

The Style Invitational

Week CXXXVII: Czar Har



BY BOB STAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Cher Nair: Miraculously removes unwanted years from your real age.
Buddha gouda: A cheese with a high fat content.

Deep Throat boat: It leaks.
Victor Hugo Yugo: A car that makes you *très misérables*.
Al Gore floor: It's wooden, and a little slippery.

This week's contest was suggested by Stephen Dudzik of Olney. Take the name of someone famous, rhyme it with a product, and describe the unholy union, as in the examples above. First-prize winner gets a pocketbook made from a coconut.

First runner-up wins the tacky but estimable Style Invitational Loser Pen. Other runners-up win the coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt. Honorable mentions get the mildly sought-after Style Invitational bumper sticker. Send your entries via fax to 202-334-4312, or by e-mail to losers@washpost.com. U.S. mail entries are no longer accepted due to rabid, spit-flying fanaticism. Deadline is Monday, Sept. 16. All entries must include the week number of the contest and your name, postal address and telephone number. E-mail entries

must include the week number in the subject field. Contests will be judged on the basis of humor and originality. All entries become the property of The Washington Post. Entries may be edited for taste or content. Results will be published in four weeks. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. No one came up with a better revised title for next week's contest.

Report From Week CXXXIII

In which we asked you to explain the difference between any two items in a 12-item list. As always in such contests, some people took the looong way around to issue political diatribes, as in "The difference between the Dad on 'Zits' and capital punishment is that the dad is an orthodontist, and orthodontia actually solves the problem it is supposed to solve, and . . ." This week marks the return from purgatory of Russell Beland of Springfield. He is back in our good graces after having had nine entries (including one today) attributed to other people.

◆ Fourth Runner-Up: **The difference between poetry by Yeats and a Wall Street Journal editorial is that poetry by Yeats waxes allegorical, whereas a Wall Street Journal editorial waxes Al Gore.** (Milo Sauer, Fairfax)

◆ Second Runner-Up: **The difference between a mole on one's butt and the dad in "Zits" is that there's no reason to panic when the dad becomes larger and more colorful next Sunday.** (Russell Beland, Springfield)

◆ Third Runner-Up: **The difference between the Redskins' offensive line and the Pennsylvania Dutch is that the Pennsylvania Dutch sometimes have a good time when they visit Philadelphia.** (Rigoberto Tiglaio, Manila)

◆ First-Runner-Up: **The difference between ex-congressman James Traficant and five corpulent porpoises is that Traficant probably wouldn't make it back to shore if you dumped him 10 miles out into the Atlantic. Of course, he might.** We could try. (Roy Ashley, Washington)

◆ And the winner of the Eight-Legged Freak box: **The difference between the Pennsylvania Dutch and a mole on one's butt is that in a Pennsylvania Dutch neighborhood, there's probably no crack.** (Chris Doyle, Forsyth, Mo.)

◆ Honorable Mentions: **The difference between the Redskins' offensive line and ex-congressman James Traficant is that when the offensive lines bend over, they're concerned about the guys in front of them.** (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge; John Holder, Rock Hill, S.C.)

The difference between the Redskins' offensive line and a Wall Street Journal editorial is that occasionally, the line will pull to the left. (David E. Romm, Minneapolis)

The difference between original sin and a Wall Street Journal editorial is that the first argues that we are all born with transgressions and the second blames them solely on the Democrats. (Jason Meyers, Charlottesville)

The difference between five corpulent porpoises and original sin is that only original sin is an anagram for "I nail groins." (Russell Beland, Springfield)

The difference between the Pennsylvania Dutch and the dad in "Zits" is that, by comparison, the Pennsylvania Dutch practically define cool. (Amanda Fein, Potomac; Joseph Romm, Washington)

The difference between James Traficant and a foofy poodle is that a poodle couldn't get away with strapping a dead human to its head and trying to say it was hair. (Bird Waring, New York)

The difference between the Redskins' offensive line and poetry by Yeats is that things fall apart on the Redskins' offensive line even when the center is holding. (Jonathan Paul, Garrett Park; Steve Rojcewicz, Silver Spring)

The difference between the Redskins' offensive line and James Traficant is that the offensive line has numbers on their uniforms that don't go above two digits. (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)

The difference between James Traficant and the dad in "Zits" is that the dad in "Zits" is less embarrassing to his children. (John Holder, Rock Hill, S.C.)

