

Misattributed Quotes, Theories, Discoveries and Inventions

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Midnight Facts for
Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript
consists of episode
outline)

Stigler's law of eponymy

Back in 1980 a statistics
professor from the
university of Chicago
named Stephen Stigler

(that doesn't sound like a real name, that's very porn star) published Stigler's Law of Eponymy, which states that no scientific discovery is ever named for its original discoverer.

Which absolutely makes sense. the bulk of scientific progress is iterative rather than revolutionary. So-called Breakthroughs are typically more accurately described as improvements; the evolution of technology is analogous to the evolution of organisms, occurring in small steps. Mark twain put it slightly more articulately in a letter he wrote to Helen Keller. The two met when she was a teenager and they were pen pals for years. When she was defending herself against accusations of

plagiarism, he wrote to her: "It takes a thousand men to invent a telegraph, or a steam engine, or a phonograph, or a photograph, or a telephone or any other important thing — and the last man gets the credit and we forget the others." He reportedly also said, "these facts as I have stated them make it extremely challenging to determine the genesis of a specific invention, especially when crafting an episode of a comedic yet exhaustively-researched podcast."

That's a direct quote. So look, no one really invents anything. No one invented the space shuttle. It was a long, team effort.

inventors over decades developed components of the airplane and then the jet engine and thruster

rockets and then teams of people figured out how to make all of those components work together and now douchebags like Musk and Bezos are joyriding to Mars. every invention is the result of tweaking and improving and building on the work of predecessors. Apple didn't invent phones or touch screens but it was the first to put them all together in a package that actually worked, and the resulting device completely destroyed human interaction but is pretty great for passing time on the toilet.

So invention is iterative, but there are occasional giant leaps. Just Like the occasionally radical genetic mutations that result in evolutionary breakthroughs...like, the first fish to flop on land.

That fish didn't create lungs, but it figured out how to use them and had the guts to try.

And pretty soon a second, more unscrupulous fish followed, and then pioneered the art of deception by taking credit for the first fish's accomplishments.

This episode is about a bunch of second fish. I should call this episode the unscrupulous fish. Except that wouldn't be fair, because not all of these people are responsible for actually assigning credit for inventions, and we're not even just sticking to inventions; we're going to cover discoveries, inventions, and finally some commonly misattributed quotes.

So let's start with Halley's Comet

This one is a little nitpicky, but Edmund Halley did not discover Halley's comet.

The comet was first conclusively documented by Chinese historians who referred to the bright smudge in the sky as a "broom star" as far back as 240 BC., and throughout the centuries the comet has inspired equal parts fascination and terror around the globe. Roman Historian Flavius Josephus dubbed it "a star resembling a sword," while Britons of the Middle Ages called it a "long-haired star," and the sudden appearance of the comet was often used to justify or explain whichever horrific deeds

the observers either witnessed or wished to commit. There is even speculation that the appearance of Halley's comet in 1222 inspired the famous Mongolian warlord Genghis Khan to invade Europe. Genghis Khan, famously a hair trigger. "There's a weird-looking star in the sky...I'm gonna murder everyone." So Halley certainly didn't *discover* the comet, but he **WAS** the first to realize that a bright streak appearing in the sky every 74 to 79 years was in fact a single object looping around the solar system. After the comet's sole appearance during his lifetime in 1682, Halley correctly predicted the comet's return in 1758, but passed away before he was proven correct. There's nothing more

tragic than a missed opportunity to say "I told you so." I'm not a good person. It's the little things. During its last appearance in 1986, scientists were finally able to study the object, and confirm that it is indeed, as had been theorized, a "dirty snowball." A filthy ball of ice and dust. The majesty of the heavens. Breathtaking. Falling stars are often astronaut shit, and comets are ice-mud.

