane she was taking with her father Laszlo from Bucaramanga, Colombia, to Bogotá, was hijacked. From Bogotá, she planned to fly to Israel to work on a Kibbutz for 6 months. You might think she was a bit
sheltered for an 18 year old, that her father would accompany her on a flight less than 250 miles-
but then look what happened. After the hijacking, the 32 people on the plane were divided into
4 groups, and Leszli ended up in a group with her father and six male plane employees.

Tom Hart Dyke and Paul Winder, in their 20s, had each been on the road for about two
years when they met and decided to cross the Gap together. Tom was an obsessed orchid-seed
collector, while Paul was simply an extreme traveler. They were within a day or two's walk of
Panama when they were kidnapped by the FARC. The FARC was in it for the money, although
Hart Dyke and Winder insisted that their families were actually rather poor. The kidnappers
focused on Winder, a banker, instead of Hart Dyke, who said he was a gardener. In fact, Hart
Dyke's family probably could have come up with some ransom; it seems typical of these FARC
terrorists that they didn't pick up on Hart Dyke's address, Lullingstone Castle, which suggests
some disposable income.

Leszli Kalli's book reads like the diary of a young girl. Its apparent minimal editing is
part of its charm. Leszli remembers her dreams and recounts them, along with her daily decision
whether or not to bathe, and her relationship with a former boyfriend. There are two entirely
separate characters named Diego, and you have to figure this out for yourself. You would think
that as a lovely young woman, she would receive a lot of attention both from the terrorists and
from the airline employees, but she ends up disliking her fellow hostages at least as much as she
does her captors, and they don't seem fond of her either. She quarrels with her father Laszlo and
resentfully notes her mother's radioed suggestion that Leszli use her free time to become
proficient as a sculptor.

You have to read carefully to get a sense of Leszli's uniqueness. Until her capture, she's
had the nervous habit of pulling out her eyelashes, which she is able to overcome during her 379
days in the jungle. At one point she impulsively shaves her head. She and her father are skilled at fermenting *panela* to make a mildly alcoholic drink. Although at one point one of the terrorists comforts her when she's upset that the male hostages won't play Parcheesi with her, her closest bonds seem to be with various animals; she plays with a dead snake for a whole afternoon. She cares for a tarantula under her bed and tries to make the life of a captive duck more comfortable. She complains that her father cares more about his pet parakeet and a friendly monkey than he does about her.

She spends a lot of time writing in her diary, watching TV in the TV hut, and listening to the radio, while the male hostages and their captors play soccer together. Snakes are a major problem, including one Leszli estimates to be 13 feet long. The whole group suffers a bit from the Stockholm Syndrome; departing one camp, Laszlo leaves tips for several terrorists. Leszli's anger is directed more toward the president of Colombia for the pace of the negotiations than toward the terrorists.

Tom and Paul do not succumb to the Stockholm Syndrome, although they do play a few games of chess with their captors (who win). They move camps more often and do not have a TV hut or radio. They give their captors nicknames: "Loose Teenager," "Nutter," "The Game Player," etc. They call two other hostages whom they are not allowed to talk to "the Bedfellows" and wave to them when they can. Paul speaks very little Spanish, and although Tom has recently completed a seven-week course, he pretends to understand little of what the captors are saying. When they begin saying *degollar* (to slit someone's throat), a verb not taught at Tom's Spanish school, Tom and Paul plan to escape through a nearby thick field of maize. By the time they have stolen enough supplies, however, the FARC members have harvested the maize. Tom
plans a beautiful garden in his mind and at one long-term camping spot carefully plants orchids and other flowers. The kidnappers, of course, stomp it to death as they prepare to move on.

ELN and FARC, at least as portrayed by Kalli, Hart Dyke, and Winder, have a lot in common. Neither group seems as interested in ideology as in collecting ransom. Both groups are obsessed with cleanliness (although you wouldn't catch me bathing in one of those rivers, so I hope I'm sent as a hostage to a dry climate, which might also have fewer snakes) and *panela*. Tom and Paul observe that Loose Teenager has gained weight over their nine months of captivity because of all the *panela*, and Leszli fears the same about herself. The FARC is much larger (12,000 - 18,000 members) and better funded than the ELN (about 3,000 members) although you wouldn't know it from reading these books. Despite more snakes, I'd have to go to ELN, because of the TV hut.

My advice here is that you should probably stay out of The Darién Gap. Also: if you know Spanish, pretend not to, so you can listen to the captives talk to one another about your future. Moving from encampment to encampment isn't what I would call fun, neither for captors nor for captives. Still, it is cheaper than a lot of eco-tourism, and if your captors don't kill you, you can write a book later.