The difference between five corpulent porpoises and a Wall Street Journal editorial is that the porpoises might prey on cod and salmon, while a Wall Street Journal editorial might pray to God and Mammon. (Chris Doyle, Forsyth, Mo.)

The difference between the Pennsylvania Dutch and a Wall Street Journal editorial is that one holds a quaint system of beliefs that fails to take the realities of the modern world into account, whereas the Pennsylvania Dutch make excellent pastries. (Seth Brown, Williamstown, Mass.; Joseph Romm, Washington)

The difference between a mole on one's butt and James Traficant is that a mole is a spot on the arse, and Rep. Traficant is an arse on the spot. (J. Larry Schott, Gainesville, Fla.)

The difference between the Redskins' offensive line and capital punishment is that the Redskins' offensive line can ruin your whole weekend. (Eugene H. Cantor, Bethesda)

The difference between a foofy little poodle and Queen Noor of Jordan is that the poodle is a dog. (Tom Witte, Gaithersburg)

The difference between capital punishment and the Redskins' offensive line is that capital punishment is probably a pretty good deterrent to killing a quarterback. (Gregory M. Krakower, New York)

The difference between the Redskins' offensive line and five corpulent porpoises is that the porpoises came to play. (John Held, Fairfax)

The difference between five corpulent porpoises and the dad in "Zits" is four corpulent porpoises. (Amanda Fein, Potomac)

The difference between original sin and James Traficant is that original sin is a big onus, whereas . . . (Tom Witte, Gaithersburg)

The difference between the Redskins' offensive line and a foofy little poodle is that poodles tend to have prissy little names like Anton or Francois or Jacques, while the Redskins' offensive line has manly names like Kip, Wilbert and Melvin. (Russell Beland, Springfield)

The difference between a mole on one's butt and James Traficant is that, over time, a mole can grow on you. (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)

The difference between original sin and a mole on one's butt is you can remove the mole. (Bill Spencer, Exeter, N.H.)

The difference between poetry by Yeats and capital punishment is that poetry by Yeats is rarely experienced in Texas. (Sue Lin Chong, Washington)

The difference between five corpulent porpoises and James Traficant is four blowholes. (Jack Welsch and Sugar Strawn, Alexandria; J. Larry Schott, Gainesville, Fla.)

The difference between the dad in "Zits" and the Redskins' offensive line is that the dad is a soft-in-the-middle Walt, and the offensive line is a soft-in-the-middle wall. (Tom Witte, Gaithersburg)

The difference between a foofy little poodle and the Pennsylvania Dutch is that the Pennsylvania Dutch make do, whereas the poodle makes doo. (Spencer Moskowitz, age 8, Bethesda; Tom Witte, Gaithersburg)

The difference between capital punishment and a Wall Street Journal editorial is that capital punishment usually concludes shortly after the victim loses consciousness. (Elden Carnahan, Laurel)

Next Week: **Get Your But in Here**



Where's the Write Stuff?

ESSAY, From FI

hideous root-chewing grubs. Sometimes I convince myself that I can actually hear the grubs gnawing away. You have to understand that, working in the basement, I'm at grub level. It would be difficult, surely, for any writer, no matter how focused, to concentrate on his material when he knows that just inches away, on the other side of the basement wall, are thousands of subterranean vermin.

Another distraction is the presence of other people in the house, the so-called "family members." The children are a particular nuisance, in that they have been slow to realize that they have no problems that will be solved by their father. Daddy can't solve them, won't solve them, doesn't want to solve them. Daddy doesn't care. This is a concept they can't seem to grasp. It leads to some painful conversations.

"Daddy, Mom's gone and we're starving and . . ." "I don't care."

" . . . when we tried to make our own dinner these huge flames shot out of the oven and—" "I don't care."

" . . . so we went looking for a garden hose to put out the fire and when P went behind the shed she suddenly fell into that abandoned well and now all we can hear is this tiny pitiful voice."

"I don't care."

