

The Style Invitational

Week CXXVII: Pompous Assets



BY BOB STAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

"In 1985, in my preface to a three-volume reference set about Shakespeare's world, work and influence, I noted that falling under the spell of the man Ben Jonson dubbed the 'Sweet Swan of Avon' is one of life's most liberating experiences. This paradox has been affirmed and reaffirmed by more than four centuries of drama professionals, theatergoers and other observers. And if the memoirs to be examined in the paragraphs that follow are any indication, it has lost none of its original pertinence..."

This Week's Contest was proposed by Mike Pocalyko of Oak Hill. Mike suggests that you come up with the first paragraph of a review of a real book or a movie—past or present—that is as narcissistic, pretentious and self-aggrandizing as the review above—which actually appeared in The Washington Post two weeks ago. Maximum length, 50 words. First-prize winner gets a Spam-can piggy bank donated to The Style Invitational by Bruce Friedrich, PETA's Washington bureau chief. Bruce procured this item from the Spam Museum in Austin, Minn., to which he was dragged by a sweet, elderly, clueless relative. That was bad enough, and then he learned that the inventor of Spam was named Friedrich and may well be a relative.

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, July 8. 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. The revised title for next week's contest is by Seth Brown, of Williamstown, Mass.

Report from Week CXXIII, in which we asked you to come up with completely unfunny, humor-impaired questions for "Jeopardy!" answers we had previously supplied. Several persons were disqualified for the mistake of being too funny. The best of these was Chuck Smith of Woodbridge (Answer: Germany, only Germany. Question: In what country is the "Family Circus" character "I'da Know" named "Ino Nussing"?). We also must reprimand Mark Hagenau of Derry, N.H., for unnecessarily pointing out the unfortunately amusing fact that "Rapid I Movement" is an anagram for "Vomit me a pi, nerd."

◆ Third Runner-Up: Answer: **A Mackerel Lollipop**. Question: **What do you get when you cross a mackerel with a lollipop?** (Andrew Nellis, Washington; Simon Toomey, Christchurch, New Zealand)

◆ Second Runner-Up: Answer: **Rapid I Movement**. Question: **What is a homophonic pun on a phrase used in polysomnography?** (Mark Hagenau, Derry, N.H.)

◆ First Runner-Up: Answer: **Velcromagnon Man**. Question: **How would Mel Brooks, speaking with a Yiddish accent, say "Well, Cro-Magnon man?"** (Judy Miller, Poolsville)

◆ And the winner of the Loser pen that mistakenly says "Bizarre" instead of "The Czar": Answer: **Those Paper Toilet Seat Covers**. Question: **What product should be recyclable but isn't because big business rapes the planet to assure that we have clean buttocks when we excrete cows we have murdered and consumed?** (Mark Young, Washington)

◆ Honorable Mentions:

A MACKEREL LOLLIPOP
What might a masochistic Catholic piscatologist confectioner create for use as a dessert after a Lenten dinner? (Greg Berry, Fairfax)

What treat would be difficult to "fin"-ish? (Dave Zarrow, Herndon)

What takes a licking and keeps on stinking? (Mike Hammer, Arlington)

What kind of candy doesn't swim upstream to spawn? (Beth Baniszewski, Columbia)

THOSE PAPER TOILET SEAT COVERS
Let's say your company's coffeemaker is located in the ladies' room. Well, what might work pretty well as a substitute if you run out of coffee filters? (R.J. Sturgeon, Kensington)

What does George W. Bush use for lobster ribs because he's so clueless that he does stupid things? (Ned Bent, Herndon)

What is different from eggs in that eggs might hatch if you sat on them? (Mike Genz, La Plata)

ABIGAIL, BUT NOT MARTIN, VAN BUREN
What is a chain of six words where each word contains at least one letter that goes above the middle line in print handwriting? (Lex Friedman, Manalapan, N.J.)

FRAN DRESCHER AND THE NORWEGIAN PARLIAMENT
Who's probably not going to come over and help me take out the garbage? (Sarah W. Gaymon, Gambrells)

Whom did R. Kelly not videotape himself having sex with? (John Stoner, Durham, N.C.)