**A Really Bad War to be Wounded In**

My alternate title for this entry was "It's A Wonder Anyone's Alive at All."
The total casualty rate during World War I was far higher than the American Civil War's. However, huge medical advances occurred between the 1860s and 1914. You may ask yourself which would be worse--to be wounded in the Civil War or in World War I.
I have to say that being wounded in the Civil War in most situations, especially early on, would be much worse. Ira M. Rutkow's *Bleeding Blue and Gray: Civil War Surgery and the Evolution of American Medicine* is a reminder of how awful medicine was before the development of asepsis and antiseptics, let alone useful chemicals. Rutkow’s book is also the story of how personality conflicts and inter-agency political battles can get in the way of what everyone agrees is a good thing--in this case, proper care for the Civil War’s wounded soldiers.

Most of the Confederate Army's medical records were destroyed, so *Bleeding Blue and Gray* concentrates on Union Army policies. At first there were none. The surgeon general at the time believed, for example, that army hospitals were unnecessary in South Carolina because of its warm climate--even after four wounded soldiers froze to death. Little could be said about the efficacy of American medical schools in turning out physicians. In fact, you could avoid med school completely and still call yourself a doctor, even if your personal theories about medicine were worse than the accepted ones.

In fact, you'd have to be pretty eccentric to have medical theories worse than the accepted ones. The physician with the strongest following in the United States at the time was Benjamin Rush. His belief was that human sickness was caused by "excess activity in blood vessels." Thus, removing excess body fluids--including blood and the contents of the digestive system through bleeding, purging, and the blistering of the skin--was the best possible way to deal with disease.

As in World War I, amputation was the primary surgical procedure; amputation fatalities, percentage-wise, during the Civil War, were higher because of the lack of clean facilities and surgical instruments. While anesthetics like ether were theoretically available, they did not
always make it to the operating field (I use the word "field" literally), and the surgeon's duty was simply to complete the process as quickly as possible to lessen the pain of the procedure.

Some doctors and indeed untrained random enthusiasts abandoned their assigned roles of treating the sick or dressing wounds and rushed off to the amputation fields just for the joy of the experience. Except for the mad amputators, though, the doctors were for the most part doing the best they could.

There are several heroes in *Bleeding Blue and Gray*, and the first one is Frederick Law Olmsted--yes, the designer of New York's Central Park--who became executive secretary of the United States Sanitary Commission, the precursor of the Red Cross. The civilians on the Sanitary Commission were finally successful in establishing an independent ambulance service and in making sure some basic sanitary conditions were established--that hospital kitchens were not drawing their water from the latrines, for example.

Eventually, surgery was performed only by doctors who had passed genuinely rigorous exams. Female nurses were allowed to treat the soldiers. Hospital ships were established. A new surgeon general, William Hammond, declared the medications that caused the most violent digestive-system reactions would no longer be SOP in the Union Army, although they were still used. Designs for army hospitals assured that the convalescing wounded would not have to look out the windows at the dead. Ventilation was somewhat helpful.

By the end of the war, most civilians had developed a new, more positive view of hospitals than they had previously held; while surgery was still performed under what we would consider bad conditions, patients could in general at least count on better care than they might have received at home.
Despite the lessons of the Civil War, things were still bad in World War I, but more because of the overwhelming number of casualties in the badly planned battles and the perhaps inevitable filth, vermin, and mud of the trenches, than because of lack of basic knowledge of sanitation, although a certain number of medical facts (e.g., gangrene doesn’t go away on its own) seemed to have needed to be relearned. The soils of France, long fertilized with manure, caused infections that could often not be treated with antiseptic-laden bandages packed into the soldiers' wounds, as was the case during the Boer Wars. However, motorized ambulances, a more adequate number of medical personnel after the first appalling battles, and, of course, increases in medical knowledge, probably made conditions for the wounded at least less horrible than they would have been under the same circumstances in the 1860s.

Walt Whitman served as a nurse for the Union Army, by the way, and recorded his experiences in the very moving *Specimen Days*.

**Lenin’s Embalmers**

The year 1958 was an interesting time to be born, because World War II, though safely past, was still a part of everyone's collective memory, and the Cold War was really gearing up. Most of my friends and teachers believed Hitler had been a communist, and our games of Russian Interrogation and Nazi Interrogation were identical:

"What is your name?"

"Laurie"

(Face slap) "You lie. What is your name?"

Laurie"

(Slap) "You lie."
Those were the simpler times, when children played healthy outdoor games like this, rather than the evil videogames you see now.

*Lenin's Embalmers* is the story of Ilya Zbarsky, the son of Boris Zbarsky, one of Lenin's two main embalmers. Ilya worked as a lab assistant and later as a chemist on the project, and the book is a deft combination of embalming details and details about daily life in Soviet Russia.

Before the death of Lenin in 1924, Ilya Zbarsky's family lived alternately in comfort and squalor, at one point in an unheated single room. His parents divorced, and Ilya lived with his father, who contributed little to Ilya’s happiness. For example, Ilya complains, his father once insisted that he work in a room contaminated with mercury fumes despite increasingly disturbing physical symptoms. He was released only when another scientist intervened.

