

Nematodes Worm Their Way Back to the Top

U

ntil recently, ants had the dubious distinction of being society's most annoying life form next to restaurant cell phone users. Ants spoiled picnics; they got in your pants. Once they got a taste of radioactivity, they ran amok in sci-fi B movies defying the best efforts of the National Guard and King Kong to

wrest Faye Wray from their lustful clutches. Every ant looked like every other ant and we hated them all.

Meet the new champ, that elongated, usually naked, soft-bodied animal, the worm. Universally held beneath contempt as being more useless than a Braille television remote, the worm is staging a big comeback with an annoyance factor exceeding that of many rock stars.

Your average worm has long felt a massive inferiority complex heightened by his cousin, the snake and not without reason. Denied fangs, poison sacs and the ability to slither, the worm came off a pathetic second best in every department. Lurking in apples or popping up unexpectedly in a salad just didn't cut it. Early birds harassed them. Likened in an uncomplimentary fashion to wimpy husbands, rebellion was inevitable. And what a rebellion it has been!

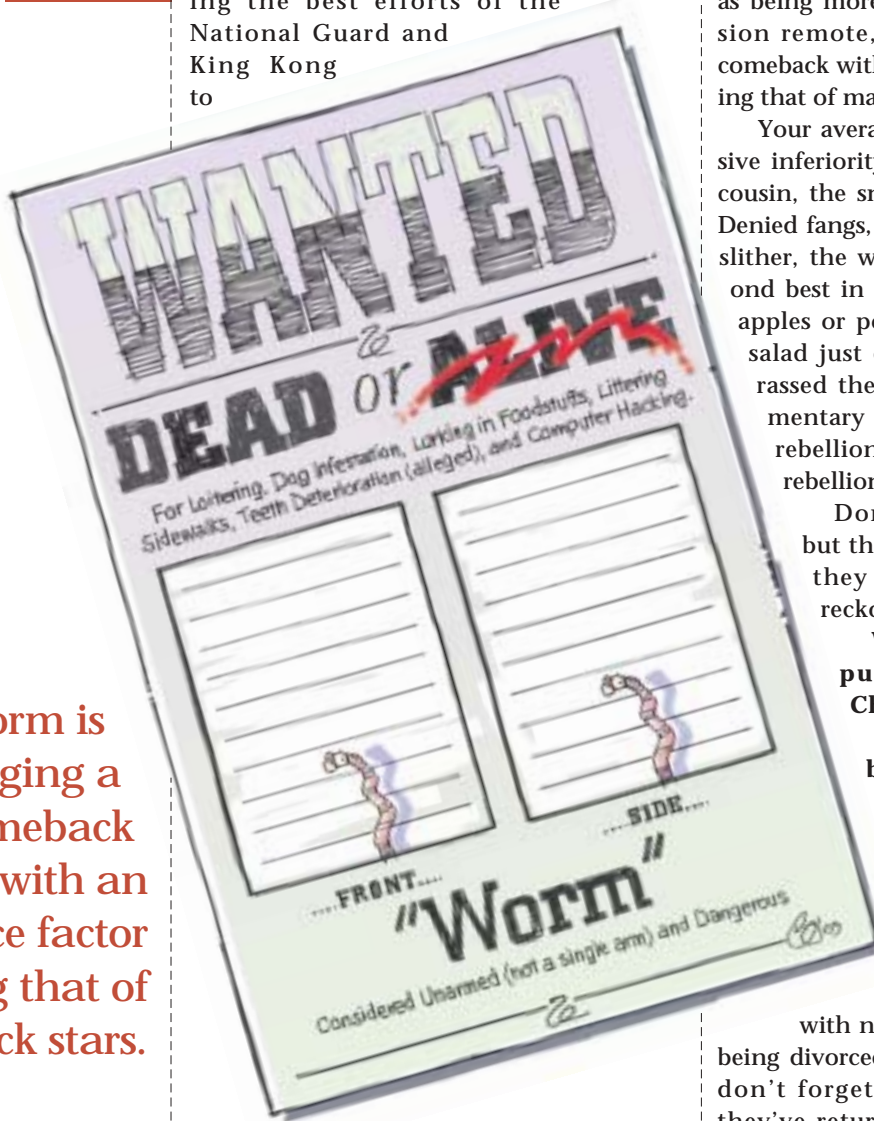
Don't ask us how they did it, but the headlines make it clear that they are back and a force to be reckoned with.

Worm shuts down GM computers! Thirty thousand Chevrolets die!

Northeastern grid disabled by computer worm virus. Energizer bunny linked to conspiracy!

We should have seen this coming. When your dog got worms, what was the solution? He was dewormed, of course, and

with no more fanfare than you'd get being divorced by Elizabeth Taylor. Worms don't forget slights like that and now they've returned to wreak vengeance on



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their tormentors. The worst of it is that we, as dentists, are partly responsible for this present day crisis.

Once upon a time, according to Dr. Malvin Ring, dentistry's authoritative link to the past, worms got a lot of respect, especially among the dental profession. To understand this, reflect for a moment on the oral health of a 1600s citizen. "Hollow teeth" were endemic, i.e., teeth that had deteriorated to the point of resembling the Coliseum in structure. Packed with food debris, it became necessary to continually suck on these carious teeth. A gathering of hollow-toothed people would sound like a bunch of today's teenagers in a malt shop all inhaling the last of their Diet Pepsis through straws. Toothache, of course, was common and was ascribed to the gnawing action of "tooth worms."

Even into the late Renaissance period, this belief in worms as the causative agent of dental caries was firmly held. Many reputable and prominent authorities of the day supported the theory in spite of the worms' vigorous denial that they had anything to with the problem. "OK," they admitted, "we may

have messed up some produce and littered the sidewalks after a rain, sure, but living in a hollow tooth? Get real!"

Even Pierre Fauchard was reluctant to deny the possibility of the tooth worm. Even if there are worms, he cautions, they had to arrive via corrupted food-stuffs, not by Immaculate Conception.

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So to settle the matter, a researcher by the name of Anton van Leeuwenhoek of Delft, Holland was called in. He is credited with being the father of modern microscopy and a master of scientific deduction. Anton came up with this idea: Everybody likes cheese. Flies like cheese. Flies lay eggs in cheese. People eat cheese, tucking away unswallowed bits in

their hollow teeth. Eggs hatch into worms and somewhere along the line turn back into flies again. This is called "The Circle of Life" he said, failing to copyright the phrase, thus losing a fortune to Elton John years later.

The years went by without much happening except a few wars and famines until finally Louis Pasteur proved that a worm causing a toothache was the dumbest idea since the Flat Earth

Theory. The worms' 15 decades of notoriety had passed. Then Bill Gates and Al Gore invented the computer and, like Arnold Schwarzenegger, the worms are back.

Now would seem to be the time to lure them out of the hard drives with all that surplus cheese held in government warehouses. **CDA**