

'Letters From a Nut' author a phantom, or Seinfeld?

By Miguel Bustillo=(c) 1997, Los Angeles Times

THOUSAND OAKS, Calif.- This should be prankster Ted L. Nancy's moment in the sun. Instead, the funny man who purportedly lives here is nowhere to be found.

Thanks in part to a foreword by Jerry Seinfeld, Nancy's first book of deranged comedic correspondence, "Letters From a Nut," has enjoyed

"I did not write them, that I promise you... I am telling you the truth."

-Jerry Seinfeld

strong sales and positive reviews since it was published earlier this year.

Nancy's ridiculously silly missives-from his fan mail to the king of Tonga to his requests to gamble at the Flamingo Hilton in a "lucky" giant shrimp outfit-were even talked up on "Larry King Live" and "The Tonight Show."

But it wasn't Nancy doing the talking. In fact, no one associated with "Letters From a Nut"- not Seinfeld, his high-powered literary agent or the book's New York publisher- has apparently ever met or spoken with the author, who lists a Moorpark Road return address on all his letters.

"Never met Ted Nancy," said Dan Strone of the William Morris Agency. "I don't really communicate with him."

Asked how the author participates in marketing decisions, or if he even gets paid, Strone replied, "He's not in it for the money.... He's really about the art."

As fans of Nancy's off-kilter humor are disappointedly discovering, the mystery man is not easy to track down: A visit to the return address listed on his outrageous joke letters yields a private post office box in a tiny strip mall, next to a dog groomer and a car rental company.

And the owners of Mail N' More, the postal box business, say they've never met Nancy in the flesh, communicating only by phone.

All of which has led many people to conclude- quite naturally, perhaps- that Ted L. Nancy doesn't exist and is nothing but a thinly veiled pseudonym for Seinfeld, or perhaps one of his sitcom's writers. If so, the TV star has not owned up to his alter ego, telling Larry King and Jay Leno while plugging the book earlier this year that Nancy is indeed for real.

"I did not write them, that I promise you," Seinfeld told a skeptical King. "... I am telling you the truth."

In his foreword to "Letters From a Nut," Seinfeld offers this explanation of how he got hold of Nancy's wacky work:

He was watching the Jerry Lewis Telethon at a friend's house in 1995 when he noticed a pile of letters on the coffee table. He picked one up, read it and laughed. Then he read some more, along with the equally funny responses from the corporations and establishments that followed. He began to read them out loud, and soon everyone was laughing.

Everyone, that is, but one man, who "just kind of nodded approvingly as each letter was read."

"I guess I didn't realize it at the time," Seinfeld wrote, "but I am convinced that man was the real Ted L. Nancy."

Seinfeld says he asked the friend hosting the party if he could borrow the letters, and later called back and asked if there were more. There were. Likening his intermediary role to that of Clark Kent reaching Superman, the comedian then took the bundle to Strone, "literary agent to the stars," and the rest is history.

Or so the story goes. Regardless of the truth, one thing is certain: The letters are nutty and often hilarious, exposing corporate America's politically correct tendency to respond to all customer inquiries, no matter how weird.

Take, for example, Nancy's letter to Nordstrom headquarters in Seattle, asking if he could buy a mannequin at the company's Glendale, Calif., department store that closely resembled a deceased neighbor so he could give it to the family. The situation closely resembles a recent "Seinfeld" plot.

"Yours is one of the more interesting requests I have ever received," Bruce A. Nordstrom wrote back. "Candidly,

I can't imagine any family who has lost a loved one wanting to see a mannequin that resembles that person."

As word of mouth spreads about Nancy and his mischievous writings, some admirers are finding out that not all is as it appears when it comes to this cult figure. Rosemary Afara, who owns Mail N' More in Thousand Oaks with her brother and sister, said fans continue to call and drop by the business, only to find out that Nancy is supposedly living incognito.

"They come with the book and say, 'Where is Mr. Ted Nancy?'" Afara said. "We tell them, 'Sorry, he's not

here, but you can always leave him a letter."

