



## Verbatim: From the Bawdy to the Sublime, the Best Writing on Language for Word Lovers, Grammar Mavens, and Armchair Linguists

Edited by Erin McKean. Harcourt, 353 pp., \$14.

By William Chronister

Many books are meant to be enjoyed alone, the reader sitting in an easy chair at home with no special accompaniment - - perhaps a glass of wine or a cup of coffee, a box of bonbons, a dog beside the hassock, unobtrusive music wafting from the stereo. Mmmmmm.

But this compilation of articles from the language quarterly Verbatim begs for a sturdy chair in a library reading room, good lighting, and a wide selection of reference works close at hand. (Of course, if you've got the reference books at home, then put your feet up.)

It isn't that the book is difficult or dry - - although it has its moments when a thesis gets a bit beyond an individual author. It might even get you in trouble with the librarian as you titter through its pages. But the desire to check deeper into the words, grammatical points and usage arguments might as well be indulged.

Consider the opening salvos on neologisms and the opprobrium many otherwise educated people heap on the introduction of such new terms and new ways of saying old things. The founding editor of the quarterly, Lawrence Urdang, threw a few thousand words at those who would try to ossify English usage within their comfort zone, his humor only barely masking his disdain.

Urdang's essay, written decades ago, is reprised in an article by the current editor, Erin McKean, who also edited the compilation. She uses what seems like an entirely different vocabulary to suggest many of the same things. If there is a clearer illustration of the evolution - - or should that be "revolution"? - - of language, I haven't seen it.

In between chuckles and the occasional guffaw, you've gone through at least three dictionaries of differing publication dates and a book or two on usage. That is, if you're a "polysemaniac" - - see Page 105 - - as most of the authors herein appear to be. Such people are prone to notice

every nuance of meaning that a word or phrase might conjure, and besides seeing smut where none is offered, they also see humor where none is intended.

But please don't labor under the misimpression that this is a textbook or style guide, such as the "Chicago Manual of Style" or "Lapsing Into a Comma." In fact, it might be good to have those two around when rambling through chapters such as "Slang, Jargon and Other Limited-Range Vocabulary" and "Wordplay and Word Games."

Verbatim, the quarterly, and Verbatim, the book, both are intent on sharing the joys of the study of language, not on providing contributors a vehicle for achieving tenure in ivory towers. And editor and authors accept no limits on their inquiries.

The editor appears to have selected articles not merely for their humorous content, although the articles titled "Pleonasties," "Tosspots and Wrappascals," and "Learn to Spike Lunars" are very funny. Some are simply bizarre, such as "Nullspeak" - - which asserts the joy of discovering three-word groupings that sound interesting but mean nothing - - and "On Again, Off Again, Finnigin" - - which offers a poem written in Irish dialect from about 1917.

And why the author of "Instant Welsh" even attempted to write an article on a language without using that language is beyond understanding. The fact that he pulls it off is all the more astounding.

Open to examination is everything from the newspeak of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" through the content of British soccer chants to the discovery that definitions in American dictionaries of terms describing sexual intercourse frequently are not very illuminating.

Which brings up a warning: Several articles included in this book address sexual terms, as well as slang and jargon related to sexual practices bizarre and mundane. Although the presentation is even almost scholarly, it is not necessarily to everyone's taste. One of the more carefully written pieces is titled "Identity and Language in the SM Scene," which with sufficient justification could be printed in the average general-circulation newspaper.

But that aside, the book provides a measured yet enjoyable canter through the first 25 years of the quarterly. May it enjoy at least 25 more.