Pythagorean theorem

This one is less nitpicky, because there is really no case to be made for the Ancient Greek mystic Pythagorus having discovered that a-squared

plus b-squared equals c-squared, a mathematical formula reviled by school children everywhere and which—as you know—describes the relationship between a right triangle's hypotenuse and its two opposing sides. If there's anything you've no doubt retained from high school and found relevant to your life in the years since, it is obviously the fact that the area of a square extending from the hypotenuse of a right triangle is equal to the sum of the areas of squares extending from its two opposing legs. I don't know about you but that formula has gotten me out of more than a few sticky situations. So many vicious geometry duels. Thanks pythagorus! I kid, because it turns out that this formula actually IS super useful to smart

people, which is why you and I are mocking it. For instance, From "sciencing.com," which is much more credible than it sounds, "Given two straight lines, the Pythagorean Theorem allows you to calculate the length of the diagonal connecting them. This application is frequently used in architecture, woodworking, or other physical construction projects." I'll take their word for it. Smart people stuff. The theorem would also have come in very handy in many triangle-related construction projects such as the Egyptian pyramids. There is credible speculation that the formula was used in constructing the pyramids at Giza thousands of years before Pythagorus was born around 570 bc. The

theorem was *definitely* used by the Babylonians, and that was likewise over a thousand years before Pythagorus's parents even began thinking about getting down to business. It only became associated with him as a result of his followers, because pythagorus would eventually become the leader of an Italian math cult. Worst. Cult. Ever. We have quite a few cults in the discord, my least favorite is the bean cult because the entire cult consists of posting beans, don't ask, we have an entire list of the discord cults that I'm going to post on Instagram, but the Pythagorean cult would eventually spread from modern day Italy to Greece and was focused on the supposedly mystical relationship

between math, geometry, music, and the human soul. Pythagoreans were in particular fascinated with the mathematical basis of music and the concept of harmony, the idea that mathematical intervals as expressed musically could affect emotion and supposedly resonate with the soul. Which, I can kind of feel that. They were also vegetarians and—this is true—also hated beans. Pythagorus despised beans. Specifically fava beans, and he forbade his followers from partaking. The Pythagoreans were an a pro-music anti bean cult and I suddenly respect them way more. But they were also weird math-nerds who fetishized geometry and took credit for mathematical formulas they hadn't created and so ultimately I have to give

them the MFFI thumbs down. I cannot sanction their buffoonery.

Edwin Hubble

Contrary to popular belief, lauded American astronomer Edwin Hubble did not personally build NASA's spacefaring Hubble telescope. Does anyone actually believe that? But you may not know that the reason Hubble earned the honor of having his name emblazoned on a ridiculously expensive piece of spacefaring technology is because he is associated with an eponymous law that he also did not create, Hubble's Law.

Hubble's Law states that celestial bodies are moving away from the earth—and from each

other—at speeds proportional to their distance. Simply put, the universe is rapidly expanding, and the farther an object is from earth, the faster it is moving away from us. As mentioned in our Fermi Paradox episode, earth: very unpopular. We are a backwater ass planet and no one wants to be anywhere near us. The entire universe in fact is pretty antisocial because Hubble's Law tells us that everything is rapidly trying to get as far away as possible from every other thing. Hubble's law is particularly instrumental in providing evidence for the Big Bang theory. If the entire universe emanated from a single explosive event, it makes sense that the universe would be expanding like the

fragments of a bomb. I refer to the Big Bang as the shrapnel theory of the universe. We're all the product of a celestial takata airbag. That's dark. So Hubble's Law is super important, and super misnamed. It should actually be called Friedman's Law, because the theory of an expanding universe was developed in 1922 by a scientist working from Einstein's theory of General Relativity named Alexander Friedmann. Five years later another scientist who was equally not Hubble independently came to the same conclusion, so while it wouldn't be totally fair chronologically, it would even be more accurate to call it Lemaitre's law, because even though he was second to the punch,