About two years ago, Afara said, Nancy called up and asked to rent a post office box. The business's owners have never seen him come in to retrieve the mail from the box, which is accessible 24 hours a day. But they often communicate with him over the phone.

How do they get paid? Nancy leaves cash in the box, Afara said.

Shortly before the book was published, she said, he also left her a little note informing her and her siblings that a book of his

correspondence was coming out, so attempts to reach him at the address might increase.

Afara, for one, does not believe that Seinfeld and Nancy are one and the same, judging from the many conversations she has had with the author by phone. Moreover, the book isn't as amusing as the man in the sitcom, she said.

"It's the same voice every time, and it doesn't sound like Jerry," Afara said of the calls. "I really don't think it's him. Some of the book is funny, but I didn't read most of it myself."

Hometown backers vow to clear nanny's name

By Dan Balz=(c) 1997, The Washington Post

LONDON- Elated supporters of Louise Woodward toasted her freedom with tears, cheers and champagne in the little pub in her home village Monday night. But even in their jubilation, they vowed to continue their campaign to overturn her manslaughter conviction and "clear her name completely."

They had tied thousands of yellow ribbons, raised thousands of dollars from all over the world for her legal defense fund and maintained a vigil in the Rigger pub in little Elton in northwest England since a Cambridge, Mass., jury convicted her of second-degree murder 10 days ago.

Judge Hiller B. Zobel announced Monday morning that he had reduced her conviction to manslaughter, leaving the people of Elton anxiously anticipating what her sentence might be. But not even Woodward anticipated Zobel's ruling that her sentence would be limited to the 279 days she has already served since the death of 8-month-old Matthew Eappen last winter.

"She was expecting to get 10 years," her younger sister Vicky told Sky News TV from the Rigger pub. "She couldn't believe it. She's so happy. She just wants to say thank you to everybody."

The two sisters had spoken by phone moments after the 19-year-old au pair had been freed and rejoined her parents, Gary and Sue Woodward. Vicky Woodward said her sister had exclaimed that, after months inside the Framingham, Mass., prison, she now could see the city of Boston, across the Charles River from

Cambridge, spread out before her from her hotel room.

The trial of Louise Woodward had gripped Britain through weeks of testimony, in part because Sky News's carried the case live several hours every afternoon.

The case triggered massive criticism of the American judicial system, as British viewers had difficulty comprehending U.S. rules of evidence, the theatrics of televised courtroom proceedings and even Zobel's courtroom demeanor. The British people quickly took sides and were outraged and disbelieving when Sunil and Deborah Eappen gave a television interview calling Woodward a murderer while the jury was deliberating.

The intensity and interest in the case escalated dramatically with the jury's verdict of second-degree murder, which almost no one here expected. Woodward's friends mounted a campaign to set her free. They received enthusiastic support from the British tabloids, which seized on the crusade.

Over the past few weeks, the Rigger pub in Elton had become an electronic village of television crews, newspaper reporters, satellite trucks and cables snaking through the parking area and into the pub. Local residents have been interviewed hundreds of times by reporters from all over the world.

Monday, her supporters gathered again in the Rigger, many wearing yellow T-shirts calling for Woodward's freedom, to learn what Zobel had decided.

Television watched the locals watching their newly installed computers, hoping to read the judge's decision when it flashed across the

World Wide Web. But technology failed. The news arrived the old-fashioned way, delivered through speculation passed on by a television reporter, and then through official confirmation that the judge had reduced the verdict to manslaughter- but had not said anything about sentencing.

Everyone in Britain could see emotions sag in the pub as Woodward's friends realized they would have to wait another five hours for Zobel to announce the sentence.

When the ruling finally came, it seemed to take a second or two to sink in. Then there was a huge cheer in the Rigger and a sign appeared: "Thank You Judge Zobel."