University life in Stalin's Russia was also disappointing: The chemistry and biology departments had been dismantled, and Ilya was forced to join the College of Work Physiology. The teaching system divided students into “brigades” of three or four, "who were supposed to study together from 8 in the morning till 2 in the afternoon." Ilya's brigade members had had only four years of elementary school, so Ilya had to spend most of his time teaching them algebra.

Embalmming was not a new concept, but the goal with Lenin was to make the body viewable indefinitely. At first, there was controversy as to whether to freeze the body or to inject it and soak it in a solution of *glycerine* and *potassium acetate*. After two months had passed, it became obvious that any method would be better than the freezing one. The embalming process posed many challenges; however, the work was successful, and the scientists continually improved their techniques. The laboratory was probably one of the best in the Soviet
Union, which helped Ilya greatly in his graduate studies—and provided lab workers with 96-proof alcohol, ordered as part of the embalming solution.

In 1941, both Zbarskys moved with Lenin's body to Siberia, where they were relatively unaffected by the War, and their experiments improved the condition of Lenin's body even more. Afterwards, Ilya helped loot Berlin for embalming chemicals. Between weekly correction of small problems with Lenin's body and an 18-month cycle of major overhauls, the laboratory embalmed other communist heads of state, putting their best efforts into embalming the most important dictators.

Ilya's father believed that his Jewish family would be saved from increasingly anti-Semitic purges after the War because Stalin believed the Zbarskys' embalming techniques could not be replicated by other scientists. However, the senior Zbarsky was imprisoned and Ilya was fired from the lab and from other prestigious positions. Their punishment ended only with Stalin's death.

Stalin was embalmed in the same laboratory where the Zbarskys once worked, and his body was put on view next to Lenin's for eight years before being buried in the Kremlin. After the fall of communism, the State, which had supported the laboratory, withdrew most of its funding, and the laboratory now spends most of its efforts profitably embalming Russian gangsters. Zbarsky, who was still alive in 2004, spends a fascinating chapter scornfully describing the funerals of these *nouveau-riche* criminals. He has come to believe that embalming is barbaric.

The idea of burying Lenin comes up every so often, but no one seems to want to do it quite yet.
What to Do With Your Famous Relatives (Stalin)

I don't mean to brag, but one of my uncles might have invented chocolate syrup. I think I heard a family member mention this once. Amino acids are involved. Uncle Jim is in his 90s, so if I see him this summer, I'll have to discuss this with him. I don't know though if I can spin a whole book out of my memories of Uncle Jim, especially if it turns out that he didn't invent chocolate syrup.

In the stacks, I found My Uncle Joseph Stalin, by Budu Svanidze. Here was someone who didn't have to read up on amino acids, the "building blocks of protein," to make an interesting famous-relative-exploitation book! Budu was a loyal communist, but he fell in love with a Hungarian woman who refused to live behind the Iron Curtain, so they snuck out to Paris and perhaps also South America under assumed names. So Budu wrote this and several other sincere memoirs, out of sincerity and also because he needed the money (and he was successful, as his several volumes of memoirs were translated into English and other languages. He even sold an article on Joseph Stalin's three wives to McCall's).

Budu knew Joseph Stalin off and on for about 50 years. Except for a period during which Budu served as one of Stalin's secretaries, their paths did not cross frequently. Still, Stalin, homesick for their native Georgia, interceded for his nephew several times about work assignments. Budu wanted to take charge of copper mines in Siberia, for example, while others were insistent that he go abroad in an ambassadorial position. Stalin pulled the necessary strings to get Budu off to Siberia.

The Stalin depicted in this book is until his final years brilliant, athletic, tireless, witty, and awfully nice. He made his own shoes and when possible tended his own vineyards. He championed the work of Honoré Balzac at a time when others considered him dated. He was
very concerned about the famines caused by the collectivizing of Russian farms and argued convincingly that the food shortages stemmed from greedy farmers rather than from his own policies. The purges are seldom mentioned and never explained.

The second most startling thing about the book is Budu's contention that the embalmed body of Lenin deteriorated so much during the War that it was replaced by a lifelike dummy. This information is not found in normal books like Lenin's Embalmers.

The first most startling revelation is that the whole book is made up, that there really was no Budu Svanidze. According to Paul Blackstock, in an article "Books for Idiots: False Soviet Memoirs," which appeared in the Russian Review (Vol. 25, no. 3, p. 285, 1966), My Uncle Joseph Stalin's real author was Gregori Bessedovsky, one of the earliest Soviet defectors. The non-existence of Budu Svanidze was exposed in the journal Est et Ouest in the 1950s, and Bessedovsky then served as a medium through which other nonexistent Russians channeled their memoirs. The nephew of Lavrenty Beria, head of the Soviet secret police, for example; and also a confidant of Malenkov. Most famous was Bessedovsky's invention of the diaries of Maxim Litvinov, Soviet Foreign Minister from 1930 until 1939.

