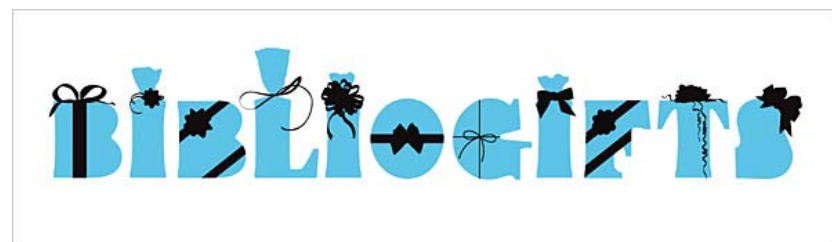




ON LANGUAGE Bibliogifts



Lettering by Bobby C. Martin Jr.

By WILLIAM SAFIRE Published: December 2, 2007

Black is the new black. Walking briskly down Madison Avenue in New York, I passed the window of the designer DKNY, but the display therein slowed my gait to a lugubrious plod. All the mannequins in the windows were clothed in funeral chic — outfits suitable for matronly morticians at an undertaker's convention.

The new black is defined under "new" in The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, Sixth Edition, as "a colour in such vogue as to rival the traditional role of black as a staple or background color for garments; figuratively, something which is suddenly extremely popular or fashionable." When there is not a color in a carload, the noncolor black becomes the new black. (British lexicographers spell color with an added u,

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and apparently prefer which over that before a restrictive clause; in this case, I prefer that or no relative pronoun at all.)

It was good to see the verb smoosh finally made it: "squash, crush or flatten"; though the Americanism tonsil tennis, "passionate kissing," might have shocked Sir James Murray. The interjection nyah — "expressing a feeling of superiority or contempt for another" — is now O.E.D.-immortalized, and the phrase for "a short sleep taken during the working day in order to restore alertness" is given its deserved dignity: power nap.

Although this publisher will bring out a new edition of my political dictionary next spring, I feel no conflict in designating its two-volume "short" view of the whole English lexicon the big language book of the year. At \$175, its two volumes, 3,700 pages — with indispensable CD enclosed — take it out of the stocking-stuffer category; consider it an intellectual investment.

Dictionary of American Slang. Fourth Edition, revised by Barbara Ann Kipfer of the classic work by Robert Chapman (Collins, \$45), covers much of the informal usage of the 19th and 20th centuries. Entries include the 1940s murder board, "a committee or board

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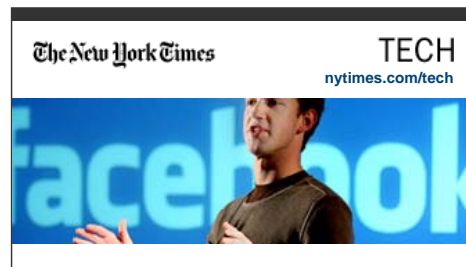
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convened esp. to examine a candidate for presidential appointment before the name goes to the Senate for confirmation.” A most useful new feature is an appendix of text-messaging abbreviations, from the ancient ASAP and AWOL to the more recent @TEOTD “At the end of the day”; BTDT “Been there, done that”; FOFL “falling on floor laughing”; KISS “Keep it simple, stupid”; MorF, “Male or Female?”; PU “That stinks!” TLK2UL8R is code for “Talk to you later,” but strikes me as a WOMBAT, the name of an Australian marsupial that sneers, “Waste of money, brains and time.”

“**The Stuff of Thought**,” by Steven Pinker, thoughtfully subtitled “Language as a Window Into Human Nature” (Viking, \$30), is serious linguistics done in understandable style by Harvard’s most eminent explicator. (When asked to explain how the brain works in five words or less, the quick-thinking Pinker told a wiseguy interviewer, “Brain cells fire in patterns.”) His chapter “The Seven Words You Can’t Say on Television,” drawing on George Carlin’s memorable monologue, contains locutions too blue for review but is an illuminating tableau of the taboo. The chapter on metaphors is an eye-opener, which is a metaphor. (That nonrestrictive clause calls for a *which*.) And when you read his dissertation on names, you will not soon forget Pinker.

Books by Editors

Editing ain’t easy. (Shouldn’t that be isn’t? No. The style of this column is breezily pedantic; hence the pop grammarian’s *which*-hunt.) Two books by masters of book editing and journalistic ethics:

“**The Artful Edit**,” by Susan Bell (Norton, \$24), subtitled “On the Practice of Editing Yourself.” In one of the long passages by the author’s friends, Tracy Kidder writes, “There’re so many steps involved in editing . . . first you’ve got to know that there is something wrong.” Isn’t there something wrong with that opening elision, *There’re?* Why not plain *There are?* Because he wrote it that way, and she left it unedited to simulate a particular sound of lazy speech; many people pronounce the two words as one “therrur.” Kidder continued: “One of my gripes about the computer is that it encourages a kind of editing that I don’t think is very useful. That is, you can move stuff around endlessly.”

Bell’s point is “to implant the conversation between editor and writer into the writer’s head; so that, when the time comes, the writer can split into two and treat herself as a good editor would.” First rule for the editor side: “You may not say ‘I love this’ . . . or ‘I don’t like this.’ These stock phrases offer nothing helpful to a writer.” Short, helpful, original book.

“**The Elements of Journalism**,” by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (updated and revised paperback, Three Rivers Press, \$14), subtitled “What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect.” Don’t even think of becoming a reporter, editor, columnist or influential blogger without reading this modern classic.

“**Spanish Word Histories and Mysteries**” (Houghton Mifflin paperback, \$13), by the editors of American Heritage Dictionaries, subtitled “English Words That Come From Spanish.” Stopping at a *bodega* to pick up some *salsa* on the way to a *barbecue* in the *barrio*, we recognize the Spanish words — but do we associate *booby trap* with *pajaro bobo* — a “stupid bird”? Or *blue blood* as a *calque*, a translation of a phrase borrowed from another language, as in the Spanish *sangre azul*, describing the blue veins visible through fair skin of the Christians who once ruled portions of Muslim Spain?

A famous calque is the bullfight *aficionado* Ernest Hemingway’s translation of *la hora de la verdad* (literally “the hour of truth”) as “moment of truth.” It wouldn’t hurt American politicians reaching for support among the fastest-growing segment of our voting population to spend more than a few moments learning about English words that come from Spanish.

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