

The Style Invitational

Week 620: Keep the Empress Employed



ILLUSTRATIONS BY BOB STAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Except for maybe slide rule manufacturers, there's hardly an industry whose doom is prophesied with more certainty than that of the daily newspaper. Although these predictions may be considerably overblown — look, there are *dozens* of you reading this column in the print edition right now — there's no arguing that The Post's circulation, like that of many of its counterparts, has been falling off since its peak in the mid-1980s. **This week's contest** was suggested, pretty much on a dare, independently by Losers Russell Beland of Springfield and Mark Eckenwiler of Washington: Suggest some original, creative ways that The Post could increase its circulation. (Note: Despite the decline, The Post still does sell more than 1 million copies of the paper every Sunday, so don't worry that no one will see your fine work. Unless, of course, the Empress deems it insufficiently interesting.) With the cartoon above, we hope to preempt 24,342 suck-up entries along this line.

Winner receives the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. First runner-up receives, courtesy of the aforementioned Dr. Beland, a genuine, highly detailed Lenox porcelain figurine of a bald eagle, its talons gripping a stars-and-stripes shield, that would be truly patriotically inspiring except that (a) the eagle possesses roughly the same facial expression as Big Bird, and (b) it is sitting on a big ball of brownish something between its legs, perhaps an ostrich egg, or a very old grapefruit.

Other runners-up win a coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt. Honorable mentions get one of the lusted-after Style Invitational magnets. One prize per entrant per week. Send your entries by e-mail to losers@washpost.com or, if you really have to, by fax to 202-334-4312. Deadline is Monday, Aug. 1. Put "Week 620" in the subject line of your e-mail, or it risks being ignored as spam. Include your name, postal address and phone number with your entry. Entries are 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 Aug. 21. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. The revised title for next week's contest is by Tom Witte of Montgomery Village.

Report from Week 616, a contest that turned out to be well nigh impossible. But only well nigh. Okay, extremely well nigh. One Loser who shall go nameless except for "Brendan Beary (Great Mills, Md.," submitted this entry: "The Most Excellent Royal Holiday": When the Empress of Invitania plans a vacation over the July 4 weekend, her kooky yet adoring subjects stage an impossibly nonsensical contest to make sure she's not bothered with tons of pesky e-mails." Tsk-tsk, so, so cynical. The fireworks were especially satisfying this year, particularly after that all-day pool party.

Anyway, the contest was to look at the accompanying "sketchbook page" containing five cartoons, allegedly all planned for a children's book that Style Invitational artist Bob Staake was working on. Your mission — and indeed, not many of you chose to accept it — was to describe in a sentence what the book was about, name the title and, if you liked, include sample text for the cartoons. A number of Losers made a truly valiant effort to unite all these cartoons that clearly have nothing to do with one another. Valor can earn you a medal but not necessarily a T-shirt.



◆ Second runner-up:

"The Energy Crisis That Never Was": Congressman Pork Barrel and his guide dog, Big Energy, are able to secure funding to produce gas-guzzling, roll-prone SUVs by buying energy credits from dwarf Antarcticans; meanwhile, President Bush plays with his dog. (Eric Murphy, Chicago)

◆ First runner-up, winner of the mustachioed coffee mug and 1982 World's Fair mini-mug: **"Can You Pick Out the Upside-Down Picture?"** Another in the best-selling Low Threshold series for underachievers. (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)

◆ And the winner of the Inker:

"Stay Inside!" A book for children whose parents are just concerned, that's all.

Text under the cartoons:
Those with disabilities
Fill me with a vague unease.
Their seeing-eye dogs sometimes bite
And carry rabies, ticks and blight.
Do not ride the bus to school
For fear of wrecks and leaking fuel.
Also, I have often heard

Of kids pecked by a flightless bird.
Hats, e.g., the stovepipe version,
Hint of sexual perversion,
Whereas clowns with large behinds
Have kidnapping on their minds.
And finally, you must beware
Of the dread child-eating hare.
I did not make this up, my pet:
I saw it on the Internet.
(Ron Stanley, Reston)

