

The Snowflake Saga

Philip J. Davis



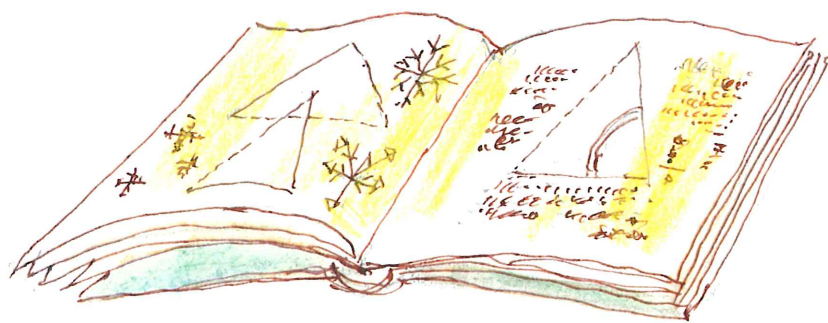
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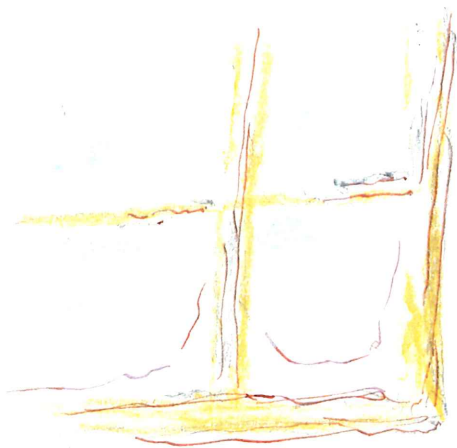


In February of 1978, the month of the Great Blizzard, during which we were snowbound, I warded off cabin fever by writing a small but significant book entitled *Snowflakes for Euclid*. This book laid out clearly and succinctly my views on the metaphysics of life. Included also were a number of hard-to-find recipes for warm and comforting drinks.





My publisher, largely as a courtesy, ordered a print run of 600 copies. He sent out ten copies to important reviewers, but eschewed a costly advertising campaign. I received one review in the *International Posset Journal* which opined somewhat ambiguously that “The author has done it again.”



Despite the fact that my publisher asked me to buy back four hundred copies, I basked in the knowledge that I had done it again. Little by little, over the quarter century that has elapsed, by pressing copies on house guests (as one might press new-born kittens) and by similar ploys, my backlog of *Snowflakes* melted away. I woke up one day with the realization that I had absolutely no copies from which to self-plagiarize my ancient but hopefully still pungent thoughts. No, by foolish oversight, had I retained my hand-written manuscript copy.

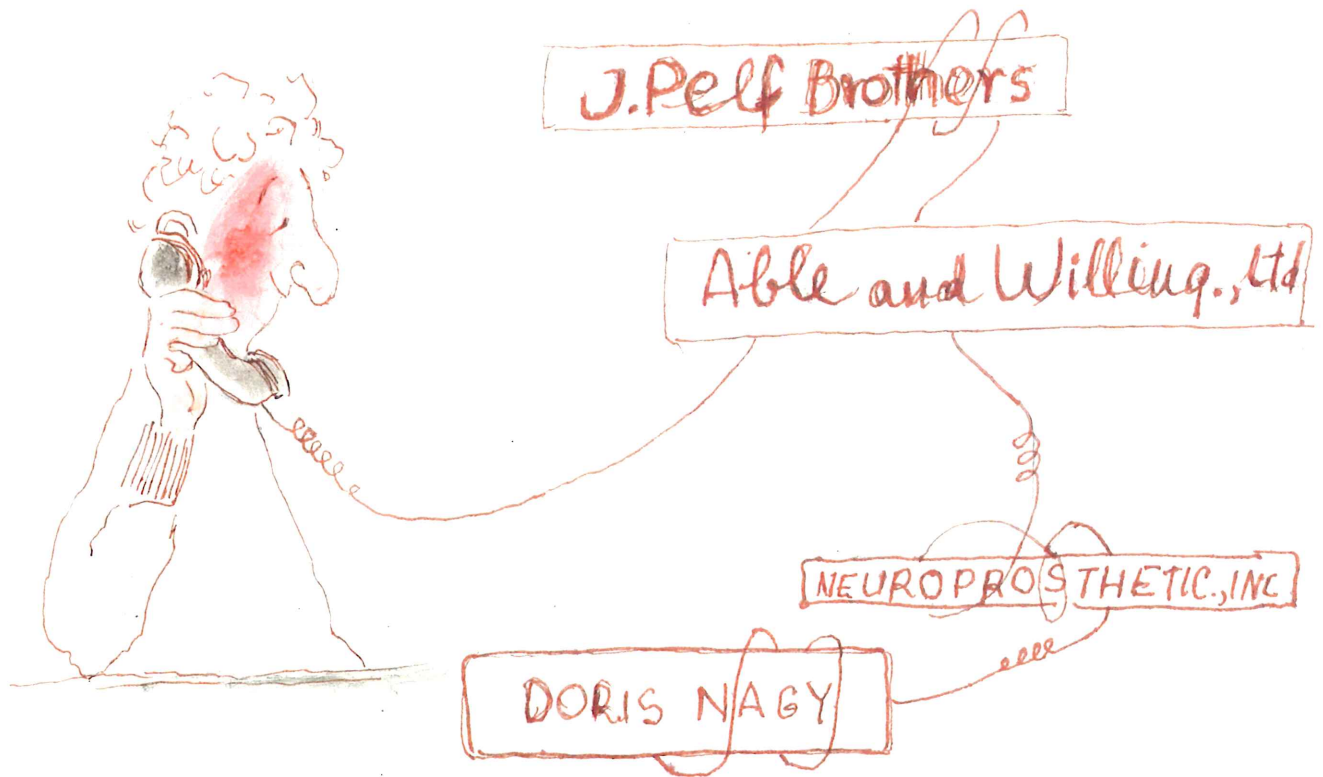
They say that God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb. This was the case, as I shall now relate. As an inveterate Bookman, I have the habit of looking at the titles of books wherever I can find them. One surely expects such behavior from a person who regularly walks by the stacks of a library with two million books. However this habit of mine became intensified, aggravated, and some say sub-neurotic.

