

The Great Tease
By Lawrence S. Connor
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I am guessing that most of you who have delivered essays before the club have found that coming up with a title for your paper could be challenging, and especially if you followed the club's practice of teasing the secretary into guessing the subject of your talk with a clever title.

OK now. Let's have a show of hands if you struggled with your title?

Even the best writers struggle. Hemingway confessed that he made a list of titles for a book or story and then began eliminating them, sometimes all of them and starting over. His care paid off. His titles were cited often as being poetic. He sometimes lifted lines from the Bible and reworked them. His first major work, "The Sun Also Rises" came from a passage in "Ecclesiastes."

“One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth forever. The sun also riseth, and the sun goeth down...”

Many writers' titles came from the Bible, especially "Ecclesiastes," and from poems and, of course, Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. Here's a sampling:

"All the King's Men" was lifted from "Humpty Dumpty." Noel Coward's "Blithe Spirit" can be traced to Shelley's "To A Skylark." Thomas Hardy's "Far From the Madding Crowd" can be found in Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." Hemingway's "For Whom the Bell Tolls" owes its title to John Donne's "Meditations," and Donne's "Holy Sonnets X" was the source for John Gunther's book "Death Be Not Proud."

Steinbeck's "East of Eden" has biblical origins, as does Faulkner's "Absalom, Absalom" and "The Sound and the Fury."

The Literary Club has produced its share of tantalizing titles. I thought these titles surely induced members to pass on Monday

night football and come to Park Tudor. Here is just a sample – “Man Stands Alone” by Rowland Parsons in 2003. “Bikini Brief” was offered by Duncan Schiedt in 2005. “I Found the Place Very Sickly” by our secretary, David Vanderstel in 1994. “The Name of the Game” by Ray Hawkins in 1996, “Too Many Bumps” by Joe Hingtgen, and “From A to Z” by Dave Best in 2007. The titles of three papers in 2001 surely brought out the members -- “A Bench in Gorky Park” by John Carmack, “Ghost of a Chance” by George Geib, and “Guns and Butternuts” by Stephen Towne.

James Alexander Thom, one of the best living Indiana authors, has written a dozen published works, most of them historical fiction novels. He has tussled with his publishers over titles for his work, and generally he bends – reluctantly -- to their wishes, he admits.

Writers Digest commissioned him to write a book on how to write historical fiction. It came out last year with the title, “The Art and Craft of Writing Historical Fiction.” It is one of the best textbooks I’ve ever read — helpful, breezy and even a bit

humorous. He preferred his own title, “Once Upon a Time It Was Now,” but Jim said the publisher overruled him. He managed to salvage his title, though he said somewhat smugly. He used it as the title on the back cover over comments about the merits of the book. The comments wound up thusly: “With wit and candor, Thom’s detailed instruction, illuminating personal experience, and invaluable insights culled from discussions with other trusted historical writers will guide you to craft a novel that is true to what was then, when then was now.”

While he realizes that the aims of the writer and the publisher are not always the same, he understands that marketing is necessary, so he had little argument when the publisher changed the title of his novel, from “The End of the River,” to “Follow the River.”

“Follow the River” was one of two of his books that have been made into movies. The other was “Panther in the Sky,” which was filmed as “Tecumseh,” the Shawnee Indian chief who was the subject of the novel.

Jim began his writing career in 1964 when he was named business editor of The Indianapolis Star. He held that job for three years and then moved on to become senior editor of the Saturday Evening Post.

He said publishers listen to the merchandisers and he can't argue too strenuously. He said his preferred title for his novel about an American battalion fighting in the Mexican-American War was "Viva Riley." Riley was the leader of an Irish-American battalion that finally switched sides in the war because his troops were regularly mistreated by the Army's leaders. The book's publisher opted for "St. Patrick's Battalion." As would most authors anxious to get their work published and promoted, he acceded.

Jim said he usually has comes up with five or more working titles while writing a novel and he changes them as the book progresses.