Andrew Miller, the member of Parliament whose district includes Elton, quickly appeared for an interview. "We were all hopeful the judge would go this far," said the television anchor. Miller replied: "I just didn't believe he would do this."

Even in their elation, Woodward's closest supporters declared the battle is not over. "The campaign will go on to try to clear her name completely so that at the end of the day she doesn't have a criminal record," said the Rev. Ken Davey, the vicar of Elton.

Almost lost in the euphoria was the tragedy that had produced the dramatic trial and judicial rulings.

"We must never lose sight of the fact that there is a baby who died," Davey told Sky News, "and our hearts go out to the Eappen family. . . . All along our prayers have been not only for Louise and the Woodward family, but also for the Eappen family."

Site Bigger Than Stonehenge Found in England

By Dan Balz=(c) 1997, The Washington Post

LONDON- British archaeologists announced Monday the discovery an enormous prehistoric ceremonial site in rural England that they said is larger and as significant as Stonehenge, one of this country's most visited historical attractions.

The buried site at Stanton Drew in Surrey was discovered unexpectedly this fall during a routine geophysical survey of an archaeological site containing three stone circles. Scientists long had known of the existence of those stone circles, which had drawn little attention over the years because of their somewhat remote location. But what the scientists found through the geophysical survey was a much larger and far more significant site beneath the ground.

The archaeological surveys suggest that it was the site of a huge, circular timber temple that predated the stone circles and that could give scientists a better understanding of the tribes that existed in England in prehistoric times. The site dates to between 3000 B.C. and 1500 B.C.

Geoffrey Wainwright, the chief archaeologist at English Heritage, which carried out the surveys, could barely contain his enthusiasm over the find. "This is quite extraordinary," he said. "I'm bowled over by it." Wainwright said the buried site at Stanton Drew is roughly twice as large as Stonehenge and that it is one of just eight timber temples known to exist in England. "Stanton Drew

is quite the biggest and most complex of all," Wainwright said. "It was really a very, very dramatic structure."

Scientists believe the ceremonial sites or temples were used in early agricultural societies to attempt to manipulate the supernatural to assure adequate rainfall for crops or the expansion of herds of cattle or sheep.

The timber temples were symbols

"We got more than what we bargained for."

-Geoffrey Wainwright chief archaeologist at English Heritage

of power and influence used for making offerings.

But Wainwright said experts do not know much about the period and how societies were organized and related to one another. The Stanton Drew site may offer clues to the territorial relationships among these tribes, in addition to the knowledge it will provide about the structure of the temples themselves.

The discovery came after English Heritage decided to survey the site, which is on privately owned farmland, when it changed hands. "We got more than we bargained for," Wainwright said.

The Stanton Drew site contains three stone circles, the largest of

which is known as the Great Circle. The survey carried out this fall with the help of magnetometers, which measure magnetic forces, revealed that the Great Circle was surrounded by an enormous ditch approximately 148 yards in diameter.

But more significant was the discovery of what English Heritage called "a highly elaborate pattern of buried pits," which were arranged in nine concentric circles, varying in diameter from about 25 yards to 100 yards. The pits appear to be about three feet in diameter and were about three feet apart from one another. Based on work at similar sites

elsewhere in the country, scientists believe the pits supported huge wooden timbers standing upright, although it is not clear whether they supported a roof of any kind.

What heightens the interest of archaeologists here is that the circles at Stanton Drew were significantly larger than at other such sites, and there are many more of them.

English Heritage, which oversees the country's man-made historical sites, has no plans to excavate the site at Stanton Drew. Wainwright said he doubts that it will become a tourist attraction comparable to Stonehenge because there is nothing to see on the

surface.

There are several thousand sites with stone circles in Britain, with Stonehenge the most famous. But the sites with wooden temples, which predated the stone circles, are far more rare. They were generally constructed around 3000 B.C. and lasted for about 400 years, Wainwright said. After that they were replaced by stone circles.

English Heritage scientists now will focus their attention on three or four other sites of stone circles to determine whether similar wooden structures existed there before.