Our household receives regularly each day about five mail order catalogs, ranging in subject matter from women's dresses to cans of aphid spray. In price levels the catalogs range from deep discount to highly elevated expenditures. The latter category, which is germane to my story, consists largely of high quality, high priced men and womens garments. The models are often photographed against an interior background of considerable sumptuousness and which very often includes a bookcase full of books. The implication that expensive people are both literate and selective pleases me though I realize that this may be only an approximate truth.



When I come to such catalog pages, I whip out my magnifying glass to read the titles of the books. I can't help it; it can be described as a knee-jerk reaction to the stimulus. In most instances the fidelity or sharpness of the reproduction is not sufficient to allow title identification. But one evening, lying in bed and surfing the catalog of The J. Pelf Brothers ("Quality Men's Garments Since 1803"), and turning a page to where a bookshelf was displayed, there it was on the shelf, totally recognizable under magnification: a copy of my book *Snowflakes for Euclid*.

I had to have it. I laid out a campaign. My family had no inkling that there were no *Snowflakes* in the house or that I valued the book so highly. "Well, if you want a copy," they suggested, "just ask on eBay and you'll get one in microseconds." I rejected this route. I wanted to contact the J.Pelf Brothers. "You've been misled," they



added, “the books shown are not real books. They are simply book covers, dummies.” “A Potemkin Book Village,” explained another relative who knew about such things.

Ignoring these pessimistic assessments, I went forward with my pursuit plan. I contacted the J. Pelf Brothers’ Customer Service Department. It took several calls before I got through the automated “push this, push that” stage and was able to talk to live flesh. Ultimately I got to the J. Pelf Brothers advertising and publicity department. There I learned that mail order catalogs were outsourced to a certain company, *Able and Willing, Ltd.*, that produces catalogs for many, many firms ranging from womens garments to aphid control.

Contacting *Able and Willing, Ltd.*, and having (with considerable difficulty) avoided the “push this, push that” stage, I was referred to a project manager (whose name is irrelevant) and who seemed to know something about the J. Pelf Brothers account.

The project manager was an agreeable, talkative fellow, and told me that various companies informed his company of the socio-economic status of their target customers. This, he said, was of great importance for it indicated the tonality (his term !) of the photographic productions. J.Pelf Brothers, he informed me, probably bought into the research of *Numeroprosthetics, Inc.*, that has available data on the shopping habits of some 200 million Americans.

Sharpening my inquiries a bit, the project manager referred me to an assistant, Doris Nagy, who "shot the J. Pelf Brothers' Account." Contacting Doris Nagy or Nagv

Doris (she was clearly of Hungarian derivation), a sub-assistant told me she was in the middle of a shoot and that she would be free the following week. Having waited twenty five or more years without a copy of *Snowflakes for Euclid*, this delay perturbed me not at all.