Publishers aren't always correct. They didn't believe that William L. Shirer's title for his blockbuster World War II book, "The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich," would sell with that title, but Shirer, a famous World War II correspondent, held fast and Simon & Schuster finally published it. For a time, the book didn't sell well but in time it became one of the all-time best sellers.

Has anyone yet figured out what Samuel Beckett had in mind when he titled his play, "Waiting for Godot," back in 1952. Initially the play about two old geezers talking was dismissed as incomprehensible, and then later considered a landmark in world literature. Beckett reportedly said he enjoyed seeing many explanations for the play's title.

Joseph Heller originally wanted his book titled "Catch-18" but Leon Uris was working on one of his blockbusters, "Mila 18" so Heller looked for another title. He chose "Catch-11," but scrapped that one because a new movie, "Ocean's Eleven," was being shown. Finally Heller's publisher settled on "Catch -22" and

it fitted because so much of the book had to do with double events and episodes and names.

Scott Fitzgerald's came up with several titles before settling on 'The Great Gatsby.' He favored "Trimalchio" but his editor at Scribners, Max Perkins, talked him out of it. Fitzgerald came up with several other titles. Trimalchio was barely mentioned in Fitzgerald's book, but the old guy staged lavish feasts in first century Rome like Gatsby did two centuries later. Other suggested titles put Gatsby in various locales. He and Perkins went back and forth on other titles until Perkins finally steered him to "The Great Gatsby" despite Fitzgerald's doubts. Even when the manuscript was at the printer, Fitzgerald wanted it changed to "Under the Red, White and Blue," a reference to the "American Dream," which took a beating in the novel.

Edward Albee's play, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," a brutal but hilarious play about an educated couple who tear into

each other in front of guests, was a takeoff on the old saying, “Who’s afraid of the big bad wolf.”

Tennessee Williams said he got the title for one of his famous plays from a remark his father often said to his wife, “you’re making me as nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof.”

I think most viewers of the movie, “The Postman Always Rings Twice,” believed the title referred to the postman ringing twice to announce to the woman in the house that he was here and ready to come in and make love. But in the novel by James M. Cain there was nothing about a mailman and sex. The book’s original title was “Bar-B-Q” but the publisher didn’t like it. Cain ultimately came up with the title from an eccentric screenwriter who waited around for reaction from the producer of his first play. He’d wait for the postman to ring twice (postmen always ring twice) and Cain said he had the title for his book.

Verbal battles between authors and publishers are common, especially if the author has a history of writing successful books. But if the writer is just embarking on a writing career, he or she likely won't argue too strongly over the publisher changing the title of the book. After all, the author may fall in love with the title, but the publisher's goal is to sell the book.

The great crime novelist Raymond Chandler once wrote to his editor at Alfred A. Knopf, "I'm trying to think of a good title for you to want to change."

Britain's George Orwell's began work in 1943 on his classic novel, "1984" and he finished it in 1948. Orwell was seen as a latter-day Nostradamus., though he didn't agree with the critics that the book was a prophecy. He saw it as a satire on a new Dark Age. Some students of Orwell believe the title came from a reversal of the year it was completed -- 1948 -- to make it 1984. As time wore on Orwell advanced it to 1982 and finally settled on 1984 a time when the public thought the fascists would be taking over the country. .

There are instances where titles got changed – and for the best. “The Mute” was changed to “The Heart is a Lonely Hunter.” “This Point in Time” became “All the President's Men.” “The Red Badge of Courage” originally was title “Private Fleming, His Various Battles.” Would “Lolita” have sold if Nabokov had stayed with “The Kingdom by the Sea?” And who knows if “Moby-Dick” would have succeeded if it had gone with Melville’s original title, “The Whale”? In fact, the book initially was a monumental failure even with the new title.

James Boyd passed on several titles before settling on “Marching On”, a 1925 best seller. Three of those dismissed titles were “The Prisoner” “Deliverance”, and “The Grapes of Wrath “.

Lorraine Hansberry’s classic, “A Raisin in the Sun”, the first play by an African-American woman ever produced on Broadway, got its title from a poem by Langston Hughes. It went...

“What happens to a dream deferred?