Writing fake pro-Stalin memoirs seems a cynical step for a defector. In a letter to a friend, Bessedovsky claims to have written the books simply because they were certain to sell. "Allah has given money to the stupid in order that the intelligent can live easily."

For more reliable information about Stalin's personal life, including the sad story of his second wife's suicide, read Sebag Montefiore's highly praised Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar. It's not clear that Stalin’s third wife ever existed, and why, if she didn’t, Bessedovsky felt compelled to invent her.

And wish me luck with my uncle.
Armchair Hacker

Like betting on horses and selling worthless junk on eBay, computer hacking and its precursor, phone phreaking, are a lot harder to do now than they used to be. The coolness of knowing that you can make free phone calls by calling an 800 number, blowing your Captain Crunch whistle into the receiver before anyone picks up, and then "dialing" the person you really wanted to call, has become much less cool now that long-distance phone calls are pretty much free if you have a cell phone, and now that everything’s digital, the Captain Crunch trick doesn't work anymore.

The library has a lot of how-to books of hacking computers, none of them helpful to a person like me who can't even set up a static IP address. You won't find instructions like, "To learn your ex-husband's Hotmail password, just solder an unbent coat hanger to any USB port and hit the Control Key three times." Instead, the discouraging “social engineering” phrase will be used, which is the hacker equivalent of the medical euphemism “palliative care.”

You'll probably want to know a computer language like C or C++ to really use a book like Hacking Exposed: Web Applications--and have a specific interest in government or industrial espionage. A similar book, The Unofficial Guide to Ethical Hacking, written in 2001 by the then 16-year-old Ankit Fadia, devotes over 100 pages to the Nasty Scripts and Hostile Applets chapter--just so you'll recognize one if you come across it.

Hacking, in general, is not considered ethical and is sometimes performed by creepy loners. But not usually, because of the social engineering. According to The Hacking of America: Who's Doing It, Why, and How, hackers usually have close online social networks
although not particularly loyal ones: they are often willing to grass each other out in exchange for lighter sentences. To spot a hacker, according to this book, look for interests in music, chess, backgammon, war games, ham radio, linguistics, and theater.

If you eat out with people, beware if they order "ethnic, spicy, Oriental, exotic, and high-quality Jewish delicatessen food," because they're probably going to try to get your passwords. If you see someone engaging in "bicycling, auto racing, kite flying, hiking, rock climbing, aviation, target shooting, sailing, caving, juggling, skiing, and skating," well, just run the other way. (Especially from the auto racing, which is also probably illegal.)

If you have a specific project in mind (e.g. piggybacking your neighbor's WiFi after your power is shut off) the Internet is probably your best bet for information. (You'll need to plan for this before your power is shut off.)

Like being stranded in the Andes after a horrible plane crash, hacking might be more fun to read about than actually to attempt. *Tangled Web: Tales of Digital Crime from the Shadows of Cyberspace*, and *The Art of Intrusion: The Real Stories Behind the Exploits of Hackers, Intruders & Deceivers* both tell the stories of people who have hacked into electronic equipment out of greed or for other reasons.

The stories are satisfying, because the hackers are all awfully smart people whom under normal circumstances I might envy. For example, I don't think I would realize that the numbers on casino slot machines are not really random, hide a tiny computer in a transistor radio in my pocket, run a wire down my pant leg, and manipulate the slot-machine-controlling computer with a string tied to my big toe. But unlike me, these people now have prison records.

In the meantime, just call me if you'd like a soldering iron and a couple of rolls of solder.
Missing Terrorists

A man I knew confessed--it seemed like a confession--that he was relieved when Theodore Kaczynski turned out to be the Unabomber, because a friend of his pretty much fit the profile and could have written the manifesto.

I understood perfectly, having spent some time in high school trying to track down Patricia Hearst (really impossible from rural South Carolina before the Internet). I just finished reading Robert Graysmith's 2003 *Amerithrax: the Hunt for the Anthrax Killer*, and the most interesting part isn't about anthrax at all: it's the report of an interview between Mohammad Atta and Johnelle Bryant, manager of the Homestead, Florida, office of the U.S. Departure of Agriculture.

Bryant portrays Atta as an idiot, albeit a scary one. At first he refused to talk with Bryant because she was "but a woman." Atta had bought a book that described ways of getting free money from the U.S. government. The fact that he'd bought the book from cable TV, rather than from network TV or from a normal bookstore, seems particularly contemptible to Graysmith.

Atta wanted a $650,000 loan to buy a plane that he could use both for charter flights and for crop dusting. According to Bryant, Atta expected to walk away with the $650,000 in cash, without completing any application. Bryant refused the loan. Atta asked Bryant what would stop him from stepping behind the desk, cutting her throat, and stealing the contents of the office safe. Bryant said there was no money in the safe.