The day finally arrived. Doris was free to talk. I assured her that I was not a company spy and that if she wished she could answer all my inquiries generically. Apparently, my voice conveyed a feeling of forthrightness. (Perhaps she thought I was an investigative reporter through whose writings she might gain some personal publicity.)

In answer to my question of where she got the bookcase full of books displayed on page 35 of the Fall Catalog of J.Pelf Brothers, she answered that she usually calls up Wolf Goldman's theatrical supply house. "Wolf is a

doll," she said, "Whatever props I need, he gets it for me. Books, snow, dogs, bicycles. You name it." Thanking Doris Nagy for her time and insights, and waiting a few days to amalgamate all I had learned, I reached Wolf Goldman of *Goldman's Theatricals*. "Pres. and CEO" his website said.

I must report that in this case, despite the intimation of Mr. Goldman's website, there was no "push this and punch that" to get through to him. Moreover, Mr. Goldman said it was his slack season, and he was glad to have the opportunity to talk to an "intelligent person." Type-casting by voice, I suppose; but of course I was flattered.

I could tell at once that with a man such as Wolf Goldman you didn't get down to the business of the day immediately. When I told him my name and various other parameters of significance, he ventured that we were second cousins once removed, and that we had a common ancestor who had a schnapps and kummel mill in the Old Country. Be this as it may.



I summarized the situation to Wolf and he listened with increasing interest. I told him that there was a book by the title of *Snowflakes for Euclid* on page 35 of the J. Pelf Brothers Fall Catalog and that Doris Nagy did the shoot. "She's one of the best," he said with emphasis. "The bottom line," I cut in with some impatience, "is that I want to get that copy. So tell me, where do you get your books?"

"If you asked me where Doris gets all her models. I can tell you. Exactly. They come knocking on her door. If you asked me whether Doris shoots on the premises of J. Pelf Brothers, or Macy's or the late lamented Gimbels of revered memory, I can tell you. But I'll be honest with you, I get my books from a guy named Vance. He get them from overstocks. He also goes around and gets them from the discards of library sales. You know, when people bring books they don't want. He comes around here; I buy. I don't even have his phone number. I buy only the best: five cents a pound."

There was no stopping Wolf Goldman:

"Doris calls me up. She orders four feet of books. Whatever. I charge by the pound, not by the feet. I'll tell you a thing or two. The books I supply are fresh and clean. Nothing torn. No mildew. Not from Wolf Goldman. Only the best."

“Do the books come back to you after Doris shoots them,” I asked.

“No why should they ? But she has to keep them up to date. It wouldn’t look good to show a 1938 *World Almanac*, would it ? ”



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“It would not,” I agreed. So *Snowflakes for Euclid* might still be in her studio?”

“Positively yes. And you can tell her Wolf said so.”

Was this back to Go? No. Well, not quite. Another week went by before I could get in touch with Doris Nagy. I explained to her what I wanted. She was rather curt; she had two shoots lined up and scheduled for that day. “Come to my studio. Look around, maybe it’s here. How should I know? In the afternoon.”

So far, all my dealings had all been on the phone, but this development required my flesh and blood presence. I considered that I was making progress in these degenerate days when humans are indistinguishable from machines. I took the train to Penn. Station and taxied down to someplace between Canal Street and Houston Street and found *Able and Willing Ltd.* without too much difficulty. In a loft, three flights up. No elevator.

Are you Doris? “I asked a tall lady in an artist’s smock who was puffing away on a cigarette and was fussing with lights focused on a still life consisting of slices of roast beef on a bed of greens and surrounded with a necklace of radishes. She nodded. “Cook book stuff,” she explained. There was deprecation in her voice.



Deeply disappointed that there were that day no beautiful models around in various stages of deshabile, I introduced myself and explained what I was looking for.

