

THE WAY WE WORD

a word play  
written and arranged by Judith West

PLAYERS

NAR Narrator

- 1 Speaker 1
- 2 Speaker 2
- 3 Speaker 3

NAR (*Perusing a dictionary. Closes it and looks up.*) A logophile is a lover of words. You wont find "logophile" in every dictionary – which is odd, given the job description of a lexicographer. [Beat.] "A dictionary writer."  
"Chrestomathy," however, you *will* find in most dictionaries, and it is what we would like to present to you today. (*Reading from dictionary.*) "Chrestomathy: a selection of passages compiled as an aid to learning a language." Today we offer you a whimsical chrestomathy on the English language.

1 "You should say what you mean."

NAR "I do; at least – at least I mean what I say – that's the same thing, you know."

1 "Not the same thing a bit. Why, you might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as 'I eat what I see'."

2 (*Drowsily.*) "You might as well say that 'I breathe when I sleep' is the same thing as 'I sleep when I breathe'."

3 "It *is* the same thing with you."

NAR All that is from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, of course. A great logophile, Carroll. You probably remember his looking-glass poem "Jabberwocky." What you may *not* remember is Humpty Dumpty's explanation of it to Alice.

1 (*As Alice.*) "You seem very clever at explaining words, sir."  
"Would you kindly tell me the meaning of the poem called 'Jabberwocky'?"

2 (*As Humpty Dumpty.*) "Let's hear it. I can explain all the poems that ever were invented – and a good many that haven't been invented just yet."

1 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;

2

All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.

2 "That's enough to begin with; there are plenty of hard words there. '*Brillig*' means four o'clock in the afternoon – the time when you begin *broiling* things for dinner."

1 "That'll do very well. And '*slithy*'?"

2 "Well, '*slithy*' means 'lithe and slimy.' 'Lithe' is the same as 'active.'"

1 "I see it now. And what are '*toves*'?"

2 "Well, '*toves*' are something like badgers – they're something like lizards – and they're something like corkscrews."

1 "They must be very curious-looking creatures."

2 "They are that, also they make their nests under sundials – also they live on cheese."

1 "And what's to '*gyre*' and to '*gimble*'?"

2 "To '*gyre*' is to go round and round like a gyroscope. To '*gimble*' is to make holes like a gimlet."

1 "And '*the wabe*' is the grass-plot round a sundial, I suppose?"

2 "Of course it is. It's called '*wabe*,' you know, because it goes a long way before it, and a long way behind it."

1 "And a long way beyond it on each side."

2 "Exactly so. Well, then, '*mimsy*' is flimsy and miserable. And a '*borogove*' is a thin, shabby-looking bird with its feathers sticking out all round – something like a live mop."

1 "And then '*mome raths*'? I'm afraid I'm giving you a great deal of trouble."

2 "Well, a '*rath*' is a sort of green pig: but '*mome*' I'm not certain about. I think it's short for '*from home*' – meaning that they'd lost their way, you know."

1 "And what does '*outgrabe*' mean?"

2 "Well, '*outgribing*' is something between bellowing and whistling, with a kind of sneeze in the middle; however, you'll hear it done, maybe – down in the wood yonder – and when you've once heard it you'll be quite content."

NAR Equally mystifying, but in this case unintentional, is the kind of naïve yet inspired assault on the language occasionally found in English-language phrase books written by non-English authors. Here is a sample of fractured dialogue from José da Fonseca's 1855 phrase book, *ENGLISH AS SHE IS SPOKE*, called "The fishing":

2 "That pond it seems me many multiplied of fishes. Let us amuse rather to the fishing"

3 "Here, there is a wand and some hooks"

2 "Silence'. there is a superb perch! Give me quick the rod. Ah! there is, it is a lamprey"

3 "You mistake you, it is a frog! Dip again it in the water"

2 "Perhaps I will do better to fish with the leap"

3 "Try it. I desire that you may be more happy and more skilful who ascertain fisher, what have fished all day without to can take nothing."

NAR The British writer Oscar Wilde once remarked: "We really have everything in common with America nowadays, except, of course, the language."