he still beat Hubble.
Belgian scientist George's Lemaitre even offered an estimated value for the proportionality of the expansion, which would later become known as the "Hubble Constant." Fuck this credit-stealing creep. Stealing credit should be called pulling a Hubble. Edwin Hubble did not develop the constant, he simply confirmed it, and he would later be accused of redacting critical portions of the translation of Lemaitre's paper so that he could retain credit. However, the evidence is slim, but Hubble was inarguably both a brilliant astronomer and a self-promoter who spent years campaigning for a Nobel prize...and this was before astronomers were even eligible for the Nobel prize. Pretty ballsy. I'm officially

campaigning for this podcast to win a gold medal in Olympic snowboarding, because why the hell not. Shoot your shot, as Edwin Hubble liked to say. I imagine. To be clear, there's no evidence he said that, but it feels right. In honor of Hubble I'm going to start taking credit for every other podcast's accomplishments. If anyone asks, MFFI interviewed president Obama and caught the Golden State Killer. That's not actually something that a podcast did but people believe it is, so it's basically true.

Btw, I mentioned the subject of a previous episode, the Fermi paradox. The Fermi Paradox is in fact misattributed. The famous

paradox was actually first proposed by Russian Scientist Konstantin Tsiolkovsky in 1933, 17 years before the famous "where is everyone" lunchtime exclamation by Enrico Fermi that blew all of our collective minds. One of my favorite episodes, number 26.

Automobile

This one might seem obvious, but there's a twist. So, the invention of the automobile involves a double misconception.

First, There are a surprising number of people who believe that Henry Ford created the automobile. He did not. He implemented the moving assembly line, which he also did not create but was smart enough to adopt when it was suggested by one of his workers, William

Klann. Klann based the idea on a similar process that he had witnessed in a slaughterhouse, where it was known as a "disassembly line," which is a really nice term for tearing apart a corpse. "I'm not a serial killer, I'm just a hitchhiker disassembler." The moving assembly line sped up automobile production to 40 minutes per car, massively reduced costs, and allowed Ford to eventually release the affordable Model T, a no-frills, no seatbelts, 20-hp modern wonder capable of a top speed of 45 mph and available, as Ford famously quipped, in any color a purchaser could want, so long as it's black. Ford was also a massive antisemite and nazi sympathizer, as we discussed in a not yet

released episode.

So the inventor of the automobile definitely wasn't Henry Ford, but it's a little tough to nail down the actual inventor because it all depends on your definition of an automobile. So we're going to ignore steam powered automobiles as well as primitive electric automobiles (and yes, the electric car came before the gas-powered car) and we're going to define the classic automobile as a four-wheeled vehicle with a combustion engine, the invention of which is commonly credited to German Carl Benz, of Mercedes Benz fame. But herein lies the twist, and as with Henry Ford, the story of the automobile starts off innocently but by the end involves a surprising number of

nazis. The actual inventor of the automobile was a German of Jewish descent named Siegfried Marcus. And I bet you can guess what's coming. Siegfried made the horribly misguided decision to invent the automobile in Germany pre WW2 and also to be born Jewish in the early 1900s. This is an actual quote from a 1940 nazi directive: to the "Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda

Subject: True inventor of the automobile

The Bibliographical Institute and the publisher F. A. Brockhaus have been notified that in the future, encyclopedias are to refer to the two German engineers [Gottlieb Daimler](#) and [Carl Benz](#) as the

creators of the modern automobile, not to Siegfried Marcus."

That was brazen.

"Message Subject: we're a bunch of lying liars, body of message: hey, don't forget to lie."

As a result of the expunging of Marcus from German encyclopedias and history books, we don't know for sure when he created his own first vehicle, but the current estimate is 1864. It looked sort of like a go cart. His second car looked a bit more carish, like Cinderella's pumpkins carriage if you removed the pumpkin and added a transmission. Like HG Wells time machine from the movie, plus wheels. Should I keep offering examples? Like a sled crossed with a wagon with a motor.

Marcus was responsible for numerous patents, including one that automated the electrical ignition of ship-cannons, so that cannons could be fired from the bow of multiple ships simultaneously. So if you or your loved ones own a car, OR have ever been involved in an old-timey maritime battle, you have Siegfried Marcus to thank.

