

January 19, 2010
Indianapolis Literary Club
Essay titled "*A Letter from Alice Marble*" by David Best

We of the Indianapolis Literary Club share a common bond. Each of us in our inimitable ways is a wordsmith, e ia person who works with words. According to *Merriam Webster's Deluxe Dictionary* a wordsmith is a skillful writer. Having defined wordsmith we are then faced with the question: What precisely is the wordsmith's greatest challenge? Perhaps the answer can be found in the writings of Gustave Flaubert, the nineteenth century French perfectionist author of *Madame Bovary* and *Sentimental Education*. Attributed to Flaubert is the term *le mot juste*, the exact word. Flaubert says: "... all talent for writing consists after all of nothing more than choosing words. It's precision that gives writing power. Perfection has everywhere the same characteristic: that's precision, exactness." Flaubert would spend hours looking for a word. Here's how he expressed his struggle to find the exact word: "I am the obscure and patient pearl-fisher, who dives deep and comes up empty-handed and blue in the face." He wrote to a friend once that he spent three days making two corrections and five days writing one sentence. To Flaubert it was a relentless search for artistic perfection.

Of the writers, authors, lexicographers, and etymologists I've encountered through the years there are three who in most diverse styles epitomize the search for *le mot juste*. First, let's imagine ourselves in the fall of 1976 entering the Reading Room of the British Museum. We are struck by the austere setting of the room. We note an elderly man, lean and desiccated in shape seated at what we later learn is desk K.1. Piled in front of him are books and papers. Out of curiosity we ask a Reading Room attendant who this person is. We are told he is Eric Partridge. He looks like a fixture in the room. Well, in fact, he is. We learn that for the past forty-one years, except for illness and World War II, he has occupied that chair at desk K.1. In fact he has joined the legends of the Reading Room: George Bernard Shaw, the renowned playwright, at one desk; Lenin, plotting the overthrow of an empire, at another; and Karl Marx questioning the foundations of the world in a corner of

the room. We are told that Partridge will be the last of the legends, the last of Samuel Johnson's species.

To place Eric Partridge in perspective we must first note the three reference books that all writers consult: *The Oxford English Dictionary*; *Roget's Thesaurus*; and Fowler's *Modern English Usage*. These we find on a shelf in the Reading Room. Added to this shelf are Partridge's *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, his etymological dictionary *Origins*, and his *Usage and Abusage*! Here we find Eric Partridge at the age of eighty-one now crafting *A Dictionary of Catch Phrases*. He works alone transcribing his notes in long-hand. Ninety percent of his research is gained from the volumes within the Reading Room.

He is meticulous in his routine. He rises at 7:30, shaves, and then takes public transportation to the museum, arriving at nine o'clock when the museum opens. He eats lunch alone in the small Italian restaurants in Bloomsbury. He stayed at the museum until closing time until 1975 when illness interrupted his schedule. Now he stays until 2 P.M. when he returns home. He spends an hour with his mail of which he says, "The number of people who write to me! They think, 'Poor old Partridge, he's got nothing to do.' They've got no idea I've got a living to make." He then reads until supper, after which he reads again. He goes to bed at 10:30.

Partridge was born in New Zealand. He joined the Australian army and fought in the Battle of Gallipoli. Out of 1100 in his battalion he was one of twenty-odd who survived. He told himself that if he came out of the battle alive, he would go to Oxford. This he did. He was a lecturer at Oxford for two years. He then turned to writing and publishing. Until 1965 he attended the Wimbledon tennis championships for a London magazine. He never knew how the pieces he wrote got used. He said, ". . . they were quite decently written." He hero-worshipped Alice Marble, the famous American tennis player of the 1930's. He wrote about her. One day he received a letter from her. He said, "I was delighted to get the letter. Who wouldn't be, to get a letter from Alice Marble? Particularly as it was so literate."