Thomas Middleton made a similar observation, but from an American perspective, in his language column in the *Saturday Review*:

I heard a British broadcast of a horse race a few weeks ago. Like thinking of a hamburger with onion while eating a watercress sandwich.

If I had a tape of the English horse race, I'd guarantee the accuracy of the following, but as I haven't, I'll do what I can to approximate.

"Lovely day here. The sky a cerulean blue. [Pause] Just a lonely cloud or two to our left. [Pause] That would be the East. [Pause] A brisk breeze. Just to refresh, but not to chill. Ah, the race has started. The horses are still rather bunched up. Surprisingly few people out here on such a lovely day. I suppose it has to do with the morning overcast. Difficult to predict the weather would turn so glorious. Blue Boy seems to be in first place now. It looks like Lucky Penny second and Bobbin third. Bobbin, of course, is the horse that was trained as a jumper and didn't begin flat racing until a year ago. He's fared rather well in the past six months. Exciting horse. Those one or two clouds I mentioned in the East have been joined by several others. A lovely formation. Like a collage of cotton wool. It could, of course, turn to nasty weather, No way of knowing, this time of year. Still. Ah, Silly Billy has won.

Came from behind. Jonquil second. Sweetbrier third. Jolly good race."

NAR As Oscar Wilde also observed, "The English have a miraculous power of turning wine into water."

Then there are those whose talents in, say, cookery, spill over into their speech, turning the language into mincemeat. The immortal humorist James Thurber found just such a one in his cook Della and wrote about her in "What Do You Mean It Was Brillig?"

2 I was sitting at my typewriter one afternoon several weeks ago, staring at a piece of blank white paper, when Della walked in.

1 "They are here with the reeves."

2 It did not surprise me that they were. With a woman like Della in the house it would not surprise me if they showed up with the toves. In Della's afternoon it is always brillig; she could outgrabe a mome rath on any wabe in the world. Only Lewis Carroll would have understood Della completely. try hard enough. "Let them wait a minute," I said. I got out the dictionary and put it on my lap and looked up "reeve.~~ It is an interesting word, like all of Della's words; I found out that there are four kinds of reeves. "Are they here with strings of onions?" I asked.

Della said

1 they were not.

2 "Are they here with enclosures or pens for cattle, poultry, or pigs; sheepfolds?"

Della said

1 no sir.

2 "Are they here with administrative officers?" From a little nearer the door Della said

1 no again.

2 "Then they've got to be here," I said, "with some females of the common European sandpiper." These scenes of ours take as much out of Della as they do out of me, but she is not a woman to be put down by a crazy man with a dictionary.

1 "They are here with the reeves for the windas.

2 Then, of course, I understood what they were there with: they were there with the Christmas wreaths for the windows. "Oh those reeves!" I said. We were both greatly relieved; we both

laughed. Della and I never quite reach the breaking point; we just come close to it.

She told me one day that

1

she has three brothers and that one of them works into a garage and another works into an incinerator where they burn the refuse. The one that works into the incinerator has been working into it since the Armitage.

2

That's what Della does to you; she gives you incinerator perfectly and then she comes out with the Armitage. When I finally hit on Armistice it sounded crazy. It still does. Della's third and youngest brother is my favorite; I think he'll be yours, too. His name is Arthur and it seems that

1

he has just passed,

2

with commendably high grades,

1

his silver-service eliminations.

2

Della is delighted about that, but she is not half so delighted about it as I am.

Della came to our house some months ago, trailing her - (glory of cloudiness. She was puzzled at first because I worked at home instead of in an office, but I think she has it figured out now.

1

This man used to work into an office like anybody else, but he had to be sent to an institution; he got well enough to come home from the institution, but is still not well enough to go back to the office.

2

I could have avoided all these suspicions, of course, if I had simply come out in the beginning and corrected Della when she got words wrong. Coming at her obliquely with a dictionary only enriches the confusion; but I wouldn't have it any other way.

There is no doubt that Della is considerably worried about my mental condition. One morning when I didn't get up until three o'clock, Della told my wife at breakfast what was the matter with me.

1

"His mind works so fast his body can't keep up with it."