◆ Honorable Mentions

"Abraham Lincoln": This book examines how history would have drastically changed if Abraham Lincoln had instead been born a penguin — except that strangely enough, in the South, people would still park their cars on their lawns upside down. (Marc Leibert, New York)

"Twilight of the Dogs": As global warming melts automobiles and forces polar inhabitants to don protective headgear, the Bush administration blames the dog days of summer on canine terrorists. (Dave Kelsey, Fairfax)

"The Mad Mascot Masquerade": When they need money for the new gym, the kids at Birch Lake School enter a contest to come up with a more appropriate mascot for the Washington Redskins — and win, giving rise to the new Washington Submissive Clowns. (winner and 4 runners-up pictured) (Jeff Brechlin, Eagan, Minn.)

"Who's the Bone Smuggler?" If you guessed the rabbit, you're wrong. (Chuck Smith)

Next Week: Best the Best, or Nompositions

MISS MANNERS

Judith Martin

Letter-Quality Expressions

"Nobody writes letters anymore" is a refrain that Miss Manners has been hearing for years. But it seems that now they do — and warm, personal letters at that — when the occasion is important enough.

When would that be?
When a friend has died? Well, no. Surely an e-mail is enough then. Gentle Readers have tried (with remarkable lack of success) to convince Miss Manners. The important thing is for the bereaved to know that you're there for them, they argue, and e-mail is the quickest and therefore the most meaningful way.

No, the way to "be there" for them is to go there. Paying condolence calls is not a dead custom among the compassionate.

Neither is the handwritten letter of condolence, containing kind words about the deceased as well as sympathy for the survivors. Sympathy cards are nothing more than preprinted form letters. E-mail may have more content, but it is a breezy way of dismissing a solemn occurrence. You might just as well add a smiley face symbol at the end in hopes of spreading cheer. Do people write personal letters when they are unable to attend a wedding or graduation to which they have been invited?

Certainly not. The hosts are lucky if the invited even answer the invitations, much less express their congratulations. All they want to know is whether they owe a present, the demand for goods being one of the few social moves that is taken seriously, if resentfully. They have not incurred such a debt, but the idea of another response — wishing their friends happiness on important occasions, which costs only a stamp — seldom occurs to anyone.

Similarly, dinner and overnight guests neglect their duty to write appreciative letters because they feel they have already paid their debt with the grocery or bottle they handed over at the door.

It can be argued that e-mail has kept alive the tradition of the chatty letter written on no special occasion, and indeed, e-mail is a marvelous way to say nothing in particular. But it won't do for the deeply emotional declaration where one feels moved to pour out one's heart to another.

The incentive for doing that is nothing less than passion. These days, that does not mean the passing passions people might feel for each other, for which text messaging is considered enough.

It is passion for real estate. Competition for buying property in a sellers' market has apparently spurred

prospective buyers to epistolary competition. Real estate agents have been known to advise this, along with such other personal gestures as presents and invitations, as a way to charm the seller into taking the writer's money.

This is yet another manifestation of the theory on which the entertainment expense account is based: that people will put aside their business interests if flattered into making an apparent social connection.

The premise here is that selling one's house is somewhat like putting a child out for adoption. One would want to feel that one was turning it over to warm people who will take loving care of it. It turns out to be a faulty analogy. People who are selling their houses may form retroactive attachments to them, but they are usually moving on, emotionally as well as literally, and inclined to value money over charm in a buyer.

Oh, well. Writing those letters about how close they are with their children and their pets, and how attached they are to the simple attractions of house and garden, are good practice. Surely there is an old friend or relative who would be happy to receive one.

Dear Miss Manners:

What rules of etiquette, if any, govern the use of a drinking straw? I know straws aren't exactly part of a proper place setting, but they are continually offered at dining and drinking establishments, and in some cases they are convenient to use. Other than the obvious suggestion — don't slurp or blow bubbles! — how can I avoid looking childish or uncouth while drinking from a straw?

Let's see. If it is wrapped and you tear off one end and blow the paper in your sister's face, that would be childish. So is putting it up your nose.

Otherwise, you just need to bring the drink up to your mouth, rather than leaning down to it, and to refrain from unnecessary noises. And Miss Manners begs to differ with you about the slurps, as she permits three relatively discreet ones at the end of an ice cream soda.