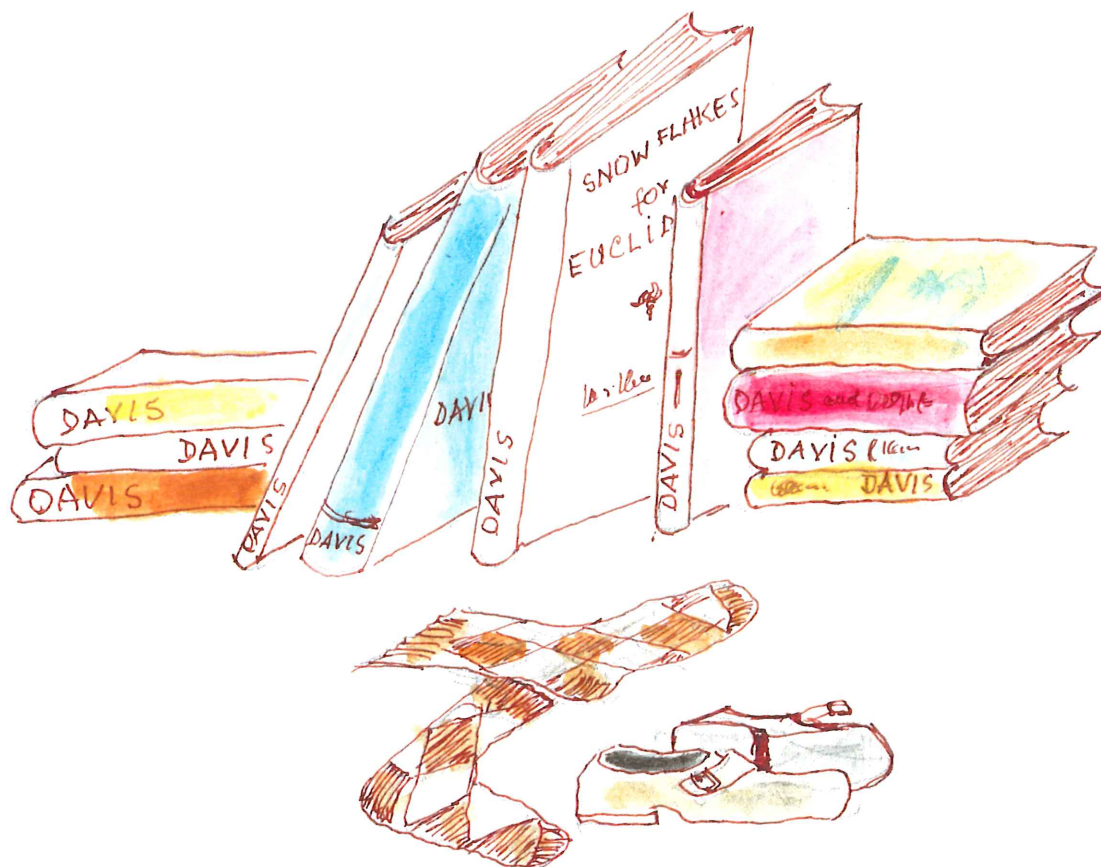
“Be my guest,” she said with paprika sharpness, making a gesture with her hand to indicate that the whole studio was open to my search.

I took her at her word, and ignoring numerous technicians, costumers, I know not what, all of whom ignored me, I searched for *Snowflakes for Euclid*.

Tucked away here and there on shelves; piled into cardboard boxes, or strewn at random, I found many books. There were titles galore. To name just a few: *The Wines of Provence*. The *1998 Report of the Water Commission of the Upper Hudson Valley*. A reissue of Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*, the two volumes of Mortimer Adler’s *Syntopicon* (which engaged me for ten minutes while I looked up what it had to say about *Exegesis* as an abstract concept.) But *Snowflakes*? I could not find *Snowflakes*. Not there.

I returned to the center of photographic action where Doris Nagy was now working on a chicken pot pie. An assistant was spraying the crust a golden brown hue from a spray can. For increased verisimilitude, I supposed. I left *Atelier Nagy* depressed. I walked out onto roaring, lively Manhattan and comforted myself with a street corner hot dog sloshed with mustard, relish, and onions. The works.

My search was over. The goal was not reached, but I comforted myself by realizing just how much I had learned about the production of mail order catalogs. I was impressed by the complexity of the operation; how each stage had to fuse perfectly with other stages. I was so impressed, in fact, that after a few days back at home, I got online. I pushed here and clicked there and ordered a pair of Argyll socks from the J. Pelf Brothers Fall Catalog at \$39.95 plus shipping costs.





A POSTSCRIPT

LIFE ITSELF IS OPEN ENDED. Despite the advice to writers: start at the beginning, continue on, and stop at the end, there is always more to a story. Three months after my futile hunt in New York City, a person near and dear to me said

“You want to hear something ?”

“Sure. Tell me.”

“Do you still have *Snowflakes for Euclid* in mind ?”

“Absolutely.”

“Well, it’s on the Web.”

“What ?”

“The whole text. On the Web. They --- someone --- scanned it in.”

“They --- someone --- had a copy ?”

“Of course. How else could they scan it ?”

And thus, eschewing eBay, ignoring rare book dealers, and seeing no point to bother Doris Nagy any further, I began a second attempt at recovery. I will make public the details as soon as they emerge.

THE END