

NIRVANA BLEACH



...and other tales
of wordy whimsy

Alan Paterson

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by

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About this book

Nirvana Bleach started out as a series of ‘newsletters’ (the inverted commas reflecting the fact that they weren’t letters, and none contained anything even remotely newsworthy) which my copywriting company ampers&, sent out to keep us in potential clients’ minds, and our details within easy reach.

They were subsequently repurposed (an ugly but serviceable word) as ‘nuggets’ on the website – www.wherewordswork.com – but the enthusiasm they seemed always to arouse seemed to justify a wider circulation. When the first ‘ebooks’ hove into view, even my luddite ears pricked up (my luddite tail giving a dignified but definite wag).

My unreserved thanks go out to those ‘soldiers’, both unknown and, where possible, identified, who fight the good fight for the fun of my favourite thing (after my family, naturally, and Cassie the dog): the English language.

I hope you enjoy reading these scraps of wordy whimsy as much as I enjoyed putting them together.

A handwritten mark, possibly a signature or initials, consisting of a stylized letter 'R' with a vertical line extending downwards from its base.

Nirvana Bleach

A friend recently told me about a couple of blokes he'd heard of, who'd taken a year out from their careers to seek out the fountainhead of spiritual wellbeing.

They spent time at a monastery. They went to Tibet and hung out with the Buddhists. They consulted shamans in South America and Zen masters in Japan.

Eventually they learned the secret from a druid at Glastonbury, who'd found it, he said, on the back of a bottle of bleach: "Stand upright in a cool place."

It don't mean a thing...

Bringing up young kids brings you face to face with natural appreciation for the rhythms, the poetry to be found in the everyday spoken word.

I think she was about four when she first brought home a one-potato-two-potato we'd never come across, but which is now by all accounts a commonplace in playgrounds throughout the land:

Ip dip doo
The cat's got flu
The dog's got chickenpox
And out goes you

Wonderful stuff! Once heard, how could you ever forget it? And how much of today's corporate communications would pass that test? Mind you, we'd be happier if she would forget the latest one picked up from 'the big girls' on holiday - aged six:

Oo ah
I lost my bra
I think I musta left it
In my boyfriend's car

Ah, the innocence of childhood, eh?

Enchanté

[A letter from the Times]

Sir,

Some years back I dated an American who was a graduate student at the Sorbonne. When in France, he would try to improve his conversation skills by attending American movies with French subtitles.

One, a Western, featured a cavalry officer and his men charging up a hill where the Indians and their chief waited silently. The officer greeted the chief who raised his hand and said: "How!" This was translated in the subtitles as "Enchanté".

Rhythm-master at work

*I'm not afraid of pussy cats
They only eat up mice and rats
But a hippopotamus
Could eat the lot of us*

Spike Milligan

Note the way the third and fourth lines, which 'ought' to have eight syllables apiece, have seven and then six - hence that stubbing your toe on a fold in the carpet feeling: the rhythm is key to the humour.

Zippedy and friends

There's not much I enjoy more than word play. There were some cracking examples recently, in Guardian correspondence on footballers' nicknames:

A few years ago, my club Man City signed a player called Kizito Musampa. He became known as Chris.

Let's not forget the former Everton player Neil Pointon, or "Disser". His early promise wasn't quite fulfilled.

Some years ago Sheffield Wednesday had a constructive midfield player called Gilles de Bilde, known affectionately to team-mates as Bob.

Leicester Tigers have this year played a centre who is simply known as "36". His surname is Twelvetrees.

...much travelled defender currently on loan at Newcastle, "One Size" Fitz Hall.

I particularly liked the "second-generation" nickname given to Carlos Eduardo Ventura, a Brazilian who played in Portugal and who was nicknamed Duda. That name, in turn, acquired a prefix – Zippedy.

Justin Edinburgh (Tottenham and England) was known as Leith.

Australian rugby player Matt Hilder is known as Waltzing.

Supporters of Grimsby Town (aka the Mariners) always refer to their custodian of the net as the Ancient Mariner, because he stoppeth one in three.

Through does not rhyme with though

I was fortunate enough recently to be introduced to the work of New Zealand (ex-Cambridge) journalist, Joe Bennett, who among many other things takes great delight in laying into those reasonable folk who periodically call for English to be made more phonetic.

Charging them with 'an innocent arrogance', he writes: *'Not only would the simplification of language distance the language from its roots, more importantly still it would sever the people of tomorrow from the wisdom of yesterday'*.

Arguing further that the acknowledged vigour and richness of English can be attributed directly to the diversity of its roots (and the histories they embody), from Anglo-Saxon through Latin to Hindi, he points out that:

*'Through does not rhyme with though, nor
with cough or bough or enough or thorough. I
find that delightful.'*

Who could find otherwise?