Atta noticed a framed aerial photograph of Washington, D.C., on Bryant's wall and started throwing money onto her desk, demanding to buy the picture. He pointed out the Washington Monument and the Pentagon. Bryant refused sell.
Weeks later, Atta returned to Bryan's office in an unconvincing disguise, claiming to be an accountant wanting $500,000 for a sugarcane farm. Three other terrorists came in separately, also seeking loans, but "they were not as successful at dealing with people as Atta."

It is satisfying, if not completely convincing, to think of the 9/11 terrorists as bumbling thugs who got lucky. Patricia Hearst's brilliant autobiography *Every Secret Thing* makes a similar case for (against?) her captors, the Symbionese Liberation Army. On the other hand, it's law enforcement that pretty much got lucky in the Timothy McVeigh case.

The story of the anthrax bioterrorist attacks that occurred just after 9/11 remains deeply unsatisfying for many reasons, one of which is that we haven't found the perpetrator. Graysmith's convincingly argues that the case against Stephen Hatfill is not exactly cut and dried--the best evidence seems to be that Hatfill was in London at a time when a hoax anthrax letter was mailed from London to Senator Daschle.

*Amerithrax* clings to the view that the anthrax was "weapons grade," which has since turned out to be only a rumor. The spores were not aerosolized and therefore could have been created by less skilled people, and more cheaply, than Graysmith suggests.

For a long time, we didn't know what had happened to Pan Am Flight 103, and maybe it's still not completely clear that we do. You can check out Jack the Ripper movies (or just wait for them to come on on TV). Who he was still bothers a lot of people. We don't know for sure who killed Olof Palme, the Swedish Prime Minister. As with the identity of the anthrax killer, we may never know, and it's enough to drive a person crazy.

Years after Patricia Hearst's release from prison, I met someone who claimed to have known someone who had met her (the Jack Scott connection) while she was hiding. A telephone customer spontaneously revealed that she had been fired from her job for hiring Patricia Hearst to do some drywalling. (Whether because she was Patricia Hearst or because she wasn’t up to the job is unclear.) It’s not actually hard for me to understand why a person would invent stories like these.

**Say it Ain’t So, Marie-Reine**

Yesterday, my son was rejected by CCM as a piano performance major. Fortunately, he got over it in a few minutes because he liked Bowling Green (where he was accepted) better anyway.

I mention this because if you're planning to push your child into something, piano is better than figure skating, especially pairs figure skating. Pianos are expensive, but they're cheaper than ice time, skating coaches, skates (you'll have to have more than one pair, because your feet will keep growing as you get older, although maybe less than most people's if you're a girl and aren't allowed to weigh more than 100 pounds). Plus even if you're playing a piano duet, there's practically no chance that your partner's skate blade will pierce your skull. Jon Jackson's 2005 *On Edge: Backroom Dealing, Cocktail Scheming, Triple Axels, and How Top Skaters Get*
Screwed; and Joy Goodwin's 2004 *The Second Mark: Courage, Corruption, and the Battle for Olympic Gold* make this pretty clear.

I guess we all spend a lot of time thinking about the 2002 Olympic pairs figure-skating competition, so maybe the following summary isn't necessary: The Russian pair made some mistakes, and the Canadian pair skated great. Those in the know would have guessed that the U.S., Canadian, and Japanese judges would vote for the Canadian pair, and the Russian and other Soviet-bloc judges would vote for the Russians. This left the French judge's vote up in the air. The French judge, Marie-Reine LeGougne, ended up voting for the Russians, who came away with the gold.

Later, in the hotel lobby, LeGougne broke down and said she had been forced by the president of the French figure-skating federation to vote for the Russians. In return, the Russians promised that they would vote for the French ice-dancing team. The upshot was that the judges ended up giving a second gold medal to the Canadian team. People thought there would be a scandal and a lot of changes in the corrupt judging system, but there weren't. The scoring method changed, but for the worse. A lot of people are still ticked off.

Jon Jackson started skating when he was 13--too late to become internationally competitive, but he did very well regionally. In his 20s, he decided to become a figure-skating judge, and he progressed quickly, first judging local competitions and then international ones. He became increasingly concerned that other judges seemed to award medals based on skaters' overall reputations rather than on their actual performances during a specific competition. The unfairness of the 2002 pair-skating competition judging pushed him toward anger. A lawyer with an MBA (who says he aced the math part of the GMAT), Jackson decided
to start a new figure-skating federation with the goal of wrestling power from the corrupt U.S. Figure Skating Association.

Goodwin, who covers figure skating for ABC Sports, agrees that the new scoring rules have not made judging any more fair. Much of this engrossing book traces the Olympic paths of the six medal-winning 2002 pairs skaters--the Russians, the Chinese, and the Canadians. Except perhaps for Jamie Sale, the Canadian woman, all of the skaters endured a lot to reach the elite ranks. The story of the Russian woman skater, Yelena Berezhnaya, is particularly harrowing: a previous pairs partner regularly and publicly beat her up, and no one really intervened for way too long. She's also the one who suffered the brain injury from her partner's skate blade.