2

This diagnosis has shaken me not a little. I have decided to sleep longer and work less. I know exactly what will happen to me if my mind gets so far ahead of my body that my body can't catch up with it. They will come with a reeve and this time it won't be a red-and-green one for the window, it will be a black one for the door.

NAR Thurber was a truly masterful and cunning logophile. Witness this delightful little lecture:

2 The relative pronoun "which" can cause more trouble than any other word, if recklessly used. Foolhardy persons sometimes get lost in which-clauses and are never heard of again. One adventurer who became involved in a remarkable which-mire said:

3 "Surely what applies to games should also apply to racing, the leaders of which being the very people from whom an example might well be looked for..."

2 Not even Henry James could have successfully emerged from a sentence with "which," "whom," and "being" in it. The safest way to avoid such things is to follow in the path of the American author, Ernest Hemingway. He was going along on solid ground until he got into this:

3 "It was the one thing of which, being very much afraid - for whom has not been warned to fear such things - he..."

2 Being a young and powerfully built man, Hemingway was able to fight his way back to where he had started, and begin again. This time he skirted the treacherous morass in this way:

3 "He was afraid of one thing. This was the one thing. He had been warned to fear such things."

2 Never monkey with a "which." Nothing except getting tangled up in a typewriter ribbon is worse.

NAR The poet Ogden Nash might have argued that point. The bane of his existence seems to have been that breed of person that is carrying on an endless love affair with figures of speech. I can picture him one day, having gotten as far as the first two lines of Byron's poem "The Destruction of Sennacherib" -

3 "The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold,  
And his chariots were gleaming in purple and gold;..."

NAR - when suddenly something snapped. He could take no more, and in a fit of pique he composed "Very Like a whale."

3 One thing that literature would be greatly the better for Would be a more restricted employment by authors of simile and metaphor. Authors of all races, be they Greeks, Roman, Teutons, or Celts, Can't seem just to say that anything is the thing it is but have to go out of their way to say that it is like something else. What does it mean when we are told

That the Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold?  
 In the first place, George Gordon Byron had had enough experience  
 To know that it probably wasn't just one Assyrian, it was a lot  
 of Assyrians.  
 However, as too many arguments are apt to induce apoplexy and  
 thus hinder longevity,  
 We'll let it pass as one Assyrian for the sake of brevity.  
 Now then, this particular Assyrian, the one whose cohorts were  
 gleaming in purple and gold,  
 Just what does the poet mean when he says he came down like a  
 wolf on the fold?  
 In heaven and earth more than is dreamed of in our philosophy  
 there are a great many things,  
 But I don't imagine that among them there is a wolf with purple  
 and gold cohorts or purple and gold anythings.  
 No, no, Lord Byron, before I'll believe that this Assyrian was  
 actually like a wolf I must have some kind of proof;  
 Did he run on all fours and did he have a hairy tail and a big  
 red mouth and big white teeth and did he say Woof woof woof?  
 Frankly I think it very unlikely, and all you were entitled to  
 say at the very most,  
 Was that the Assyrian cohorts came down like a lot of Assyrian  
 cohorts about to destroy the Hebrew host,  
 But that wasn't fancy enough for Lord Byron, oh dear me no, he  
 had to invent a lot of figures of speech and then interpolate  
 them,  
 With the result that whenever you mention Old Testament soldiers  
 to people they say Oh yes, they're the ones that a lot of  
 wolves dressed up in gold and purple ate them.  
 That's the kind of thing that's being done all the time by poets,  
 from Homer to Tennyson;  
 They're always comparing ladies to lilies and veal to venison.  
 How about the man, who wrote,  
 Her little feet stole in and out like mice beneath her petticoat?  
 Wouldn't anybody but a poet think twice  
 Before stating that his girl's feet were mice?  
 Then they always say things like that after a snow storm  
 The snow is a white blanket. Oh it is, is it, all right then, you  
 sleep under a six-inch blanket of snow and I'll sleep under a  
 half-inch blanket of unpoetical blanket material and we'll see  
 which one keeps warm,  
 And after that maybe you'll begin to comprehend dimly  
 What I mean by too much metaphor and simile.