Angry raisins

John Steinbeck's widow once gave a reading of some of his works to a hall full of students in China. After she'd finished, she was approached by one of the audience, who told her that her husband's work was held in very high regard thereabouts, "particularly his novel 'Angry Raisins.'"

This brought to mind recent reports that English was set to decline rapidly over the next few decades in its status as a world language: currently second, after Mandarin Chinese, it would by mid-century be neck and neck with Spanish, Hindi/Urdu, and Arabic. First language to 9% of the world's population in the last century, it would by 2050 have that status among just 5%. So much for its all-conquering march to global domination.

Interestingly, however, its grip on the scientific community reportedly goes from

strength to strength - a trend doubtless echoed in other fields of human endeavour.

Indeed, I suspect its decline as a first language will be offset by a steady growth in its status as a second: it seems almost certain to become the lingua franca of the new millennium. In other words, English will become the new 'French' - expressed in Latin.

Language. It never disappoints.

Pineapple rain

I recently came across a mighty fine online survey of North American dialects, currently being undertaken by a Harvard professor, which reveals among other things that almost a third of Americans pronounce the word 'poem' as tho' it had but one syllable, that over 20% place the stress on the 'um' in umbrella, and that just 0.28% use the term 'baguette' to refer to 'a long sandwich that contains cold cuts, lettuce, and so on', over three-quarters preferring 'sub'.

The most disturbing revelation is that Americans have a variety of terms for 'the act of covering a house or area in front of a house with toilet paper' - the most popular being tp'ing, at 57.03%; most beguiling, that they also have many ways to describe 'what you call it when rain falls while the sun is shining', including 'sunshower', 'pineapple rain' and - most bizarrely - 'the wolf is giving birth'.

Call 911, Scooby

I recently came across a 'Top 15 terrible opening lines to romantic novels'. In reverse order...

He snapped my bra like a Concord taking off, and I was unhooked for love.

Yes, she was a woman who had once been a man, but she still knew how to flutter her eyelashes as well as those other hussies.

The heaving waves on the vast, ink-black ocean sent a salty spray over the proud bow of the three-masted ship, leaving beads of water on the exposed alabaster skin above the bodice of the tall, raven-haired woman who stood sobbing on the deck, her salty tears mixing with the storm-tossed sea.

Scarlet's hair was as red as my persistent canker sore.

Nicole let the silk blouse fall from her shoulders, wrapped her left leg around James and deftly cut some cheese.

Robert was new at this prison thing, and he felt frightened and confused. But the moment he laid eyes on #472825994, he became a prisoner of love.

Sam liked to hump.

Though flanked by two swarthy state troopers, Paula found her gaze drawn to the chubby saxophonist.

It was a dark and horny night...

Gentle cascades of vermilion poured over Daphne's heaving, lily-white bosom. 'Call 911, Scooby,' she breathed.

His flatulence reared up like a proud stallion.

Miss Savannah, is there room for both of us in that hoop skirt?' Chandler mocked with a slight bow and a sweep of his top hat.

Within minutes of their meeting, Representatives Beth (D-Florida) and Eric (R-Montana) lumbered into the bedroom where soon the unmistakable sounds of wet, naked bodies engaged in sexual congress were heard.

He smelled of pork. Rotting pork, in fact -- and lots of it.

And the worthy winner...

Omaha Beach, 0800 Hours: reinforcements from 2nd Panzer Korps arrive, their well-muscled young torsos glistening with mandew.

!

The poor old exclamation mark seems to be a bit 'Billy No Mates', as young Jamie might put it. Certainly the old BAA style guide I was updating was unequivocal: *'Do not use! It looks like you are shouting.'* The BBC's digital guide was hardly more enthusiastic: *'Exclamation marks should not be used for emphasis or to 'strengthen' jokes – they are meaningless.'* Shouting? Meaningless? Ouch!

Why do people dislike the exclamation mark so much? Simply, we suspect, because it is overused, and indiscriminately at that. Exclamation marks make writing look more exciting! More lively! More fun! And if you want to heighten the effect, why, just use three!!! A half-bright teenager could do it. Which is no doubt why many who do end up looking like half-bright teenagers, and why so many corporate guides, erring very sensibly on the side of caution, advise against doing it at all.

One thing is for sure: better to avoid it altogether than to use it badly. But that doesn't mean it can't be used properly. I use exclamation marks - occasionally. Sometimes for emphasis, BBC misgivings notwithstanding. If something is genuinely exciting and you want to drive the point home, an exclamation mark might be just the job. The fact that it's so often used in an attempt to inject life into the mediocre doesn't mean it has no place marking out the genuinely distinctive.

It can also be used for humour, to signal ironic intent, to 'take the hex off' something that might otherwise cause offense. It can be a way of ending a potentially risky sentence with a clear sign not to take offense (or think I'm fool enough to be in deadly earnest about this). Would the conclusion of the first paragraph of this piece have been better with a full stop?

