

Watchbore was a character I invented for the TimeZone Forum (www.Timezone.com) in 1996. He remained a popular figure for five years until TimeZone lost its independence and Watchbore became bored.

WATCHBORE AND THE STORY OF TIME (PART 1)

In which Watchbore visits the Story of Time exhibition, Greenwich and discovers the most significant wristwatch of all time

“Watchbore,” said the Editor, graciously allowing the ash of his Monte Christo to fall on the head banging the carpet at his feet, “you may now dry my shoes and listen up. I am sending you on an important assignment. This is what you need to know. For our special millennium issue we are going to publish the ultimate watch magazine. It will be totally unreadable. The space between the ads will be occupied by text guaranteed to render instantly catatonic anyone foolhardy enough to try. Your mission will be to think up a truly stupefying subject and write about it as long and as tediously as only you know how. The expenses,” he continued, flinging a wad of freshly laundered 1000-franc notes at the squirming figure on the floor, “are unlimited. I want 20,000 words of eyeglazing drivel by Monday. Now get out.”

It will be said of Watchbore that he seldom shirks his duty to re-examine the fundamental truths of the human condition, namely that the ideal number of people for a business lunch is himself and a first-class headwaiter. It is thus that we see him emerging from the Savoy, his ears ringing with the spontaneous applause of the chef and cellarmaster, and his feet propelling him almost effortlessly to the embankment, where, brushing aside several offers of marriage from an excited mob of Japanese schoolgirls, he is swept aboard the boat for the seven-and-a-half-minute journey (angular distance) east to the Greenwich meridian, which he reaches some three-quarters of an hour of deep sleep later.

His mission, the inspiration for which had previously been successfully pursued to its lair at the bottom of a bottle of Bollinger 61, was no less than literary glory.

Watchbore would take as his theme the subject that had baffled the keenest minds since the dawn of humanity — time itself. He would explore some of the most intractable questions in the history of irrelevant trivia, like: is time cyclical or linear? Is it possible to step in the same river twice? Was there a Big Crunch before the Big Bang? How long was each day of creation? It would be an epic of truly unfathomable complexity, containing the most meaningless platitudes in Watchbore's vast repertoire and sustained in sentences of jaw-dropping length.

Thus Watchbore leaps off the boat and hastens to the Queen's House in Greenwich's elegant 17th-century palace complex, there to consult the oracle — the Story of Time Exhibition. This definitive new exhibition, as Watchbore is reliably informed, tells the entire story of time, from the cultural, technical and personal point of view, from the Big Bang to tomorrow's regrets.

But first, he must perform an important ritual: crossing the Prime Meridian, Watchbore pauses to set his favourite wristwatch (the elegantly slim secular perpetual calendar, grand strike, split-seconds minute-repeater with the cross-peto tourbillon detent escapement, made for him by a grateful Patek Philippe) by the ancient Greenwich time signal. Like generations of navigators before him, he watches the red sphere rise slowly against the washed-out sky, up the pole atop the observatory and fall, five minutes later, exactly at 01:00 GMT*.

The Story of Time Exhibition, as Watchbore was soon to discover, is the inescapable destination for all with the leisure to ask themselves what is time, where it goes, what it does when it gets there, whether it's the same for everyone, when did it start and when will it ever end?

By bringing together some 550 time-related objects from all over the world, from Neolithic calendars to the caesium fountain clock, (stable to within one second in 15 million years), the Story of Time Exhibition enabled Watchbore to research the entire 10 billion years of the subject simply by wandering around for a couple of hours in a deep torpor. Exercising his prodigious literary skills, he would

develop the theme into a masterwork of mind-numbing fatuity, as interminable as time itself.

It was only later that evening, when Watchbore was absorbed in the major issues of the moment with his new part-time private secretary, Miss Beluga Steele (a nice lady from Amsterdam), that a thought suddenly struck him, luckily doing little damage.

There was only a single wristwatch in the whole Story of Time exhibition.

In the entire history of time, there was only one representative of the icon of the 20th century. Among the most important machines in the millennium of mechanically recorded time, and among the billions of wristwatches produced in the last century, the organizers chose just one, and it had to be the most significant wristwatch in the world.

In occasionally visiting the TimeZone Forum in search of some subject to kill with a response of stupefying tedium, Watchbore inevitably finds himself scrolling interminably down a thread which leaves him wondering whether to give up high literature and realize his long-cherished ambition of becoming a trainer of performing elephants instead. It's the "what watch are you wearing today?" or "the watch you would put in a time-capsule?" kind of question that explores depths of ennui and triviality that leave Watchbore gasping in admiration.

Thus challenged, Watchbore closes the first chapter of this riveting saga with the following question to those of his readers who are still awake. It's the question that has exercised the finest minds of TimeZone forum's intellectual elite and left them baffled: Which single item best represents the entire phenomenon of the wristwatch? In other words, the most significant wristwatch of all time.

The answer to that question will be revealed next week in the tragic dénouement of Watchbore's spellbinding tale of passion, intrigue and drama, as he concludes his review of the Story of Time exhibition.

*The reason the ball drops at 1pm instead of at 12:00 is because at noon the resident astronomers were busy timing the transit of the sun.

(more)