NAR Dorothy Parker was a writer renowned for wielding a dangerous  
 word on frequent occasion; and she too was known to become  
 "impatient" when she felt language was being frittered away by  
 inept authors.

1 There was a time, when I still had my strength, that I read  
 nearly all the stories in the more popular magazines. I did  
 not have to do it; I did it for fun, for I had yet to discover  
 that there were other and more absorbing diversions that had  
 the advantage of being no strain on the eyes. But even in  
 those days of my vigor, nearly all the stories was the best

that I could do, I could never go the full course. From the time I learned to read – which, I am pretty thoroughly convinced, was when I made my first big mistake – I was always unable to do anything whatever with stories that began in any of these following manners:

One.

NAR Everybody in Our Village loved to go by Granny Wilkins' cottage. Maybe it was the lilacs that twinkled a cheery greeting in the dooryard, or maybe it was the brass knocker that twinkled on the white-painted door, or maybe – and I suspect this was the real reason – it was Granny herself, with her crisp white cap, and her wise brown eyes, twinkling away in her dear little, old winter apple of a face.

1 Two.

3 The country club was ahum, for the final match of the Fourth of July Golf Tournament was in full swing. Many a curious eye lingered on Janet DeLancey, rocking lazily, surrounded as usual by a circle of white-flanneled adorers, for the porch was a-whisper with the rumor that the winner of the match would also be the winner of the hitherto untouched heart of the blond and devastating Janet.

1 Three.

NAR I dunno ez I ought to be settin' here, talkin', when there's the vittles to git fer the men-folks. But, Laws, 'taint often a body hez a chanct ter talk, up this-a-way. I wuz tellin' yuh 'bout li'l Mezzie Meigs, ol' Skin-flint Meigs's da'ter. She wuz a right peart 'un, Mezzie wuz, and purty!

1 Four.

2 "Ho, Felipe, my horse, and *pronto!*"

3 cried El Sol. He turned to the quivering girl, and his mocking bow was so low that his *sombrero* swept the flags of the *patio*.

2 "Adios, then, *señorita*, until *mañana*."

3 And with a flash of white teeth across the lean young swartheness of his face, he bounded to the back of his horse and was off, swift as a homing *paloma*.

1 Five.

NAR "For God's sake, don't do it, Kid!"

2 whispered Annie the Wop, twining her slim arms about the Kid's

bull-like neck.

NAR "Yer promised me yer'd go straight, after the last time. The bulls'll get yer, Kid; they'll send yer up, sure. Aw, Kid, put away yer gat, and let's beat it away somewhere in God's nice, clean country, where yer can raise chickens, like yer always dreamed of doin'."

1 But, with these few exceptions, I read all the other short stories that separated the Ivory Soap advertisements from the pages devoted to Campbell's Soups. I read stories of transplanted Russians, of backstage life, of bored suburban couples, of heroic collies, of golden-hearted cow-punchers with slow drawls, of Creole belles and beaux, of the hard-drinking and easy-kissing younger generation, of baseball players, sideshow artists, and professional mediums. I read, in short, more damn tripe than you ever saw in your life. And then I found that I was sluggish upon awakening in the morning, spots appeared before my eyes, and my friends shunned me. I also found that I was reading the same stories over and over, month after month<sub>0</sub> So I stopped, like that. It is only an old wives' tale that you have to-taper off.

Recently, though, I took the thing up again<sub>0</sub> There were rumors about that the American short story had taken a decided turn for the better. Crazed with hope, I got all the more popular and less expensive magazines that I could carry on my shoulders, and sat down for a regular old read. And a regular old read is just what it turned out to be. There they all were - the golden-hearted cow-punchers, the suburban couples, the baseball players, the Creole belles - even dear old Granny Wilkins was twinkling away, in one of them. There were the same old plots, the same old characters, the same old phrases - dear Heaven, even the same old illustrations. So that is why I shot myself.

NAR Interest in the health of the language survives even today, despite the political jargonists who are bent on doing such unintelligible things as "exacerbating mutual restraint" in "functional priority areas." Columns and books on the state of English are written with wit and general good humor by such men as William Safire of the *New York Times*. One of my favorite pieces by Mr. Safire is mysteriously entitled "Mondegreens."