There are many options if you want to look into the art and business of figure skating; some are available in print at the library; others are available online. After you've read the two books I described above, you'll find that most of the names have become like old friends (or enemies).

Mark A. Lund's 2002 *Frozen Assets* mentions the 2002 scandal but is equally concerned with the difficulties faced by skaters who decide to go pro in a world with limited professional options. Why, he wonders, are there so few many fewer opportunities for pro skaters now than there were in the '90s?

*Skating* magazine is the official magazine of the U.S. Figure Skating Association, and you can browse back to 1923. The focus is on great photos of skaters, event schedules, and ads for correspondence schools (including one where you can take your coursework via iPod).

The online magazine *Ice Skating International* continues to criticize the judging system. Two books you can order are longtime figure-skating referee Sonia Bianchetti's 2005 *Cracked Ice: Figure Skating's Inner World*; if you read French, you can buy Marie-Reine
LeGougne's 2003 *Glissades a Salt Lake City: L'Honneur Perdu d'une Juge Francaise*. There's a particularly funny blog from the *Washington Post* mocking LeGougne for claiming to have brought integrity back to figure skating.

It's interesting that it's LeGougne who's received most of the bad rap for Skategate. What about the Russian and other Eastern-Bloc judges, who presumably also recognized the Canadians' superior performance but didn't vote for them? What about the ice-dancing competition (which the French team won)? What about the Russians, who presumably set up the scoring scam in the first place? We'll probably never know the truth, since the mobster who apparently arranged the vote fix is now unextraditabily back in Russia.

A young man who plays piano about 100 times better than my son worked at an aquarium store I used to frequent. I'd marvel at his rather stubby but obviously magical fingers when he dipped the net in the tanks to collect the fish I was buying. How could he play so well? Once I imagined buying a piranha or two, you know, and when he dipped his hand in the water to scoop them out--oh, the fish might--never mind. Maybe there's a little Tonya Harding in all of us.

**Extreme Home Décor**

I've yet to find the perfect home-decor book (good-looking house without money or time investment) in the budget-decor department, so I decided to go the other way. In *Dictator Style*, English writer Peter York has compiled photographs of the interiors and exteriors of homes owned by notorious dictators, including Hitler, Tito, Ceausescu, Idi Amin, and Saddam Hussein.

While admitting that some (though not all) of Slobodan Milosevic's rooms have that certain *je ne sais quoi*, York condemns most of the despots on grounds of bad taste--everything is too big, and they tend to put up photos and paintings of themselves all over the
place. Idi Amin had tacky shag carpeting, and no one knows what the scary devices in the Ceausescus' bathroom (p. 57) are.

I found one of Saddam Hussein's hideaways particularly interesting; it reminded me a lot of the basement prison where Natascha Kampusch was held for eight years. There's a filthy stove, a grill (usually a bad idea in a basement prison), a container that once would have held 30 eggs (which should have been refrigerated), water bottles, toilet paper, four bars of soap, the kind of Nescafé you don't buy if Taster's Choice is available, and a bottle of Peach Snapple. You have to wonder if the Nescafé and Snapple people paid for product placement. Only for a second, though. According to the Snapple Web site, Snapple is not sold in Iraq. It is, however, sold in Kuwait, so perhaps the bottle was a souvenir.

Do What You Want and the Money will Follow

Selling junk from around the house on eBay is fun, but driving to the post office is kind of a drag. When I saw Julian Dibbell's *Play Money: Or, How I Quit My Day Job and Made Millions Trading Virtual Loot*, I thought I might be onto something I'd enjoy. For one thing, when my daughter got sick of Neopets, I took over her account, and I'm glad to report that our oldest pet, Jenifrlopez, is now 1,298 days old. (My daughter's gotten into Runescape; she's the girl with a chef's cap who goes around butchering virtual zoo animals.) Right now on eBay, someone is trying to sell a Runescape virtual Santa Hat for $100. Some virtual items have sold for hundreds of real dollars, presumably to game players who don't want to spend the hours it can take to earn rare items.

There is no market for virtual Neopets stuff on eBay, and my daughter refuses to sell her Runescape items. Neopets is not exactly a MMORPG ("massively multiplayer online role-
playing game), and Runescape is not one of the more popular ones. Check the MMORPG Web site or similar ones for an update.

I read the somewhat similar book *Fake: Forgery, Lies, and eBay* in one long sitting; *Play Money* took about a week in short stretches. It would help to have a background in economics to understand how virtual worlds are similar to and different from the real one.

I'm not going to say how Julian Dibbell's 50-hour stretches of game playing worked out. But this is not a get-rich-quick book. Still, I found parts of the book very funny: the writer's conversations with the accountant and the IRS representative, for example, where he attempts to explain his business and find out if his virtual items are taxable. Obviously they are when he makes actual money on eBay—but what if he decides not to sell them in the real world? Do they still have value? He's rather hurt when the IRS suggests that they probably don't. You can learn more at his personal Web site.

