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THE NUMBERS GUY
By CARL BIALIK



Coming Soon: 'The Number 24'

February 23, 2007

[FADE IN]

SETTING: A DIMLY LIT BOOKSHOP

WILL FERRELL idly browses the shelves before picking up a book titled "The Number 24." He flips through the pages.

WILL FERRELL

"What a strange book. The pages are oddly worn and frayed. And what's this? Hitler was born on April 20, or 4/20, and 4 plus 20 is **24**. How disturbing. Pearl Harbor occurred on 12/7/41 -- $12+7+4+1=24$. Serial killer Ted Bundy was born Nov. **24** and executed Jan. **24**. And **24** is also the number of elders John saw seated on thrones in heaven in the Book of [Revelation](#), the New Testament volume that describes the Apocalypse. What a mysterious, powerful number."

JOIN A DISCUSSION



Do certain numbers have special meaning for you, or seem to arise repeatedly in your life? Do you think that every number can be seen as having special properties, if you look hard enough? Can Jim Carrey pull off a psychological thriller?

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WILL buys the book. Cut to a montage of **24** sightings: **12** and **14**, alongside each other in the elevator of his apartment building. A blackboard filled with mathematical scribbles, including the finding that $1 \times 2 \times 3 \times 4$ equals **24**. A jewelry catalog on the living-room table, left open by his wife to the page featuring **24**-carat gold rings. An alarm clock flashing the time 9:15, with $9+15$ equaling **24**. A copy of the nursery rhyme "Sing a Song of Sixpence," with this [passage](#) highlighted: "**Four and twenty**/Naughty boys/Bak'd in a Pye."

Camera returns to a shot of WILL, looking increasingly deranged, and his frightened family...

* * *

That's my stab at writing an imagined sequel for "The Number 23," a movie starring Jim Carrey that opens nationwide today. In the film, Mr. Carrey plays a man "spiraling into a dark obsession with the number 23," after reading a book on the number's ominous properties. (Among the "evidence:" Nirvana frontman Kurt Cobain was born in 1967 and died in 1994 -- the digits in both years add up to 23. Caesar was stabbed 23 times. Even the date of the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks has a connection -- $9+11+2+0+0+1=23$. And so on.)

The movie -- like my proposed sequel -- shows how just about any number can seem to have all sorts of eerie properties if you look hard enough.

The choice of 23 as the source of Mr. Carrey's mania wasn't arbitrary. That number has long been a favorite of conspiracy theorists, and the intrigue around the number captured the imagination of "The Number 23" screenwriter Fernley Phillips.

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Mr. Phillips told me he developed a "healthy sort of obsession, or fascination" with the number in 1998 while studying screenwriting at the University of California, Los Angeles. A classmate introduced him to the belief that the number 23 has powerful, possibly sinister properties. Mr. Phillips turned to books by the futurist Robert Anton Wilson depicting the so-called 23 enigma; Mr. Wilson called the number "cosmic."

The connections were enough to prompt Mr. Phillips, who already had an interest in the paranormal, to write a screenplay on the number. (I asked him if his next film would be a sequel titled "The Number 24." He replied, laughing, "if the studio wants it," and offered that he'd also be game to write a prequel, "The Number 22.")

Mr. Phillips, a native of England, said he's a 23 agnostic. He pointed out that the number turns up frequently in nature -- it's the number of pairs of chromosomes in human DNA, and the [percentage](#) of dark matter in the universe. More personally, after being introduced to the 23 enigma, he noticed that often when he looked at a digital clock, the time would seem to be 23 minutes past an hour, or 2:30. License plates would contain the string "23." Newspaper headlines chronicling disasters with mass casualties would count 23 victims -- "not always, but more times than I would have liked," Mr. Phillips said.