He published a reprint of Francis Grose's 1785 *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*. Partridge became hooked on the subject. When asked to do a history of slang he became a freelancer. In writing his *Dictionary of Slang* he allowed himself the humor of idiosyncratic definitions, e.g. Mod of the mid 1960's: "a teenager unable to afford a motorcycle and doing his damndest with a scooter."

Partridge experienced the sheer exhilaration of etymology that the standard dictionary did not provide. His finest example was that of the word "tanner," slang for the English sixpence. He said, "Now that was a real mystery. It had baffled etymologists for over a century. But then I remembered that the seventeenth-century underworld word for a sixpence was a 'simon.' Suddenly one day, sometime before the Second World War, it came to me. I just sat down and thought, and it didn't require much thought. It was in the New Testament, 'He lodgeth with one Simon, a tanner.' It was a combination of sheer luck and what some people call misguided ingenuity. But you couldn't get a clearer run than that."

The crux of Eric Partridge's achievements was the need to change our attitude toward language itself. The fantasy with some scholars is the attitude that there is such a thing as a perfect language, immutable and correct! Partridge contended that language is the speech of men, and that this underwrites its rules. He said, "All writing is based on speech. Not the other way around. Language is not created in a laboratory, but by people and for people. It's the spirit of the people."

Partridge died in 1979. e was not an academicianHe He was not an academician. He received only one honorary degree, a D.Lit. from Queens Island University. He thought of himself as a freelance writer – not an author. He said, "I'm a lexicographer. I'm not a rich man. I've never written a textbook. That's where the money is!" He made a living from the language by recording its forms. He considered himself to be the only living index. What he achieved in his lifetime was through the dint of his curiosity, his erudition, and his eccentric reading. Conventional etymologists relied on earlier dictionaries to quote. Eric partridge became known as "the bloke who wrote the

Page Four

slang book." His deepest interest was always in language, and inevitably in etymology.

Next we turn to a man for all seasons, a contemporary Englishman. He's a former Oxford Scholar, President of the Oxford Union, and an MP for the City of Chester. He was a Whip and Lord Commissioner of the Treasury in John Major's government. He starred in his own award-winning musical revue in London's West End. He is a prolific broadcaster, an acclaimed interviewer, a novelist, an author of children's books, and a biographer. He is the author of two acclaimed royal biographies: *Philip & Elizabeth: Portrait of a Marriage* and *Charles & Camilla: Portrait of a Love Affair*. He is the author of a series of Victorian murder mysteries featuring Oscar Wilde as the detective. He is one of Britain's busiest after-dinner speakers. I could list his awards, but I will not. Time will not permit. Instead, I'll tell you who he is for those of you who don't know already. He is Gyles Brandreth.

My interest in Brandreth is for a book he authored in 1980 and its sequel two years later that reflect his intense pursuit of *le mot juste*. The book titles are *The Joy of Lex* and *More Joy of Lex*. He describes himself as a word freak. He's fascinated by language, the way we use it and abuse it. The way we manipulate it, play with it, create with it, and have fun with it. In these two books he deals with words from A to Z and from Z to A. Brandreth estimates that by the time the typical American dies he will have uttered a total of not less than 860,341,500 words. These two books are a celebration of words.

Here are snippets from the two books to whet your keen appetite for the English language. Did you know that Shakespeare coined some 1700 words? Among them were *barefaced*, *hurry*, *leapfrog*, and *dwindle*. In the years listed these were words added to the English language: *astronautics* (1929), *muzak* (1936), *microdot* (1946), *brinkmanship* (1956), *nonevent* (1962), and *streaker* (1973). For the crossword puzzlers among you included in *The Joy of Lex* on Pages 19-23 with answers in the back of the book is what is reputed to be the "World's Most Difficult Crossword Puzzle." It was crafted by the English novelist Gilbert Frankau in 1925.

Page Five

In perhaps a reference to Eric Partridge Brandreth provides ample examples of slanguage. Baseballese is sprinkled into our daily conversation with these examples: "He

was born with two strikes against him.” “He went to bat for me.” “It was a smash hit.” “Could you pinch hit for me?” And “He has a lot on the ball.”

