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Kit Kat Club
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The Kit Kat Essay

Let's imagine a scene, a hundred years ago, of a couple of the founders of the Columbus Kit Kat Club, discussing that very issue. The place is the Chittenden Hotel on a late afternoon, the persons Joseph Denney, suave professor of rhetoric at OSU, and Osmond Hooper, creative journalist, Columbus historian, and author.

"How's the whiskey, Joe?" Hooper asks.

"Tolerable, tolerable," replies Denney.

Says Hooper, "Joe, I hear there's lots of confusion or anxiety—among younger Kits as well as old Kats—about the essay, what it is essentially."

Replies Denney thoughtfully, "Well a key function of the essay is to stimulate conversation, intelligent discourse, polite sociability—all prime reasons for a social club. Add dinner and spirits and men of different professions and you have a club, a very old institution as the London Kit Kat Club shows. Then too clubs

are a mark of cultural distinction in a rising city as, last century, were the clubs of Boston, the Saturday club, the Metaphysical Club and …"

"Yes, yes, I know," interrupts Hooper, "but what's a Kit Kat essay?"

"Essay … well, at OSU we teach two essay courses, one on the 18th century, Addison, Steele, Dr Johnson, as the main authors; and for the 19th century we teach William Hazlitt, CharlesLamb, Carlyle, and others. 'Essay' for these great writers is simply an expository prose piece, a personal definition or narration of a common topic of interest. Above all, it's an expression of a personal point of view, 'I': the point of view as narrator, what 'I' think, what ',I' believe. That's the great difference between literature before the 17th century, and virtually everything since, an objective formal stance versus a subjective autobiographical one."

Continues Denney, warming up professorially: "First among journals in the l8th century was *The Spectator*. Addison-- you recollect was one of the earliest of the Kit Kats—and Steele, wrote

several hundred essays, published weekly, on ordinary topics, for mainly middle class readers. Written with colloquial ease, on London subjects—like umbrella nuisances, runaway horses, the stock market, the latest literature—the essays became an institution, and models of sense, and grace, and wit. You probably remember Dr. Johnson's advice, he who would write good English should spend his days and nights with Addison."

"But Professor…" Hooper breaks in wearily.

"Sorry, Oz," said Denney, collecting himself. "We'll carry on with this later. I've got a bunch of essays to mark."

And there we will leave those stalwart founders of the Club, not much enlightened about the Kit Kat essay. One inference though is that the essay needed no explanation.

Joe Denney died in 1936 and Oz Hooper in 1941, by which time our Club had become pretty much what it is now. Among those early essays are some quite imposing research papers and fully

Victorian style obituaries. Topics were travel in Europe, English diarists, the Bronte family and other literary figures.

Denny's reputation as a teacher and scholar was magnified in his own right and by his student Thurber, who wrote a very fine profile of him. It was Thurber along with E. B. White who helped to make *The New Yorker* one of the standards for American prose writing, with Thoreau, Twain, and whoever else is one's favored candidate.

What *The Spectator* had been in England in the 18th century *The New Yorker* has been for us in the last century or so. The magazine is pretty much a collection of longer and shorter essays, all written in lively incisive prose with the spice of wit and insight. Profiles have been a feature of *The New Yorker* for a long time, and have been well received in our Club, as that by Tad Jeffrey on "Washington Gladden" in Columbus and that on "Father Hesburg" at Notre Dame by Mike Scanlon.

E.B. White was one of the best writers in *The New Yorker* in the middle of the last century, and though he hasn't much to say on the theory or nature of the essay, what he says is provocative. In the foreword to his own collection of *Essays* (Harper, 1977) White asserts that the essayist is a "self-liberated man, sustained by the childish belief that every thing he thinks about, everything that happens to him, is of general interest." He's a philosopher, jester, raconteur, confidant, pundit, devil's advocate, enthusiast. White goes on, "There are as many kinds of essays as there are human attitudes or poses, as many essay flavors as there are Howard Johnson ice creams."

But he warns, "There is one thing the essayist cannot do, though—he cannot indulge himself in deceit or concealment—for he will be found out in no time." That is, the essayist must be honest, genuine, not a fake, an issue which White might have pursued further. One would like to know more what sort of deception or concealment he had in mind: was it fiction for fact,

lying, incompetent writing, whatever seems inauthentic? Authenticity of course, is a hallmark of literature, and places an obligation on the reader to determine it. White was not much interested in criticism—the rage of his time—and seeing what has come of much of that criticism we are grateful for his fine essays. "Farewell, My Lovely" his elegy on the passing of the Model T Ford, and "Death of a Pig" are typical of his genius.

