

Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis Cohabitation Act

By Steve Nutt

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...

Steve Nutt's, Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis Cohabitation Act," plays on a very Mayberry, Sci-Fi, Horror story. The main characters, a group of seemingly, well-adjusted neighbors, find themselves on the vanguard of a test program developing a living, breathing structure of sausage polyps that, in the beginning, more resemble decoration than danger. Yet, what starts out as a sales pitch for community development, connection, and pride quickly turns into a consequence that all interested parties are woefully under prepared for. What makes Nutt's story compelling is his ability to give enough information to the audience that creates the world, while withholding enough so that the reader can't quite put their finger on the exact horrors that they are witnessing.

I think what I enjoy most about this story is the way in which the characters have such lackadaisical reactions to their predicament. When a family experiences a problem, the others call in their neighborhood supervisor/test pilot advisor to handle the issue. When the polyps don't form as beautiful a design compared to the development of another, they get online to discuss on social media. When Yelp reviews and conspiracy theories begin to cause a stir, they are quick to buckle down against fake news. When things go wrong, they would rather leave it to the hands of administrators and representatives – ostracizing the neighbor – over fearing about what could happen to them versus giving up the lifeforms they have chosen to develop. In their own way, these characters are bland, comfortable, and complacent, yet the story that surrounds them is anything but. What is truly fun to read about this story is the simple way in which these characters continue on about their lives, almost oblivious, to the danger that grows, is growing, around them.

Some of my favorite gems throughout, that reflect this dichotomy of Edward Scissorhandian social malaise and terror:

"In all honesty we've grown a little frustrated about the elapsed length of time over which no updates have been forthcoming, but Claire reminded us that in new schemes such as these it's understandable that teething problems and their remedies can be a complicated business.

"... Glen's Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis was rather uninspiring, lazily sprouting from his nutrient medium sausage and resembling dreary garden variety mould more than our intricate ivory sculptures, which were fast becoming all the more intricate as they twisted and plaited around themselves, reaching up to the ceiling in ever greater flights of artistic fancy."

"After all, if she hadn't spearheaded our street's campaign to be first in line for the pilot rollout, we'd have been sitting around vicariously living out our Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis cohabitation like Abbie and Tom, who were growing more needy by the day and peppering us with messages and requests for access to the marvelous

networked video stream Simon had set up for us to keep abreast of everyone's progress."

Steve Nutt's story is as vibrant and dangerous as the parasites that he has dreamed up. He combines a white picket fence, polo shirts, and chuckling over too-chilled chardonnay with a test patch of growths that have horrific consequences.

Read this story and enjoy. Also, don't grow test creatures.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (*for the love of language*)...

We considered this somewhat ironic, since Glen's Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis was rather uninspiring, lazily sprouting from his nutrient medium sausage and resembling dreary garden variety mould more than our intricate ivory sculptures, which were fast becoming all the more intricate as they twisted and plaited around themselves, reaching up to the ceiling in ever greater flights of artistic fancy. Claire's had managed to entirely fill in its heart shape with a thick web of mycelial thatching and was now embarking in all directions in what resembled an arbor, giving the whole scene the aesthetics of a greetings card or the decorations on an overly florid wedding cake.

Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis Cohabitation Act (954 words)

Anyway, given our little letter writing campaign to the council about the recycling question, it was quite the happy coincidence. Everyone in the test district—myself, Claire, Simon; Glen, Holly and their three children; Paisley, Yorick and Hella; but not Abbie and Tom, who lived just outside the catchment area and lamented that fact to us on social media, to the point that it really became rather dull and a bit clawing—were each designated a colony of Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis. Claire had suggested that we put ourselves at the top of the list, since it would serve as an opportunity to make up for our failure to take in refugees several years ago which we really, honestly, had wanted to get involved with. But Glen—who ran a luncheonette on Oakfield Road—had helpfully outlined the logistics of such an undertaking, and we had run aground in discussion.

Our Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis colonies were delivered in large sausage shaped packets of "laboratory cultured nutrient medium," atop green recycling tubs. You'd put all your plastic packaging—cellophane, those little black microwave trays, bubble wrap, crisp packets; which all inexplicably just *can't* be ordinarily recycled—through a flap in the side of the tub. The

Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis then erupted from their “sausages,” growing into spectacular looking branch-like formations that resembled trees laden with snow, their mycelial cobwebs consuming the plastic below. Claire and Simon’s looped its “branches”—though Simon reminded us that they were not in fact branches, or limbs, but elongated fruit bodies, called ascocarps—around and to meet one another, then passing and looping back again, turning downward and meeting, forming what looked like a heart, which Claire was very pleased with. Simon would confide in us that he felt that it was a little gauche, and we agreed, but we could hardly judge Claire on this. After all, if she hadn’t spearheaded our street’s campaign to be first in line for the pilot rollout, we’d have been sitting around vicariously living out our Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis cohabitation like Abbie and Tom, who were growing more needy by the day and peppering us with messages and requests for access to the marvellous networked video stream Simon had set up for us to keep abreast of everyone’s progress.