You could also say that 23 led to marriage for Mr. Phillips. He met his wife, Alissa Ferguson, through the movie -- she read the script and advised her boss, producer Beau Flynn, to buy it. Even though she knew about Mr. Phillips's fascination with the number, she reacted rather strongly when he urged her, in December 2005, to hold off a day on delivering their child because 12/6/05 would be a special birthday: $12+6+5=23$. "You probably couldn't print what she said to me," Mr. Phillips said. Their daughter was born on Dec. 5.

Before being cast as the movie's star, Mr. Carrey already had [his own predilection](#) for 23. Like Mr. Phillips, he was turned on to the number's mysteries by a friend. His production company is named JC23.

Some of the movie's claims about the number's properties are dubious. For instance, it notes that the invasion of Iraq began on March 20 (3/20, with $3+20=23$), 2003, at 2:30. (While the date is correct, reports differ on exactly what time the attack began.) Another claim is that it takes 23 seconds for blood to circulate throughout the entire body, even though the requisite time can vary widely for different people.

And in an example perhaps not governed by fate, the movie began filming on Jan. 23, 2006 -- and is opening today on the 23rd of February. (There are other 23s they missed: Dr Pepper "[is a unique blend of 23 flavors](#)." And I don't think they'll be updating the list with references to critics' pans, such as Rolling Stone's 23-sentence, one-star [review](#) and the Hollywood Reporter's [comment](#) that "there are probably at least 23 reasons why this thriller doesn't work.")

All numbers can be shown to have interesting properties and to emerge in unexpected places, if we look hard enough. That makes any one number's claim of enigmatic properties rather suspect. "Human beings are not as good as we imagine at discerning which events are random and which ones fall into a pattern," Sylvain Cappell, professor of mathematics at New York University's Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences, told me.

For a graphical representation of this concept, I recommend a Web project by Golan Levin, who teaches electronic art at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. [The Secret Lives of Numbers](#) displays, in chart form, the number of search-engine hits for every whole number between one and 100,000. Lower numbers have more hits, not surprisingly. Other numbers with spikes on the chart include those around powers of 10 (50, 1,000), crucial and current years (1492, 1945, 2000) and numbers with other meanings (911, 80386, 90210).

I've [questioned](#) the value of the reported search-engine hits, but Mr. Levin's project is nonetheless an interesting graphical representation of the persistence of certain numerals in our lives. In 2002, the most recent year for which he crawled the search-engine results, 23 was ranked just where you might expect -- 23rd (24 was ranked 22nd).

"One thing that my project does point out is that there are tons of meanings for every number," Mr. Levin told me. He added, "Wherever you'll want meaning, you'll get it."

You can also check out [this list](#) of "special" numbers maintained by Erich Friedman, an associate professor of mathematics at Stetson University in Florida. (And for a less rigorous demonstration that just about any numbers can be manipulated to demonstrate just about anything, [listen](#) to "South Park" character Cartman's explanation for why Kyle was behind the Sept. 11 attacks.)

Even Mr. Wilson, the novelist and inspiration for Mr. Phillips as he pursued his interest in 23, is read by some

fans as intending the enigma around the number as a satire of the human tendency toward paranoia and false pattern-spotting. He died last month. If Mr. Wilson had survived to see the film, Mr. Phillips thinks, "he would get a kick out of it -- the idea that 23 does, maybe, wield its inexplicable power." Mr. Phillips also acknowledged that any number can be granted these special properties if you're looking for it: "That may well be true. Or it may not."

(Thanks to numbers gurus George Bergman, Jan de Leeuw, Keith Devlin, Ivo Dinov, Mark H. Hansen, Geoffrey Mess, Robert Osserman and Kenneth A. Ribet for their help.)

* * *

Thanks to everyone who posted to the most recent [forum](#) about my [column](#) on Americans' food-spending habits. I'll be reading, and responding to, your comments about "The Number 23" in a [new forum](#) this week. And please remember to use your full name with posts. (If you have a comment or suggestion unrelated to this week's column, please email me directly at numbersguy@wsj.com.)

Write to Carl Bialik at numbersguy@wsj.com

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