Next we might ask how many words we know. Brandreth provides us with levels 1 through 6 representing vocabularies of 0 to 6,000 words (Level 1) to 30,600 to 36,000 words (Level 6). Tests are listed to determine on which level you may find yourself. The ten words for Level 6 in Test No. 10 are the following: *calamary, eparch, fleury, grangerize, jacobus, levigate, marshalsea, narthex, obol, and tetterwort.*

Incidentally, spell check on my computer required that eight of the ten words be added to the dictionary.

One of my favorite chapters is titled: “*Verbarrhea.*” To combat this verbal disease George Orwell in 1946 offered these six rules: 1) Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print; 2) Never use a long word when a short one will do; 3) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out; 4) Never use the passive where you can use the active; 5) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent; and 6) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous. There is also the Gobbledygook Generator that consists of three columns of fifty words each. Select one word from each column to provide an absolutely incomprehensible three-word combination such as: *multilateral digital turbulence* or *coincidental complementary exigensis.*

Next Brandreth introduces us to the “Schoolboy Howlers,” the attempts by youngsters to be erudite, but just can’t find “the exact word:” “*Telepathy is a code invented by Morse.*” or “*An Indian baby is called a caboose.*” or “*Blood consists of red corkscrews and white corkscrews.*” or “*An oxygen has eight sides.*” or “*Income is a yearly tax.*” or “*Today every Tom, Dick, and Harry is named Bill.*”

In the chapter titled “Tut-tut” Brandreth deals with palindromes. These are words, phrases or sentences that read the same forward as backward. Examples of words would be *deed, level, redivider, or racecar.* Sentences are a greater challenge.

Page Six

Let me offer several: Emperor Napoleon was wont to moan during his exile: *Able was I ere I saw Elba.* Leigh Mercer coined this one: *A man, a plan, a canal - Panama.* Brandreth

offers these: *Was it a car or a cat I saw?* or *Ten animals I slam in a net.* or *Some men interpret nine memos.*

Next he deals with the Rules of the Game, how to speak and write better, clearer, and more understandable English. Though not the complete list of the Brandreth rules they provide you with his objective: 1) Don't use no double negatives; 2) Make each pronoun agree with their antecedent; 3) About them sentence fragments; 4) Verbs has to agree with their subjects; 5) Just between you and I, case is important too; 6) Try not to oversplit infinitives; and 7) Proofread your writing to if any words out.

In his chapter titled Good as Goldfish Brandreth cites classic Goldwynisms. These are unique turns of phrases by Samuel Goldwyn. They make some sense and no sense all at once: "A verbal contract isn't worth the paper it's written on." "We're overpaying him but he's worth it." "Gentlemen, I want you to know that I am not always right, but I am never wrong." "I'll give you a definite maybe." "It's more than magnificent – it's mediocre." "If you can't give me your word of honor will you give me your promise?" "A wide screen just makes a bad film twice as bad." "In two words: im-possible." Incidentally, Goldwyn's name originally was Goldfish. He changed it when he became an American citizen.

It's difficult to leave Gyles Brandreth behind without citing examples of caustic correspondence. Some people call it hate mail or acid epistles. In his chapter titled Epistles at Dawn I offer these for your edification:

TO THE EDITOR OF THE *KENYA STANDARD*: Sir, if you print any more photographs of naked women, I shall cease borrowing your newspaper.

TO GEORGE WASHINGTON FROM TOM PAINE: As to you, sir, treacherous in private friendship, and a hypocrite in public life, the world will be puzzled to decide whether you are an impostate or an imposter; whether you have abandoned good principles, or whether you ever had any.