Economist Edward Castronova has written another book on the subject, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*, which manages to be both scholarly (you have to become comfortable with equations like P = MV / Q) and lively. Castronova says he had to play online multiplayer games for "several hundred hours" before even understanding what was going on, so in terms of time, selling virtual items for real money may not be the best scamming choice for a new game player. This is one reason I have forbidden my son to enter the attractive Popular Culture building at Bowling Green.

PS Right now, there are 224,853 people online playing Runescape.
In the first part of the 20th century, as many as a quarter of all patients at mental institutions suffered from late-stage syphilis, which inevitably led to dementia and death. There were no effective treatments until the Viennese psychiatrist Julius Wagner-Jauregg noticed that syphilitic patients who also suffered from malaria sometimes recovered their faculties. Wagner-Juaregg had the idea of purposely infecting syphilitic patients with malaria. His hope was that the high fever produced by malaria would kill the spirochetes responsible for what was then called "general paresis."

It wasn't a perfect solution, but many times--apparently somewhere in the 30 percent range--it actually worked. Wagner-Juaregg won a Nobel Prize for his discovery in 1927. After WWII, thank goodness, we got to have antibiotics.

Wagner-Juaregg seems to have influenced psychiatrist Dr. Henry Cotton in his quest for a cure for mental illness. The results, of course, were horrible.

We might be tempted to ask who was worse: Dr. Henry Cotton (1876-1933) or Dr. Walter Freeman (1895-1972), the enthusiastic proponent of lobotomies. Oh, the conversations they could have had!

Dr. Cotton, director of the Trenton, New Jersey, State Hospital, believed that all mental illness was caused by "focal infection" (in this case, "focal" is the euphemism for "pus") and could be cured by the removal of the infected body parts. He started out by removing abscessed teeth, which could be a good idea even for non mentally ill people. He moved on, however, to removing tonsils, spleens, stomachs, genitalia, and finally the colon. The colon operations were particularly dangerous. As many as 30 percent of the Trenton patients died as a result of their operations. Dr. Cotton claimed an 85 percent cure rate among the survivors, but careful study showed no benefits at all for the surviving patients.
So you'd think Dr. Cotton would have stopped right there, right? The story of why he was allowed to proceed with his experiments makes up the frustrating body of this depressing work.

To Dr. Cotton's credit, sort of, he believed so strongly in his theory that he had his own teeth and those of his wife and children removed, just in case.

Jack David Pressman's *Last Resort: Psychosurgery and the Limits of Medicine* has little to say about Dr. Cotton, but he offers some defenses of the lobotomy: the people who received the operation often worked at unskilled jobs and so were able to return to those jobs despite their post-surgical limitations; the progress of medicine is seldom straightforward--even in non-mental-health areas, doctors often follow blind alleys before discovering a real cure (if you've visited Mammoth Cave, you'll remember the disastrous idea of using the cave as a hospital for tubercular patients); getting patients out of mental hospitals and into the community was probably usually better for the patients than being confined to a hospital.

Okay--I believe those things. But I'd like to go on record saying that I want to keep those teeth I still have, and I don't want any brain surgery for mental-health reasons. I hope that's not too much to ask.

**Heritage**

In Alice Walker's story "Everyday Use," a mother and her two daughters view the cultural importance of some beautiful inherited quilts in different ways. The plan is for the uneducated daughter to get the quilts when she marries, and when the quilts wear out, the uneducated daughter knows how to quilt and will make some more.
The educated but mean daughter, who doesn't know how to quilt, is appalled that a piece of history will be lost when the quilts wear out. She wants to preserve the quilts and hang them on her wall. Our sympathies are meant to be with the uneducated mother and daughter--but the mean daughter does have a point. The quilts will wear out, and a piece of the characters' family and ethnic heritage will be gone.

It's sort of the same with books.

Most of the books I've been trying to sell on eBay are worthless junk that probably exist in huge numbers everywhere. And yet, I can't bring myself to throw them out. Is the 1995 Gale Guide to Internet Databases likely to be useful to anyone? No! Should it be thrown out? I'm not sure. Speaking from my own attempts to learn JAVA, I wonder at the utility of the 1997 JAVA in a Nutshell: a Quick Desktop Reference, although the book is now checked out. What happens when we lose living memory of what it was like to use the Internet in 1995?

You can't preserve all copies of all books, but at least anyone who speaks English can read the two computer books I mention above, if their research or naiveté leads them in that direction.

This is not the case with Yiddish. Twice, I helped a former friend move, and while I found the process very annoying, schlepping ill-chosen thrift-store purchases; random old newspapers and junk mail; and incomplete Scrabble sets from house to truck to house to truck to house--I think I felt the some of the same kind of reverence she felt when carrying the boxes of Yiddish books she had inherited from her grandfather, I J. Singer.