"Death of a Pig" (1947) is about the rural ritual of fattening, killing, and feasting on the pig. Observes White cleverly, There's some violence in the ritual. It's a murder, he says, "and being premeditated, is in the first degree but is quick and skillful, and the smoked bacon and ham provide a ceremonial ending seldom questioned."

Well, the pig fattens, then suddenly sickens, of which White says, "I found myself cast as the role of the pig's friend and physician—a farcical character with an enema bag." Dosing the pig, bringing in the vet, is to no avail. "At intervals during the last

day I took cool fresh water down to him and at such times as he found strength to get to his feet he would stand with his head in the pail and snuffle his snout around. He drank a few sips but no more; yet it seemed to comfort him to dip his nose in the water and bobble it about, sucking in and blowing out through his teeth."

The pig dies, the ritual turns real, the mourner suffers the perplexed grief of death. "I have written this account," White says, in penitence and grief, and to explain my deviation from the classic course of so raised pigs." That fine tenderness and sympathy, the poetic description of decline, the ironic humor in the allusion to classical ritual, together evoke a depth and authenticity that lifts the essay to literature. The passage reminds of the moral in Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner,* that as man and beast we participate in the one life of all things, penitently mindful that

He prayeth best, who loveth best

All things, both great and small;

For the dear God who loveth us,

He made and loveth all.

The voice of White's authenticity he traces to Montaigne, the originator and still master of the essay form. He had, says White, "the gift of natural candour." Writes White, "when discouraged or downcast, I need only fling open the door of my closet, and there, hidden behind every thing else, hangs the mantle of Michel de Montaigne, smelling slightly of camphor."

Montaigne was born in 1532 in Bordeaux and died age 60, having published several editions of the more than one hundred essays he had written. He was famous quickly and has remained so. One well known critic (French) has called Montaigne the wisest man who ever lived. And his latest biographer, and a very good one, (Sarah Bakewell, *How to Live, 2010)* claims that Montaigne and Shakespeare are the "first truly *modern* writers,

capturing that distinctive modern sense of being unsure where you belong, who you are, and what you are expected to do" (279).

In essays on Sorrow, Repentance, Desire, Liars, Cowardice, Fear, Power, Imagination, Old Age, and many, many other human attributes, Montaigne wrote revealing and insightful psychological-philosophical-practical essays: what he called trials, explorations, "essays of my own judgement." These collectively are essentially about how to live. Writing on Vanity, he speaks of his style and process. "The names of my chapters do not embrace the matter. It is the lazy reader who loses sight of the object, not I… I keep changing without constraint or order. I mean my matter distinguishes itself." In other words his matter, or study, is himself and through that of man and nature. A theme he emphasizes throughout is the search in life for balance, calmness, what the ancients called *ataraxia.* Wisdom drawn from this is: Don't worry about death; Give up control; Reflect on everything, Regret nothing.

The new buzzword for this self-centeredness we name as "self-fashioning" and we note it particularly in our own Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself":

I celebrate myself and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume
For every atom belonging to me as good
Belongs to you…
And I say to mankind. Be not curious about God…
I hear and behold God in every object,
Yet understand God not in the least,
Nor do I understand who there is
More wonderful than myself.

This personal, autobiographical mode is everywhere evident today, in a floodtide in the essay, more popular now than any form of writing, fiction, poetry, letters, whatever. Addressed to the common reader, the tone is familiar and inviting, and the style, say in The *Economist* or *New Yorker*, generally follows Ben Franklin's good advice in being "smooth, clear, and short." What he would say about texting would interest us.

This shift in the formal to the familiar in writing is of course evident in browsing through the pre-WWII Kit Kat archives, how full and formal the essays tended to be. Thirty and more pages double spaced were usual, and the style often starchy, in a diplomatic or parliamentary manner. Typical of this formal style was J.L.Morrill's essay of 1936, on the status and prospects of American higher education. He surveyed public and private institutions, large and small, over the nation, quoting extensively from current deans and presidents, with a familiarity that showed he knew what he was talking about. This was not written by a staff member, more common in our own day. The formality of this, and other essays, were attended with a high civility and a genuine pride in this Club.