Apple unveils new models, direct-sales plan

By Mark Leibovich=(c) 1997, The Washington Post

In its latest effort to stem its losses and shrinking market share, Apple Computer announced major changes Monday in the way it designs, builds and distributes personal computers.

The Cupertino, Calif.-based company- which has lost nearly \$2 billion in its past two fiscal years while its share of the PC market declined to 4.5 percent from 7.4 percent- unveiled three machines that Apple said will run intricate software applications faster than its previous models.

Apple also introduced a direct-sales program using the Internet as well as existing distributors. In addition, Apple will offer its

computers on a "built-to-order" basis, following the successful direct-sales model of larger PC makers, such as Dell and Gateway 2000.

"We're changing everything we do: the products we make, the way we make them and the way we sell them," Apple's co-founder and interim chief executive, Steven Jobs, told a gathering of company employees, software developers and reporters.

But while analysts generally applauded Apple's distribution strategy as a necessary step, some questioned whether the company was really addressing the root causes of its decline or merely taking small, cosmetic measures.

The new distribution methods "are

blocking and tackling issues- nothing that will save the company," said Tim Bajarin, president of Creative Strategies Research International in San Jose.

"For Apple to grow, it has to attract new users. And I want to know what Apple is doing to sell and improve the Macintosh platform."

Mitch Mandich, Apple's senior vice president for the Americas, said the introduction of faster products and the opening of new sales channels will represent a big step in restoring the company to profitability.

"This has to reinvigorate Apple," Mandich said, adding the company "must put its viability questions" behind it.

NAACP leaders ask for resignation of 4 board members

By Michael James=(c) 1997, The Baltimore Sun

BALTIMORE- Faced with a series of scandals and mounting negative publicity, leaders of the NAACP have asked for the resignation of four board members whose names have surfaced in recent cases of financial impropriety.

The NAACP's executive board and its chairwoman, Myrlie Evers-Williams, made the announcement Monday, saying that the resignations are necessary in order to ensure the integrity of the organization.

"We want them to resign because the reputation of the NAACP is at stake," Evers-Williams said. "This was a serious matter and it has to be handled swiftly. Far too many people have suffered for the organization to allow it to be tainted by scandal."

The 64-member board sets policy for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Those who have been asked to resign are:

- * Hazel Dukes, a close aide to Evers-Williams and president of New York City's Off-Track Betting Corp., who pleaded guilty last month to attempted grand larceny. She admitted that she took \$13,201 from a leukemia-stricken OTB employee who had trusted Dukes to help pay her bills.

- * James Ghee, a Virginia lawyer and another Evers-Williams supporter, who pleaded guilty in May 1996 to embezzling more than \$38,000 from a client's trust fund. He was disbarred for five years and given six months in jail.

- * Henry Lyons, president of the National Baptist Convention USA Inc., who is being investigated for allegedly mishandling church funds.

- * Bobby Bivens, a Stockton, Calif., resident who was arrested Oct. 6 on charges that he owed \$20,000 in child support.

NAACP board members have called the charges against board members embarrassing.

The organization has been trying to clean up its reputation ever since 1994, when the board fired executive director Benjamin Chavis after learning he diverted \$50,000 from NAACP accounts to settle a sexual harassment complaint.

Dukes had been one of those who was active in calling for Chavis' removal and had been outspoken in stressing the need to clean up the NAACP.

Evers-Williams said Monday that the executive committee of the association has created a committee on ethics that will try to strengthen the NAACP's code of ethics. She was not available for comment on whether any of those named in the scandals has turned in their resignations yet.

Evers-Williams said she had hoped to contact the four board members before announcing the action reached Friday night by a vote of the group's executive committee.

A member of the committee leaked details of the vote to the news media, however, so Evers-Williams said she felt compelled to confirm that their resignations would be sought.

"It is tragic that certain members of the executive committee breached the confidentiality of our deliberations before official notice could be sent to the individuals involved," she said.

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