[Speakers 1, 2, and 3 hum "America the Beautiful"]

The most saluted man in America is Richard Stans. Legions of schoolchildren place their hands over their hearts to pledge allegiance to the flag, "and to the republic for Richard Stans."

With all due patriotic fervor, the same kids salute "one nation, under guard." Some begin with "I pledge a legion to the flag,"

others with "I led the pigeons to the flag."  
 This is not a new phenomenon. When they came to "one nation,  
 indivisible," this generation is as likely to say "One naked  
 individual" as a previous generation was to murmur "One nation  
 in a dirigible," or "One nation and a vegetable."

[*Hummers switch to "The Star-Spangled Banner"*]

"The Stars Bangled Banger" is a great source for these creative  
 mishearings: "the Donzerly light," "oh, the ramrods we washed,"  
 "grapefruit through the night" that our flag was still there.

[*Hummers move on to "God Bless America"*]

In "God Bless America," the misheard line "Through the night with  
 a light from a bulb" makes much more practical sense than "a  
 light from above."

Then there is the good Mrs. Shirley Murphy of the 23rd Psalm:  
 "Shirley, good Mrs. Murphy, shall follow me all the days of my  
 life."

[*Hummers fade*]

We all hear the same sounds. But until we are directed by the  
 written word to the intended meaning, we may give free rein to  
 our imagination to invent our own meanings.

Millions of children consider the letter of the alphabet between  
 "k" and "p" to be "ellemenno." Meteorologists on television who  
 speak of "a patchy fog" do not realize that many creative  
 viewers take that to be "Apache fog," which comes in on little  
 cat feet to scalp the unsettled settler. And Danny Boy, hero of  
 "The Londonderry Air," casts a backward glance at what is often  
 thought of as "The London Derrière." The old "whole kit 'n'  
 caboodle" is occasionally written as "kitten caboodle," a good  
 name for a satchel in which to carry a cat.

What all-inclusive term can we use to encompass the changes that  
 our brains make in the intended meaning of what we hear?  
 Linguists suggest "homophone," "unwitting paronomasia," and  
 "agnominatio," but those terms sound like fancified dirty words  
 to me.

I prefer "mondegreen." This is a word coined in a magazine  
 article, "The Death of Lady Mondegreen" by Sylvia Wright. Miss  
 Wright recalled a Scottish ballad, "The Bonny Earl of Murray,"  
 which sounded to her like this:

Ye Highlands and ye Lowlands,  
 Oh, where hae ye been?  
 They hae slain the Earl Amurray,  
 And Lady Mondegreen.

She envisioned the bonny Earl holding the beautiful Lady  
 Mondegreen's hand, both bleeding profusely, but faithful unto  
 death. "By now," Miss Wright wrote, "several of you more alert  
 readers are jumping up and down in your impatience to interrupt  
 and point out that, according to the poem, after they killed  
 the Earl of Murray, they *laid him on the green*. I know about  
 this, but I won't give in to it. Leaving him to die all alone  
 without even anyone to hold his hand - I won't have it."

NAR Well, we might continue our little chrestomathic excursion for awhile longer, but I really must get home and feed my pet peeve. Let us leave you, instead, with a few last examples of the wonderful nonsense of which our language is capable.

1 The bride was wearing an old lace gown that fell to the floor as she came down the aisle.

2 He's the type who'll cut your throat behind your back.

3 I used this soap two years ago and have not used another since.

NAR Miss Swanson is in the hospital this morning after having been bitten by a spider in a bathing suit.

1 Coming home, I drove into the wrong house and collided with a tree that I didn't have!

2 Sign outside a dancehall: "GOOD CLEAN DANCING - EVERY NIGHT - EXCEPT SUNDAY"

3 It's a really beautiful spot where the hand of man has never set foot.

NAR (*To audience.*) And now if you will all be so good as to stand up and pass out quietly.

[1, 2, and 3 obligingly fall to the ground. NAR, disconcerted, looks at them, then to audience, shrugs, and bows.]