Telephone

As a Scotsman, you should be ashamed and chagrined at the fact that one of your illustrious countrymen has for over a century been falsely credited with one of the most pivotal inventions of all time. As a Scotsman you should be ashamed of many things, in fact. As a

Scotsman, you should be ashamed. Many people might think they know the controversy I'm referring to, But there's so much more to the story.

Alexander Graham Bell did not invent the telephone. The identity of the person who actually invented the telephone is the subject of hot debate among telephone enthusiasts, I imagine, maybe not, maybe no one to is debating this anymore, I guess I should just say that the origin of the telephone is super murky and there's absolutely zero agreement. The only fact on which there is 100% agreement is that Alexander Graham Bell did not invent it. He wasn't even the first to file a patent on the device. He wasn't event the SECOND

person to file a patent for a telephone. So Listeners may be familiar with the famous tale of the race to invent the telephone that was supposedly waged between Elisha Gray and AGB, but in reality the only goal of their patent race was to *steal credit* for inventing the telephone. The famous patent dispute between AGB and EG is actually irrelevant because, as the United States House of Representatives finally acknowledged with a vote in 2002, the actual inventor of the telephone was an Italian by the name of Antonio Meucci. Case closed. Unless you're German in which case you would adamantly Argue that the inventor of the telephone was in fact Johan Philip Reis, who created a telephone-like

device way back in 1860. Telephone-like might be a little charitable. You spoke into a carving of a wooden ear. "Stuck in the middle was a piece of metal connected to batteries. Your voice caused the metal to vibrate, and it was carried over copper wires to another room...In that other room, the wires were connected to a knitting needle with more copper wires twisted around it and then wrapped in silk. The needle was placed in a violin, where it vibrated."

Reis would create different versions of his device, each a little more refined and with fewer violins and body parts, One of which he dubbed the "singing station" because he imagined it transmitting music. Which may be one of the reasons he doesn't

get credit for creating the telephone. Thomas Edison would later claim that Reese's telephone could only transmit music, but this was not true. Reis had used his telephone to transmit in German the phrase "the horse does not eat cucumber salad." So there. Maybe that's why no one takes Reis seriously. He said weird shot into wooden ears. Actually, he transmitted that particular phrase because it is supposedly difficult to understand in German, so it provided proof that his device could transmit detailed speech. However, simultaneously in America Antonio Meucci was developing his less anatomical version. In 1860, a full 16 years before Bell was awarded his ill-gotten patent, Meucci unveiled in New York a

device called the "teletrofono." Pretty spot on. If you're Alexander Graham Bell it's a little tough to spin that one; "Teletrophono? Never heard of it. My device is totally unrelated. Yes, it also works by transmitting sound over wires. Yes, I was aware of Meucci's invention and did work in his lab. What's my invention called? I call it the teeliepahone. I mean sure, you could pronounce it any way you want to make it sound similar." So why didn't Meucci get the credit for inventing the landline telephone until the 2000s? Like, why didn't he get credited with inventing the landline until cell phones had doomed his invention to irrelevance? I love that congress was like, oh the telephone is dead?) I think we're ready

for that vote." Well, Meucci had the misfortune of being a non-white guy in the 1800s, and also didn't speak English very well. Bell presumably spoke very good English, albeit with a silly-a** accent. I imagine he sounded a lot like Shrek, because that's how all Scottish people sound to me. So this story is tragic: Meucci first discovered the potential for sending sound along electric wires while working in Cuba, and moved to Staten Island in the mid 1800s to perfect his device. As fate would have it, the teletrofono became an indispensable tool for Meucci when his wife was paralyzed with crippling arthritis; he set up a teletrephono in the house so that he could communicate with his wife between rooms. The

teletrofono was indeed a huge improvement over the previous method of across-the-house communication: violent shouting. That method, though, still very popular today, depending on your family dynamics. So the bottom line, AGB can suck it.

