

◆ Plenary Address: *Improbable Research—Less and More Than Meets the Eye*

Moderator:

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Chicago, Illinois

Speaker:

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Reporter:

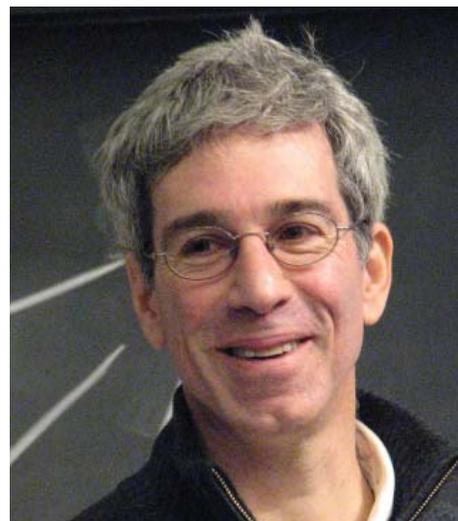
Jacob Rosenberg
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Marc Abrahams is the editor and cofounder of *Annals of Improbable Research* and the organizer of the Ig Nobel Prizes. Abrahams has done a fantastic job of injecting humor into the world of science. The slogan for the Ig Nobel Prizes says that the prize winners have done research (or other things) that first makes people laugh and then makes them think. Ten prizes are awarded in different categories every year in a special ceremony held at Harvard University. This year's ceremony is scheduled for October 1. The prize committee receives 6,000 to 7,000 new nominations every year, and nonwinners stay in the pool for future prizes. Thus, the pool consists of several thousand nominations. About 10% to 20% of the nominees are self-nominated, but they rarely receive prizes. About 1,200 people attend the yearly event at Harvard. The prizes are physically presented by Nobel Prize winners. Some recent Ig Nobel Prize winners have studied the following issues:

- *Medicine*: Using digital rectal massage against intractable hiccups. Demonstrating that high-priced fake medicine is more effective than low-priced fake medicine.
- *Cognitive science*: Discovering that slime molds can solve puzzles.
- *Economics*: Discovering that professional lap dancers earn higher tips when they are ovulating.
- *Nutrition*: Electronically modifying the sound of a potato chip to lead the eater to perceive the chip as crisper than it really was.
- *Peace*: Adopting the legal principle that plants have dignity.
- *Biology*: Discovering that fleas that live on a dog can jump higher than fleas that live on a cat.
- *Chemistry*: Demonstrating that Coca-Cola is an effective spermicide and demonstrating that it is not (this prize was given jointly to two teams).

The yearly ceremony features a contest in which contestants can win a date with a Nobel Prize winner. A miniopera is also performed in which professional opera singers sing about research.

Annals of Improbable Research now has a European office at the Natural History Museum in Rotterdam; the bureau chief (and museum curator) Kees Moeliker is a previous prize winner, having been honored for discovering and documenting homosexual necrophilia in ducks. The people involved in *Annals of Improbable Research* also produce a Web TV series, which is posted on YouTube and other sites. The



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series consists of 3-minute episodes covering the subjects of the Ig Nobel Prizes and issues of *Annals of Improbable Research*.

Others who have embraced humor in science include the *BMJ*, which has a tradition of publishing scientific articles in the Christmas issue that share the goal of first making people laugh and then making them think (several of those *BMJ* articles have later been honored with Ig Nobel Prizes).

This way of combining humor with traditional scientific methods is a great initiative and good inspiration for many young scientists. It is highly appreciated by this reporter!

To learn more about the *Annals of Improbable Research* and the Ig Nobel Prizes, visit www.improbable.com. 🌐