“Does it dry up?”

“Like a raisin in the sun?”

During the 10 years that Margaret Mitchell was writing “Gone With the Wind” Scarlett O’Hara was always named Pansy, and the book’s title was “Tote the Weary Load,” among many others, including “Tomorrow is Another Day” which is the ending of the book. It was dropped because Mitchell learned of 16 other titles beginning with the word tomorrow.

An editor at Simon & Schuster didn’t care for the title of Sloan Wilson’s novel of the world of big business, “A Candle at Midnight.” But after Wilson’s wife referred to the men at Time and Life as “all those men in gray flannel suits,” the publisher liked it as a title for Wilson’s book, “The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit,”

No one seemed to like the title of John O’Hara’s “Appointment in Samarra,” based on an ancient legend about death

meeting a servant in Samarra, but O'Hara stuck with it and it became the title for his first novel. Somerset Maugham had used the title before O'Hara went with it.

Colors and numbers often are used in titles.

Sue Grafton started her series of crime novels featuring the gutsy private eye, Kinsey Millhone, as "A is for Alibi," then "B is for Burglar" and on through 20 or more of her crime novels.

Grafton had been a fan of John D. MacDonald's "Travis McGee" books that are linked by colors "The Deep Blue Sky" "The Quick Red Fox" and some 50 others.

We can credit editors of Publications International for this selection of unusual titles:

How to Avoid Huge Ships

Fancy Coffins to Make Yourself

The Making of a Moron

How to Make Love While Conscious

101 Uses for an Old Farm Tractor

Across Europe by Kangaroo

Suture Self

How to be a Pope, What to Do and Where to Go Once

You're in the Vatican.

In researching for this essay, I learned that the original title for "Mein Kampf" was "Four and a Half Years of Struggle Against Lies, Stupidity and Cowardice." Could Hitler be talking about our current Congress?

T. S. Eliot's work has been the source for many titles. Val McDermid, a British crime writer, must be an Eliot fan. Three of his novels used parts of at least three of Eliot's works for titles, including Eliot's "The Waste Land." That work has been a source for many other authors. Evelyn Waugh went to it for his novel, "A Handful of Dust." Waugh wanted "A Handful of Ashes," but his American publishers objected so they settled on "Dust."

I recently came across a list of some 80 titles that I put together once simply because I liked them as literature or probably because I just liked the sound of their titles. I may not even have read the books. Here's a few of them:

Pale Horse, Pale Rider

Drums Along the Mohawk

A Tale of Two Cities

A Passage to India

Goodbye, Mr. Chips

All Quiet on the Western Front

All the King's Men

A Stillness at Appomattox

Death Comes For the Archbishop

A Bend in the River

August is a Wicked Month

The Wind in the Willows

The Big Rock Candy Mountain

How Green Was My Valley

A pair by John Le Carre – The Spy Who Came in From the Cold, and Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy

And yet another pair, these by Hemingway -- A Farewell to Arms and For Whom the Bell Tolls

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Poetry deserves a mention here. How about these 19th century classics:

“How Do I Love Thee” by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Poe’s “The Raven”

Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade”

Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess”

Edwin Markham’s “The Man With the Hoe”

“The Hound of Heaven” by Francis Thompson

And enough of this. There are thousands of excellent poems.

And who am I to make the selection?

Here's to the long and short of this high-level literary exercise. For the shortest title let's go with Kipling's poem, "If" even though one of our own, Fred Farrell, could claim the title. His paper, delivered here last May, should have been considered. It was titled simply "O." But we're trying to keep this essay serious. So sorry Fred.

And for the longest I went to Guinness and learned that an Indian with an unpronounceable name -- Dr. Sreenathachary Vangeepuram -- set a new record with the title of his book running to 1,086 words. He set the record last year.

But his reign as the windiest title writer didn't last long. Along came an Indonesian artist named Damin Dematra, a big fan of President Obama -- he wrote eight books about him -- and the title of his latest book -- out this year -- has 2,019 words in its title.

Don't you all agree that this is a good time to wind this up?