Yiddish is Old German, with a lot of words borrowed from Hebrew and other languages, written in Hebrew script. It was spoken particularly by Jews in eastern and central Europe roughly the 10th century until the mid-20th century and was an important written language from
roughly the late 1800s until World War II. It's spoken now ("in a mummified form" I learned in a documentary on Isaac Bashevis Singer) by Hassidic Jews, scholars, and an increasing number of young people who realize that Hebrew in not the only Jewish language, that before the beginning of World War II, there were 11 to 13 million Yiddish speakers, many in Eastern Europe.

My former friend couldn't read even the books' titles, but she knew they were valuable. My friend and I quarreled, but I often think of those books, which have no doubt by now been damaged beyond readability by basement leaks and acidic paper. I urged her to donate them to a place where they could be conserved, but she didn't want to give them up. Some day, she hoped, she would be able to read them herself.

Fortunately, I wasn't the only person who thought books in a language few people can read should be preserved, and other people have actually done something about it. Aaron Lansky, who eventually won a MacArthur Fellowship for his work at what became the National Yiddish Book Center, in Amherst, Massachusetts. He recounts his story in a 2004 memoir, Outwitting History. Lansky started collecting Yiddish books, mostly previously destined for the trash bin (or indeed, actually found in a dumpster) while in his early 20s. He had studied Yiddish at a time when very few young people did and was able to speak in Yiddish with the aging immigrants who wanted a repository for their personal libraries. The thought was that there were probably about 80,000 books in Yiddish left; by now, according to the National Yiddish Book Center Web site, there are over a half million, collected by the Center from all over the world, in the Amherst collection and in other libraries.

Lansky's book is mostly the story of increasing success. His foundation, now 25 years old, has recently won a $2 million grant. The story is a sad one as well, of course; over the ten
years about which Lansky mostly writes, he finds that he's collecting fewer books from elderly immigrants and more from their descendants, who are less likely to know Yiddish.

Another disturbing story is his visit to the Newark Public Library (whose Web site suggests it has cleaned up its act), which at the time of the book was mostly being run by "sullen teenagers" who sometimes threw away books to avoid the tedium of reshelving them. Lansky was able to rescue much of the library's Yiddish collection.

You can buy reprints of Yiddish books from the Center, as well as books about Yiddish, and they are working to translate and digitize other important works.

Poison Ivy OR Don't be Afraid to Shake my Hand, Tch, tch, tch

About 25 years ago, my mates and I were drinking 9-cent-a-bottle wine (probably now about 78-cent-a-bottle wine) in the Avignon train station, waiting for the 3 a.m. billet bige to Italy. A man with a bleeding hand approached us. He spoke no French nor any other recognizable language; just "Tch, tch, tch," as he pointed first to our individual bottles and then to his dripping hand. My classmates scattered, but I caught on and poured a few cups of the cheap wine on his hand. He said, "Tch, tch, tch," and went to a different part of the station.

The paragraph above provides one piece of useful advice, which is that alcohol is a good thing to pour on a wound, or on a potential wound. Rubbing alcohol is best, but you can't count on everyone you meet in a train station at 1 a.m. having rubbing alcohol.

It's hard to write a whole book about poison ivy, because there are basically just two rules about how to treat it in its initial stages, but Outwitting Poison Ivy, by Susan Carol Hauser, who also wrote Outwitting Ticks, makes the subject as lively as possible.
First, within 5-10 minutes after contact, slosh a rubbing-alcohol-saturated cloth around on your skin. A Handi-Wipe won't have enough alcohol on it, and don't scrub your skin aggressively, because abrasion could make the urushiol oil bond all the more intensely with your body parts. Then take a shower with a "copious" amount of water. Don't make the water too hot, because hot water makes your pores expand and more likely to suck in the urushiol oil. Probably even cold water won't help, though. It doesn't matter whether you use soap or not. If you have poison ivy in your yard, there is no way to remove it.

If you've poured the alcohol and taken a shower too late--three or four hours is the outside window—I recommend a spray-on product made by Johnson & Johnson, which is better than anything I tried the last time I had an encounter. Saying "I'm not allergic to poison ivy" is like saying, "I think I'll just go stick my finger into this electric socket."

What makes the book fun rather than merely useful is the inclusion of historical and folk remedies (laundry soap, urine, carbolic acid, etc.) and the knowledge that equally nasty poisonous plants in China and Japan are often used to make lacquer, so you can become infected not only by touching the plant but also by touching furniture coated with the vile toxin.

My other advice would be that unless the cheap ticket is more than 50 percent cheaper than a normal ticket, it's not a great idea to begin your Italian vacation at 3 a.m. in the Avignon train station. If you do, though, you can probably get away with sitting in the First-Class Waiting Room rather than the slightly more depressing Second-Class one. It's worth a try.