An essay from 1964, April 21, nearly fifty years ago, by Charles Lazarus deserves a special notice, as an exemplary Kit Kat essay, and if we were selecting an anthology of 100 years of Kit Kat Essays, this one deserves pride of place in it.

In his introduction, he speaks of the honor of membership, "second youngest" then, he says, and summarizes deftly the essayists who preceded him that year, Drs. Fawcett and Yochum, John Vorys, Dean Fullington—all of whose essays, though on different subjects, said Mr. Lazarus, stressed in one way or another, American moral and ethical values.

Casting about for a topic, Mr. Lazarus asked John Bricker for suggestions on what he might talk about, who breezily replied, "Why, The American Monarchy, Land of the Free and the Brave. With that you could talk about anything".

And so Mr. Lazarus took that title, but noting that he would stay close to his experience in finance and management, having learned years ago "that cold cash seldom sticks around hot air,"

In the body of his essay he makes a neat survey of commerce from the ancient desert tent, and Cedars of Lebanon, to the shining emporia of modern goods, the malls. Human nature, he observes, has not changed much in all that time; the great change has been in

individual awareness, the "supreme worth of individual power", and the absolute freedom of choice. He asserts, "The American consumer is the boss, the absolute monarch."

This individualism in our lives as consumers, he stresses, is a key vitality in the life of our democratic society. But in this land of the free, let the buyer beware, for, as the proverb says, the buyer needs a hundred eyes, the seller not one.

He has insightful paragraphs on advertising, on family businesses and the constant tension of change in the enterprise. All this—43 pages—is absorbing, enlightening, wise. What a fine Kit Kat essay!

That Kit Kat archive of a century of essays is very impressive indeed, and is sure to attract some urban historian with startling discoveries. There being few prescriptions, beside tradition and common sense, the archive shows there is a good match between those who want to belong and those who should belong. Perhaps

the best way to attract good clubable gentlemen is to guide them to representative essays.

My short list of memorable essays—and here I merely declare my preference of flavors of ice cream — would include Jim Ginter's essay last fall on the crisis in the fisheries. It's the sort of essay one reads in *The Economist* regularly. Allen Procter's witty essay on humor, the personal adventures of Bob Wandell's tour of the old route 40 and Richard Simpson's cycling across the continent, Dick Campbell's exploration of Ohio history, Bob Shamansky on Oscar Wilde's night in Columbus, Bob Duncan on some strange Ohio Swedenborgians, Gary Ness's imaginative account of our Club, any of Fred Milford's on science, as well as the two profiles I mentioned earlier—these were memorable, among others.

I recollect the first essay I gave 35 years ago, on Dr. Johnson and his age. The chairs were taken when Senator Bricker came in, so he just plopped down on the floor, like a sophomore. He

admired Dr. Johnson.. It is to Dr. Johnson of course that we owe the word "clubable". Boswell, he said, was a very clubable man. (But he may also have meant that Bozzy drank a lot.)

In my opening I mentioned Mr. Hooper's talking about the anxiety of Kit Kat essay-givers. Bill Chadeayne, of pleasing memory, a member of the Bricker Eckler firm and a prominent Kit Katter in the 1960's and 70's, has some very fine lines on that subject. He entitled them THOUGHTS OF A KIT KAT MEMBER AT 4:A.M. O'CLOCK IN JULY:

Tell me, oh Christopher Kat
What theme this fall ought I attack
When all too soon it falls my lot
To occupy the essayist spot

And eruditely if I'm able
While standing at the essayist's table

To bring myself to come to grips

With something that the membership
Will wait with bated breath to hear

Resisting every urge to cheer
Until my final words are spoken

And their respectful silence broken
By wild and unrestrained acclaim

Which clothes my words with instant fame.

Ah, illusions of Kit Kat grandeur! Thank you, Bill Chadeayne.

My intent in these remarks has been to sketch the larger and parent tradition of the essay form and to relate it briefly to our Kit Kat tradition.

For a hundred years now men have come together in respect and pride for a club that remains lively, diverse, and deserving of affection. The original Kit Kat members loved toasts—spirited toasts. We toast the Club again in the apt words of the best poet of that age, Alexander Pope:

May Kit-Kat flourish, around the friendly bowl,

The feast of reason, and the flow of soul.