The reason I have no time for parenting or husbanding is not that I'm too busy writing. The notion that "writing" plays a large role in a writer's book leave is one that wracks my frame with heaving spasms of mirth. When a writer writes something, it narrows too severely the possibilities of the form. The conceptual book is always better than the written one. Mostly I just think about writing. I think about what it would be like to produce a manuscript that became a published book. The payoff comes when, after hours of staring at a blank computer screen, I finally can visualize precisely what that screen would look like were one to start typing. There would be—words. Times New Roman. Double-spaced.

To get the creative juices flowing I will toy with the font size, play with paragraph parameters, and explore the various mysterious icons on the toolbar. Once I spent a lovely morning going back and forth between Decrease Indent and Increase Indent. If this book is ever finished, reviewers will undoubtedly loathe it, but if they have a shred of intellectual honesty they'll acknowledge my sublime formatting.

I know it sounds like I spend a lot of time staring at a blank screen, but there's more going on than that. I also pace the room and stare at the computer from a distance. I occasionally sneak up on it with the stealth of a panther, or peek at it from around a corner, then flee the basement, giggling. When the day is not going well there may be some verbal abuse, and I regret some of the things I've said, such as saying my computer's mother was an adding machine, and that I didn't find the "Mystify" screen saver even slightly perplexing. Tears often follow these outbursts, and then reconciliation, laughter and finally another spasm of rage and activation of the Shut Down function. Sometimes I look at that message that says "Please Wait While Your Computer Shuts Down" and reflexively shout "Sorry, —head!" as I hit the Power button.

It doesn't help to spend time with other writers on book leave. Recently over lunch I tried to share my troubles with a writer who had taken on an extremely

difficult project that was certain to take many years to complete. I delicately asked how his book was coming. His answer was along the lines of the following:

"Oh, it's done. We're in bookstores next month. There are some loose ends to tie up, like whether we're doing the 'Today' show or 'Good Morning America,' but I'm happy with the auction for foreign rights and paperback rights, and I guess it's no secret that DreamWorks has picked up the option. Spielberg insists that he'll direct himself. It looks like my role will be played by Cruise, though I'd prefer Hanks. Nice thing is, they're letting me write the screenplay and also appear in a cameo as the boyfriend of Julia Stiles."

So I tend to stay in the basement. At some point, possibly this decade, the manuscript will be finished and I'll turn it in to my editor and hope she understands the new direction of the narrative. I imagine we will have some tense conversations.

"Your focus has shifted, I see," the editor will say gently.

"Yes, I decided to make some adjustments," I'll say. "For example," she will say, "it's no longer a carefully researched nonfiction account of a crucial episode in American history."

"Right."
 "It's now a novel."
 "Correct."
 "About a man with a beautiful lawn."
 "Uh-huh."
 "And there are no other characters other than weeds, and insects, and these horrible, white, underground larvae."
 "Precisely."

Then comes the next phase, the rewrite job, in which I will throw out everything and substitute a completely different topic, this one containing violence, gore, geyers of arterial blood, and the kind of tawdry sex that reviewers will call "scorching." No writer should ever forget Rule 14 of Strunk & White: "When in Doubt Add Sharks and Lesbians."

The final stage is the most difficult: selling. There is a measure of a book's quality, and that measure is copies sold. My previous books have sold quite modestly. Indeed, the modesty of their sales borders on the pathological. These books are shut-ins, with clinical cases of social anxiety disorder.

A while back, at a book reading, my youngest daughter, a wee child with big eyes, began working the bookstore, telling people, "Please buy my daddy's book!" People chuckled. It was so cute! But when a few people actually seemed to respond to the sales pitch, I saw the commercial potential of using the children to front the operation.

"Daddy, I'm soooo tired," the little girl said after working the room for 45 minutes.

"Ten more sales. Then we hit Waldenbooks."

A fringe benefit of writing the kind of books that sell dozens of copies nationally is that at some point they'll be remaindered, and the publisher will offer the stock to the author at a steep discount. This is how I have come to own numerous boxes of my own work in mint condition. I sell them at yard sales, a buck a copy, personally inscribed. There is nothing quite like selling a copy of your own book to the kind of shopper who obtains his or her personal possessions at a yard sale.

"Did you really write this book?" they invariably ask.

"Yes. See, look at the picture."
 "Huh. Okay. I'll give you 50 cents for it."
 I draw the line when they try to bargain me down to a quarter. Even I have dignity.