

Prologue: The Bathtub Debates

Some time early in the 22nd century, the Quatuorviri, the ruling four of the world, was brainwashed by unfriendly aliens averse to the progress of humanity and its cultures. Under the effects of genetically modified bananas, cough syrup, and sildenafil citrate, they began a program to eliminate all semblances of scholarly endeavors and human understanding. Libraries, museums and all depositories of knowledge were torched and universities and colleges closed their doors forever, or became “Banana-Zones”—distribution points for the food that was keeping the masses happy, ignorant, and nihilistic. Intellectuals and earnest students went underground, striving to maintain the rigorous academic standards of yore, but the Quatuorviri sought and destroyed these cells. Slowly but irreversibly, the people ate the bananas, swigged the cough syrup and popped Viagra ® like M&Ms. The effects were terrible to behold.

Long dormant as God’s angels on earth, the penguins fought this horrible trend, but without opposable thumbs, there was little they could do. They set up a nearly inaccessible safe-haven for scholars in Penguindom, and discovered the one weakness of the aliens’ plot: the nihilism-inducing effects of the bananas had a half-life of 57 years. After that point, the aliens assumed, human culture would be irreversibly destroyed and lost... at least for several millenia. But they had not factored in the penguins. Given this weakness, however small, there was hope for humanity!

With most scholars already banana-fied, the penguins made one last stand. They sought to bring the three greatest scholars in the world—one from each division—to their headquarters, Fort Sophia in the Eastern Antarctic. Here, they would write and record as much as possible, in an effort to preserve as much of human progress as they could. Thursday May 11, 2152 brought hope and sorrow to penguinkind. The penguins picked up the scholars in a town near Philadelphia, and after walking them to the Delaware, drove them off to the Seventh Continent in a boat that they had acquired from a scientific expedition in early 1966. The Quatuorviri could nought but shake their fists in unrighteous indignation at the deftness of the Spheniscidae.

Unfortunately, as they reached Fort Sophia, mechanical failures rendered the rusty old craft unsteerable. It was headed directly for an iceberg where it crashed and began to sink at a reasonably leisurely pace that left plenty time for academic discussion, but little else. The penguins would be fine, of course, but the scholars, and with them all knowledge, would perish. But there was a final glimmer of hope: there was a bathtub on the boat, with space and buoyancy sufficient to allow one of the scholars to make the 4-day paddle to Fort Sophia.

Which division would be passed on to the future? Which division would rebuild the world? Let the Bathtub Debates begin.