Page Seven

TO PAUL HUME FROM HARRY S. TRUMAN FOLLOWING HUME'S UNFLATTERING REVIEW OF MARGARET TRUMAN'S SINGING: I have just

read your lousy review buried in the back pages. You sound like a frustrated old man who never made a success, an eight-ulcer man on a four-ulcer job, and all four ulcers working. I have never met you, but if I do you'll need a new nose and plenty of beefsteak and perhaps a supporter below. Westbrook Pegler, a guttersnap, is a gentleman compared to you. You can take that as more of an insult than as a reflection on your ancestry.

My third and final profile is that of a librarian who accepted the challenge of *le mot juste* in a most unusual manner. His name was Louis N. Feipel. He worked at the Brooklyn Public Library as its director of publications. At home at night he would pick up a popular novel and as he read he would take notes. When he finished the book he would take his notes, type them up and along with a letter would mail them to the book's author. For example, his letter to Sinclair Lewis began: Dear Mr. Lewis, I enjoyed reading your book 'Dodsworth.' While doing so I made note of certain points about its editing, typesetting, and proof-reading, which may possibly interest you. . . ." Then attached were two closely spaced pages beginning "Misprints or Editorial Lapses," going on through "Orthographic Inconsistencies," and ending with "Miscellaneous." Feipel covered everything ". . . from fuzzy pronouns to misplaced subjunctives. E. B. White wrote of Feipel in his New Yorker The Talk of The Town essay in 1930 titled *Severest Critic*, "The author, on receipt of the letter showing up anywhere from two hundred to four hundred mistakes in the book, usually has to go to bed for a couple of days."

The list of authors receiving Feipel letters with his cryptic editing notes is noteworthy: Arnold Bennett, Galsworthy, Shaw, D. H. Lawrence, Cabell, Norman Douglas, Sherwood Anderson, Max Beerbohm, Ellen Glasgow, William McFee, Santayana, Havelock Ellis, Bertrand Russell. In ten years of gratuitous proof-reading all replied except Conrad. In Conrad's "*The Nigger of the Narcissus*" and "*The Rescue*" Feipel itemized a couple of hundred miscues. To Shaw Feipel was

Page Eight

"the prince of proofreaders." Galsworthy "humbly promised to mend his ways in the future." Feipel typed the letters himself. He simply listed the inconsistencies, without comment. For example: apple-tree (195); apple tree (7); Well-known (80); and well kept

(158). If a point of English usage was involved, he used a question mark, to show that he was open to reason: adam's apple? Should be Adam's apple.

Feipel was productive in this manner in the 1920's and 1930's. He would be apoplectic with the use of email today. Many authors offered to engage him to proof their manuscripts before publication. He did read scripts for Fannie Hurst, Llewelyn and John Powys, and Francis Hackett. Feipel estimated that the average well-printed book had one hundred and fifty mistakes. Would that there were more Louis N. Feipels today!

As an aside Louis N. Feipel teamed with Earl W. Browning to write the first manuscript of the *Library Binding Manual* in 1935 under the direction of the Joint Committee of the A.L.A. and L.B.I. Chicago: American Library Association. Pp. 74. Cost \$1.50. Repeated revisions resulted from criticisms and suggestions by librarians and binders.

In sum I have used the examples of Eric Partridge, Gyles Brandreth, and Louis N. Feipel to illustrate the importance of seeking *le mot juste*, the exact word, whenever we pick up pen and paper or click on "Microsoft Word."

- 30 -

Page Nine

References:

1. Brandreth, Gyles. *The Joy of Lex*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1980.
2. Brandreth, Gyles. *More Joy of Lex*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1982.

3. Goodman, Richard. *In Search of the Exact Word*. P. ix Oxford American Writers Thesaurus. Oxford University Press, 2004.
4. Rogers, Byron. *Eric Partridge and the Underworld of Language*. P. 49 *HORIZON*. American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc. Winter, 1976 Volume XVIII, Number 1.
5. White, E. B. *Severest Critic*. P. 47 *The Fun of It: Stories from the Talk of the Town* *THE NEW YORKER*. Edited by Lillian Ross. New York. The Modern Library, 2001.