Unfortunately, Glen quickly saw a drop-off in bookings at the luncheonette—no doubt the result of several hysterical Yelp reviews he shared with us—as conspiratorial stories spread wildly about nefarious motives surrounding the Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis rollout. We considered this somewhat ironic, since Glen’s Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis was rather uninspiring, lazily sprouting from his nutrient medium sausage and resembling dreary garden variety mould more than our intricate ivory sculptures, which were fast becoming all the more intricate as they twisted and plaited around themselves, reaching up to the ceiling in ever greater flights of artistic fancy. Claire’s had managed to entirely fill in its heart shape with a thick web of mycelial thatching and was now embarking in all directions in what resembled an arbor, giving the whole scene the aesthetics of a greetings card or the decorations on an overly florid wedding cake.

Glen’s difficulties soon went beyond the mutterings of online conspiracy theorists after Holly took the inadvisable decision to move their Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis nutrient medium sausage off of its recycling tub and out of reach of their Scottish Terrier, Bach, who had taken to perpetually circling the colony at a distance, raising his hackles and growling at it. It really was a shame that Holly hadn’t consulted Simon—the self-taught Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis authority of the group. He would have told her that attempting to move a Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis colony was an endeavour best left to the experts—which he would hardly class himself as—since Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis is prone to distributing countless billions of spores when disturbed.

Whilst Bach appeared to suffer no noticeable ill effects—we now know that a dog’s immune system response neuters spore propagation—Glen soon developed a sprouting from his urethra which grew rather quickly into something of a tusk, roughly five feet long, curving up and around his trunk and jutting out at a right angle from beneath his left arm-pit. This precarious situation led to further dispersal of spores every time Glen whacked it on a door frame, or a bedpost, or the sink and thus the cycle continued with Holly developing two branching antler-like protrusions from her left eye and right ear and the children becoming entwined together at the spine by a profusion of little twisting antenna-like mycelial hairs.

Anyway, Bach then turned up in our garden, no doubt because neither Glen, nor his wife, nor the ever-growing wicker ball of children were able to feed him. Since his thick curly coat was no doubt heavily dusted with spores at this point, we desperately tried to shoo him away, but eventually resorted to leaving food out for him whilst he was at a safe distance—whilst we’ve never been very “good” with dogs, it was the least we could do for Glen given the circumstances.

In the end we all agreed that Claire and Simon should go over to see the extent of the problems at Glen’s, since Claire was our contact with the Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis Cohabitation Act: Pilot Study administrators and Simon our resident expert—taking the proper precautions of course. Claire and Simon reported the whole mess to our local representative, who assured them that he would pass on the findings to Project Headquarters and get back to us about what to do with Bach. In all honesty we’ve grown a little frustrated about the elapsed length of time over which no updates have been forthcoming, but Claire reminded us that in new schemes such as these it’s understandable that teething problems and their remedies can be a complicated business.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis Cohabitation Act*—which might mean human-serpent-digesting-parasite cohabitation act, or those words in some other order depending on how you construct Ancient Greek—was a little sandbox to have a play at being Donald Barthelme in. I wanted an absurdist conceit that the characters in the thing accepted and reacted to as perfectly normal. It might be about how governments have fobbed off the responsibility for solving climate catastrophe on everyone but themselves, or how a relatively positive impulse in society can mutate into petty tyrant dickishness when it is digested in the bowels of a particular class. It might just be me mimicking the utterly awful end of year letters that used to turn up circa Christmas in my childhood home, detailing in very fancy prose, the mundane goings on of a family I barely know, or the playing out of a fragment of

conversation I overheard about a curtain peeking local facebook “street group” which sounded hilarious. It might just be a funny little story about a man who grew a cock-tusk, or something. Maybe.

AUTHOR BIO: After five years in the unlit basement of a PhD, Steve is adjusting his eyes to the light and dividing his time between proofreading and editing academic esoteria; writing weird fiction; playing weird music and painting weird little things in another more literal basement. He lives out in the sticks, near Bristol in the UK.