Feeling incorrect? E-mail your etiquette questions to Miss Manners (who is distraught that she cannot reply personally) at MissManners@unitedmedia.com or mail to United Media, 200 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10016.

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PHOTOS BY SUSAN BIDDLE — THE WASHINGTON POST

Magician Jack Julius, left, and wife Tanya Butchick laugh with colleague Gale Molovinsky of Potomac over a spike-through-the-neck trick for sale. Illusionist Wayne Alan hosted the magicians-only sale.

Magician Turns His Tricks Into Cash

MAGICIAN, From D1

on the grass, checking out a device containing three long, curved swords. "You take the girl and you lay her down on top of the swords. You remove two swords and the third is still sticking in her neck."

"That sounds like it could be dangerous," said Julius's wife, Tanya, 34. She looked a tad worried, which wasn't surprising, considering that she would be the "girl" lying on the swords if Julius bought the illusion, which was priced at \$600.

"You just have to stay straight and be hypnotized," Julius said. "It's like acupuncture. It's like you're lying on a bed of nails, except it's three swords."

He looked very calm about the whole idea. She did not. A few feet away, Louis Hofheimer peered into a red steamer trunk.

"This is a nice box," said Hofheimer, 43, a magician/security consultant from Alexandria. "How much does he want for this?"

"Eleven hundred dollars," said Dan Miller, 61, another Alexandria magician.

"That's a lot for a box," said Hofheimer. But this was no ordinary box. It was the "Tip-Over Trunk," a magical box that makes people appear — or disappear.

"You show it to the audience and they see it's empty," Hofheimer said. "Then you close it and you padlock it and when you open it back up, there's a lady inside. It's a great illusion."

Hofheimer, who bills himself as "Captain Token, the Magician," wanted the trunk. But he didn't want to pay \$1,100.

"That's a lot of money for a used box," he told Alan.

"If you wanted a new one, you'd pay \$5,000," Alan said. "I'll give it to you for \$1,000."

"Can I buy it for \$900?" Hofheimer asked.

"It's yours," Alan said. "You've got yourself an illusion."

Alan shook Hofheimer's hand. Then he stepped over to the Zig-Zag box — a red wooden box about the size of a telephone booth — and announced that he was about to perform a feat of magic.

"Morgan, would you step inside please?" he said. Morgan Cully, a 16-year-old girl from across the street, stepped into the Zig-Zag box. She stuck her smiling face out of one hole, her fingers and toes out of other holes.

Alan picked up a wide silver blade and slid it into a slot in the box, about chest high. It got stuck. "It probably needs a new guide in there," Alan said.

He pushed a little harder. The blade slid in.

"There's blood dripping out of the bottom," Hof-



Julius dons a \$1 pair of trick glasses that slant a person's vision so he can't grab something when asked to.

heimer yelled. (He was only kidding.)

Alan slipped another blade into the box around Cully's abdomen.

"Is her heart still beating?" Hofheimer yelled. Alan ignored the heckling. He grabbed the middle of the Zig-Zag box — the part containing Cully's belly — and shoved it a few feet to the side, leaving a frightening gap between Cully's face and Cully's feet.

"Tah-DAH!" Alan said. He puts the box back together Cully stepped out, bloodless, smiling and still in one piece. Amazing!

Jack Julius was impressed. He had already bought the sword illusion. Now he was thinking about buying this one, too.

"I'm debating the Zig-Zag," he told Alan.

"Jack, you need the Zig-Zag," Alan said. "The Zig-Zag is gonna really put you in the big time. It's a strong illusion. The illusion I used to win the World Championship of Magic is based on that."

Alan frequently claims to be America's only world magic champion — and he's not too shy to mention that, especially when he's trying to sell a used Zig-Zag box for \$1,300.

"I just think the Zig-Zag is a great illusion," he told Julius.

"When you do it," Julius asked, "do you have one girl come out or two?"

Alan smiled. "If we tell you," he said, "then we'd have to kill you."

Julius laughed. He also bought the Zig-Zag.

Apparently Alan's magic still works. He can make people's money disappear.

"Break a leg," Alan said as Julius left. "And thanks for coming."