Who starred in the TV movie "The Nanny Gets Elected to the Norwegian Parliament"? (Mike Hammer, Arlington)

RAPID I MOVEMENT
What do you call that shouting thing that the Indians did when they attacked the soldiers in the movies? You know, that "I-I-I-I thing." That was cool. (Mark Young, Washington)

What happens when you hold down the

key between U and O for a really long time, like thisiiiiiiiiiiiiii? (Greg Pearson, Arlington; Dierdre Bond, Silver Spring)

IT GOT LOST IN THE TRANSLATION.
What must have happened to the proper spelling of Osama bin Laden's name, since everyone seems to be calling him O-sama in clear contradiction of the Library of Congress, which calls him U-sama? (Mark Young, Washington)

What is the TranslGotlation? (Don Watkins III, Springfield)

VELCROMAGNON MAN
What would be an obvious paleontological hoax, assuming you knew that Velcro wasn't around in prehistoric times? (Steve Fahey, Kensington)

What would be a great name for a TV sitcom about a caveman who is always getting into "sticky" situations? (Milo Sauer, Fairfax)

GERMANY. ONLY GERMANY
What instructions did the bacteria leader give his bacteria soldiers just before infecting a knee? (J.D. Berry, Springfield)

ENRON AND CREAM OF MUSHROOM SOUP.
What rhymes with "Shmenron and Shmeam of Shmushroom Shmoup"? (Lex Friedman, Manalapan, N.J.)

KUKLA, FRAN AND OSAMA
Who's buried in Kukla, Fran and Osama's tomb? (Hank Wallace, Washington)

What are a puppet, a TV personality, and the personification of evil who should rot in Hell? (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)

I CAN'T HEAR YOU, YOU'RE BREAKING UP
What did Quasimodo (1) say to Saint Catherine (2)? (1) Character in Victor Hugo's novel "Notre Dame de Paris" (1831), who becomes deaf after prolonged exposure to loud bell ringing. (2) 4th-century A.D. virgin martyr (most likely apocryphal) whose capital sentence included breaking on the wheel. (Jonathan Paul, Garrett Park)

Next Week: **Litter to the Editor**



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Where Brylcreem Is Good and Mustaches Are Evil

MARK TRAIL, From F1

in Lost Forest, newspapers keep testing him. They forget about his knockout punch.

Mark Trail was brought into the world in 1946 by a man named Ed Dodd, and it is drawn today by Jack Elrod, 78, who began as Dodd's assistant and took over the strip in 1978. Elrod works out of his basement in an Atlanta suburb, surrounded by conservation and patriotism awards the strip has won, and near a file cabinet full of animal photos clipped from magazines. Elrod draws Trail as a man perpetually in his early thirties, with a gelled, early-Superman hairdo that—in the online version—gives off a curious navy blue sheen. His adventures fill the comic every day but Sunday, when the strip gives lessons about various wild creatures.

Physically, Mark Trail lives in a house in Lost Forest with his wife, Cherry; Rusty, their adopted son; and Cherry's father, Doc. His days are typically spent tracking and smacking around poachers, drug smugglers, gangsters and other ne'er-do-wells who pass through Lost Forest.

Metaphysically, Mark Trail lives in a far simpler world than ours.

In Trail World, villains are clearly marked. Men with facial hair or long hair—mustaches, sideburns, ponytails—are always evil through and through. Gender roles at Lost Forest are also clearly demarcated: Cherry washes dishes and makes coffee, Mark has adventures in the woods.

Shopping is easier: Whiskey is bought at the Whiskey Store. Even fisticuffs are simpler in Lost Forest. The climax of every story line, the emotionally wrought cap to weeks upon weeks of dialogue and poking around after bad guys, is usually one punch, Mark's fist to the villain's face.

Elrod thinks the strip's fans are mainly older people and outdoorsmen.

Newspapers find that many of those who call in to support the strip are older people. And those who write letters about the strip treat its portrayal of nature and outdoor life with deadly seriousness. One Washington Post reader called a 1995 strip, in which a friendly raccoon licked a little girl, "one of the most irresponsible pictures that I have ever seen printed in a public paper."

Its supporters like to think that the strip is widely read by children—a big vote of confidence in kids' attention spans, given the strip's painfully slow plotlines. Survey data say that kids don't read it.

But "Mark Trail" does have a following among people younger than 60. They call themselves Trailheads, and they like the strip for its simplicity and its anachronisms. Some people think these things make "Mark Trail" silly. Trailheads think they are hilarious.

"In a lot of ways, there is really a nonexistent line between appreciating this for campy or ironic reasons and just out-and-out appreciating it," says Fairfax County resident Scott McKnight.

As it has with other fringe groups, the Internet has made them into a community.