Quotes

An excellent title of a mentalfloss article linked in the transcript: "Reports of Mark twain's quote about his own death are greatly exaggerated"

This is of course in reference to the famous and famously misquoted quip:

"Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated" which is one of the few clever things that we know mark Twain didn't say. The

man's witticisms have been well documented, and if you're puzzling over the source of a memorable quote online, there's a good chance it comes to us courtesy of Mark Twain. But not this one. To be fair, the famously inaccurate quote was based on a real statement. In responding to a New York Journal article that claimed he was gravely ill and penniless in London, Twain wrote, "I can understand perfectly how the report of my illness got about, I have even heard on good authority that I was dead. James Ross Clemens, a cousin of mine, was seriously ill two or three weeks ago in London, but is well now. The report of my illness grew out of his illness. The report of my death was an exaggeration." Which is

pretty similar, I guess you could say this is nitpicky, but honestly the real quote is just not as cool. Way too verbose. Twain was usually very pithy, so a Twain biographer in 1912 revised the quote to make it seem more twainish, and the cooler version stuck. Incidentally, Mark twain also never said, "it is better to keep your mouth shut and appear stupid than to open it and remove all doubt." Which, bummer. That's a good one.

"Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results"

I wish Einstein had said this. Unfortunately the actual genesis of this truism is less eccentric genius and more dimestore paperback. The

quote comes from a mystery novel from the 1980s by Rita Mae Brown called "Sudden Death." "she attributes the quote to a fictional "Jane Fulton," writing, "Unfortunately, Susan didn't remember what Jane Fulton once said. 'Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results.'" So the origin of the quote actually involved three people, only one of whom was real and none of whom were Albert Einstein.

"Where we go one we go all." Ask a typical QAnon believer the origin of this red-pill rallying cry and they'll tell you that it was a motto inscribed on a bell on John F Kennedy's boat, because that sounds a hell of a lot more awesome and patriotic than the truth: it

comes from an awful 1996 Ridley Scott movie called White Squall, which has been described as a low-rent Dead Poet Society on a boat, with Jeff Bridges standing in for Robin Williams, helping young men find inner strength on the open seas. White Squall is a garbage film with a low and yet still very generous 58% certified rotten rating on rotten tomatoes and a truly embarrassing legacy as a major contributor to the dumbest cult in America. Did we need more evidence that QAnon believers are fucking idiots?

Marie Antoinette never said "let them eat cake." The quote comes from an autobiography of Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in which he

referred to an unidentified princess who naively suggested that if her subjects couldn't afford bread, they should eat pastry instead. After the fall of the royalty in the wake of the French Revolution, the princess was retroactively assumed to be Antoinette. The only problem is that the book was published when Marie Antoinette was 12 years old, 3 years before she married Louis XVI and became queen of France. Antoinette has been unfairly maligned. She actually seems like a perfectly young lady probably didn't deserve beheading

PT Barnum did not say "there's a sucker born every minute." The first clue is that there's little evidence that "sucker"

was a derogatory term for a gullible person in Barnum's day. The quote was most likely derived from the gambling aphorism, "there's a mark born every minute." Incidentally, Barnum also never disparaged his clientele. He never publicly expressed contempt for his audience. He felt that the so-called humbug—the common word for a farcical spectacle like a circus sideshow—was a respectable form of entertainment and it was perfectly natural for people to pay to see one. His patrons weren't suckers, they were just normal Americans looking for a diversion. Also, Humbug now makes sense in the Ebenezer Scrooge context: "bah humbug" basically means "it's all a bullshit farce." Midnight

fact.

“Well-behaved women rarely make history” is a quote commonly attributed to Marilyn Monroe. Nope. In 1976 author Laurel Thatcher Ulrich first used the phrase in an American Quarterly article to refer to colonial women, about whom we know very little because most of them were, under penalty of punishment, “well behaved.” In 2006 Thatcher wrote a book with the quote as its title. People again assumed she was quoting Monroe when she was actually quoting her younger self. For what it’s worth I would not quote my younger self even in casual conversation let alone as the title of a book. You’re not going to sell a million

of copies of "Gee, I can't wait to take advantage of this lucrative undergraduate English degree."

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