

## Katydid It

It may not seem like it these days, but there must be some order to the world in which we live. Because to me, at least, it seems so absent in our daily life, I propose we direct our attention to a smaller, older world.

Entomology, the study of insects, takes in approximately three million species. The total is an estimate because at present there are only slightly more than a third, which have been identified and classified. In the words of one researcher, "Insects constitute the major class of our co-inhabitants of planet earth." [Evans] In Palmer's Field Book of Natural History, insects are contained in the section titled "Lower Animal Phyla Through the Phylum Arthropods." Further subdivided into the class Insecta, it fills about 8% of the pages in his comprehensive tome. Researchers have spent lifetimes trying to understand the inner workings of these living creatures, which are conservatively estimated to have been around this earth a hundred times longer than the earliest identified starting point for mankind.

Insects have perfected the art of adaptation to a changing environment. They are characterized by ergonomic efficiency and behavioral flexibility. In form, the insect is made up of three parts. On its head,

there is a part of antennae and paired mouthparts. Its thorax is composed of three parts, and is the location for three pairs of legs and wings if they are a part of the particular insect. The third part is the segmented abdomen. Most important for our purposes is the recognition that many insects build social structures. We are most familiar with the work of ants and termites as well as some forms of bees and wasps all of which live in colonies. They create castes and extraordinary specialized niche performers so it seems that members of the society have evolved perfectly to carry out a specific task, which they are assigned. Interestingly in the case of the ants and termites, the queens are initially totipotent [Oster/Wilson], taking on all of the tasks necessary to establish a colony until the first workers are born.

Even with all of the research by all of the scientists, we still know remarkably little about the inner workings of insect society. We know that insects work, eat, sleep, court, mate and tend to their young. On occasion, they will do battle and some are insectivores, i.e. they feed off of one another. We have little understanding of how insects outside the social groupings previously identified interact with one another or with other classes of insects. Certainly a starting point has to be acceptance of the likely truth that, in the words of one researcher, "Perhaps more than scientists are yet willing to admit, an insect may be conscious of what it is doing." [Milne, Lorus and Margery]

From the outset man has tended to impute human characteristics to animals, and to a somewhat lesser extent, insects. Authors of children's books for years have done such things, and it is not beyond notables such as Emerson, Tennyson and Shakespeare to project thoughts and motives to the wee tiny things. In more recent times, a rather extraordinary cockroach named Archy prowled the typewriter of journalist Don Marquis and appeared from time to time in his column in the old New

York Sun. Who could deny the truth in this famous observation by Archy,

"I have just been reading  
an advertisement of a certain  
roach exterminator  
the human race little knows  
all the sadness it  
causes in the insect world"

One of the most intriguing subsets of insects was elevated to international renown when placed on the screen by Walt Disney. Jiminy Cricket is a member of that group of insects who sing. They certainly can be credited as being the originators of the oldest love songs. Along with the cricket, this group of hopping orthopterans includes the cicada, the katydid and grasshoppers. Although the primary purpose of the songs has to do with attracting females, the individual voices are capable of joining in loud chorus as they synchronize their songs and can reach up to 70 or 80 decibels levels, roughly equivalent to the noise of heavy traffic on a busy street. [Milnes] Both the cricket and the katydid make music by rubbing the underside files of one wing across the scraper that is on the top surface of the other wing. In general, katydids are left-winged singers, and crickets are right-winged singers. However, approximately 5% of all crickets are left-winged. Another characteristic is that for crickets, their songs change with the temperature.

All this is prelude to an almost unbelievable tale that I bring tonight. I have reason to suspect that with their extra three hundred million years of time on this earth, insects have, in fact, developed very complex, but workable communications system as a means of adapting to their world which includes so many other phyla. Further refinements include apparent legal processes and a highly developed oral history. For the singing insects mentioned above, this apparently takes on the form of a ballad. This one was whispered to me

by a friend of a friend of the mother of all crickets who happens to live in my basement.

Why we were chosen to receive this startling material is not clear. Possibly the twenty years of shared tenancy of the basement gave the crickets an opportunity to observe us. How the material was transmitted would require a much longer undertaking than a budget permits. Here then is the material as best I could record it.

It tells us the story of two lovers from different classes drawn together by song, torn apart by the pressures of their respective families and the infidelity of one of the partners. Although the ending is sad, it certainly offers insight into the ways of the very small world, which we don't normally see. I shall not sing this ballad, but with apologies to Steve Allen who perfected this form of delivery, I shall try to speak it although some of you may find a familiar tune running through you head as we go along.

Randi and Albert were lovers,  
 Oh Lordy, how they could love,  
 They swore to be true to each other  
 Just as true as the stars up above.  
 He was her crickets, but he done his katydid wrong.

Albert's family was unhappy.  
 Miranda's felt the same.  
 But his left-handed song  
 really was to blame.  
 She fell in love with her cricket and thought he could  
 do no wrong.

Albert went down to the basement  
 Just for a drop of cold beer  
 Met up with a sweet cricket  
 And his love song drew her near  
 He was her cricket, but he did his katydid wrong.

Randi found Albert that evening  
 Asked how he could do her so wrong,  
 Albert started to sing again  
 But that was his very last song.  
 He was her cricket, but he did his katydid wrong.

The crickets arrested poor Randi,  
 They called for Judge Praying Mantis  
 Demand justice for Albert,  
 Certain he'd met with foul play.  
 He was her cricket, but he did his katydid wrong

The Judge forewarned, "Miranda  
 Anything you choose to say  
 Can be used against you  
 In Cricket Court today."  
 She was not dumb and asked for a lawyer right away.

Grasshopper counsel appointed  
 Needy Miranda might die  
 Judge Mantis heard the evidence  
 Asked "Where's the corpus dilecti?"  
 He was her cricket, but he did his katydid wrong.

The ladybug jury considered  
 Finally returned to the court  
 Handed their verdict to Judge Mantis  
 Who spoke these words with a scowl,  
 "It's clear to us here, Miranda et Al."

She was his katydid, but she swallowed her cricket  
 right down.

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