Before the Internet, "I figured there were maybe six or seven other people in the world that were amused by the strip the way I was," says Jim Lynch, who works at a printing company in Mankato, Minn. He was so sure that "Mark Trail" was unpopular that, when the Star Tribune in Minneapolis considered dropping the strip, he wrote about 10 letters under fake names to support it.

As the Net grew, fans of the strip began trading stories on bulletin boards and dissecting that day's strip

for anachronisms and irony.

Now, on the Official Mark Trail "What Th?" Page (named for one of Mark's favorite expressions), every day brings three or four new posts.

On Wednesday, when the strip above appeared, they had a field day.

"The first frame of today's strip is another fridge magnet waiting to happen," wrote "TrailGirl." "And is it possible to listen to the GROUND and hear an out-board motor in the swamp???"

The Internet also helps Trailheads organize. When the Star-Ledger tried to kill the strip earlier this year, the call went out for people to e-mail the editors.

Eventually, according to the paper, the strip's "small, but very loyal and very thoughtful following" persuaded the editors to keep it, says Susan Olds, the assistant managing editor for features.

"They moved us," she says.

Trailheads haven't had a convention yet, but they do have a song. Written by McKnight, who plays in local bands, it goes in part:

*He can walk into the bushes and bring back lunch
He can knock out all the bad guys with just one punch
If you've got evil intentions, then you'd better beware
'Cause he can tell that you're a bad guy by your facial hair.*

Mark Trail has been vanquished elsewhere. The Peoria (Ill.) Journal Star dropped him in 1994, and he seems to have stayed gone. In 1999, the Salt Lake Tribune dropped Mark from its Sunday comics.

A spokeswoman for King Features Syndicate couldn't say how many subscribers "Mark Trail," which currently runs in 175 papers, has lost in recent years. Published reports from 1991 said more than 200 papers carried him then.

Still, time after time in the last 20 years, various papers have tried unsuccessfully to sweep him out with other old adventure or soap opera strips like "Mary Worth," "Gasoline Alley" or "Steve Roper and Mike Nomad." Mark Trail keeps coming back.

On Feb. 9, 1991, in what may be the best-known story about "Mark Trail's" invincibility, The Washington Post cut the strip from its comics page, along with two other oldies. Nearly 15,000 phone calls came in, with more than half of them complaining specifically about the loss of "Mark Trail."

"Mark Trail" was back in The Post the next month, and the newspaper printed all 42 strips that readers had missed.

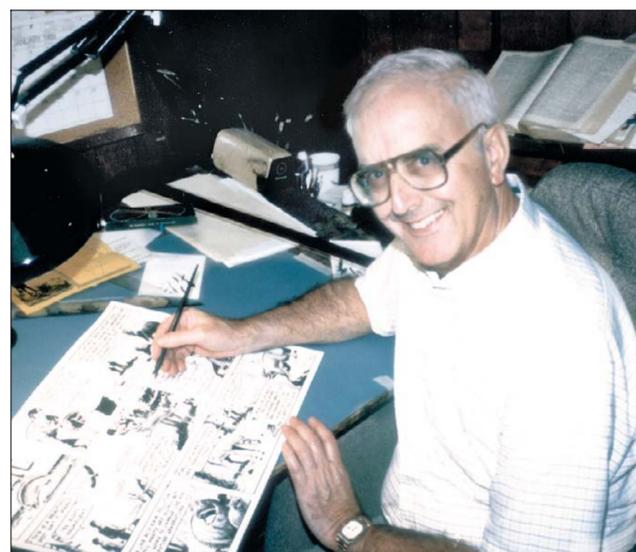
The Sheboygan Press tried to drop "Mark Trail" about 10 years ago and also was forced to restore it. But this year, when complaints about the strip started accumulating, and the editors wanted more space for the crossword puzzle, they couldn't help themselves.

"We didn't learn our lesson, I guess," says Executive Editor Mike Knuth. After two dozen or so passionate calls came in, the paper started running "Mark Trail" again.

So far, the Columbus Dispatch has gotten only about a dozen calls demanding that Trail be saved. They're cutting six other comics at the same time, so support for Trail might be diluted in the crowd, said editor Kiefer.

"We... have that on our list of many things we're expecting calls about," he says.

Might Mark still be saved?
"I suppose anything's possible," says Kiefer, who admits to—and the significance of this should be obvious—having "a small mustache."



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Richard Thompson is away. Richard's Poor Almanac will resume when he returns.