Ultimately, as BAA endorsed for their updated guide, rather than an outright ban:

"Use very sparingly, only when genuinely called for, and never more than one."

Brain Drain Liquid Candy

Cybercandy.co.uk sell sweets from around the world. Spotting a can of 'Toxic Waste' in the window piqued my interest, so I investigated further, and what a wonderful array of names the world's confectioners have come up with...

Cosmic 21 Gummy Bears

Gum Gum 5

Hello Kitty Strawberry Biscuit Sticks

Milky

Twinkle

Bubblicious - Savage Sour Apple

Hubba Bubba Ouch! Bubblegum

Jumblo Bubblegum Balls

Wonka Nerd Gumballs

Airheads Extremes

Brain Drain Liquid Candy

Candy Ear Wax

Chuckles

Goetze Cow Tales

Hersheys Good and Plenty

Little Becky Jet Puffed Mini Marshmallows

Reeses Pieces
Almond Joy
Hubba Bubba
Clodhoppers Poppers
Hersheys Oh Henry
Moomin Gum
Funny Bubblegum
Salty Liquorice Cats

Send us your dollar

A message of thanks from a client for a gift copy of Ogilvy on Advertising encouraged a revisit. And what a mine of good English used well and interesting, entertaining and thought-provoking experiences, quotes and anecdotes it is!

For one example, the opening line employed by a Harvard professor introducing his students to life with the Borgias: *'Cesare Borgia murdered his brother-in-law for the love of his sister, who was the mistress of their father - the Pope.'*

For another, he quotes his all-time favourite headlines, including *'Send us your dollar and we'll cure your piles, or keep your dollar and keep your piles.'*

Let's facilitate access

Jargon. Terrible stuff. We all agree, don't we? Let's jettison the lot, and get back to clear, straightforward English. Who could disagree? But is it really so cut & dried? And if jargon really is as useless as this, how come it's so resilient?

The fact is, given the right context, jargon is not only justified - it's a positive boon. School governor meetings would take a lot longer if everyone always referred to School Improvement Partners and Performance & Assessment reports rather than SIPs and PANDAs. The shortform is just as clear - and far more concise.

Jargon comes under suspicion, of course, when 'we', in fact, means not just us, but them too, and they aren't quite as au fait with it as we are. While jargon can aid communication, all too often it does the precise opposite. To quote from a recent letter in *The Guardian*:

"...but when she says, "My job is to facilitate access to the libraries by everyone in the community, especially people at risk of social exclusion, some of whom might have literacy problems, suffer from disabilities or not speak English fluently", does she mean "all welcome?" How easy it is to slip into bureaucratic jargon."

Indeed. Confronted by such prose, you have to wonder who's actually being addressed. Certainly not the 'people at risk of social exclusion', who would surely find it impenetrable. Perhaps, you can't help suspecting, the real audience is the speaker's peers rather than the community at large; the real objective being to impress the former rather than to engage with the latter.

Which brings us to the nub: jargon has its place, as an integral part of the language which helps distinct groups communicate with each other more easily and efficiently than they otherwise could. But used, as it all too often is, not to communicate but to

impress, to self-aggrandise, even, on occasion, to exclude, isolate and belittle, it is little but a comfy redoubt for pomposity and arrogance and disdain.

Hence ampersand's basic philosophy on jargon, which is to view it as guilty until it proves itself innocent. I am, after all, in the business of communication - winning hearts and minds - not showing off, or bolstering fragile egos.

Hey hey it's the Twirlies!

There's nothing I like more than a new neologism. Pardon the tautology.

A cracker was recently brought to my attention. It seems that bus drivers on certain routes have taken to calling gaggles of early-morning old dears 'Twirlies'. Why 'Twirly'? Because, free bus passes only becoming valid at 9.30, they are in the habit of greeting drivers with the cry: 'Am I too early'?

Check out...

A couple of words-related sites:

bookfinder.com - invaluable for tracking down books you want to get hold of that haven't been on Amazon for a decade or three. If bookfinder can't find it, noone can. And fullbooks.com, featuring the full text of any number of books. Not that reading entire books on-screen is our idea of fun, but if as we do you often want to quote a bit from a book you don't have to hand, very often you can find it here, ready for copy 'n pasting.

Less useful, but kind of interesting, a few sites to bend your mind: blueballfixed, which mesmerisingly demonstrates a twisted but brilliant mind at work, sheeprace, where you can test your own mind's speed of reaction, and rotatingillusion, which is just, well, weird.

Speaking of exercise, put a bit of brainpower and a bit of effort together, and the results

can be kind of interesting, as in this [demonstration](#) that there's no business like snowbusiness, or questionable, to say the least.

Since I feel I ought to tickle your brain cells just a bit, a [talk](#) by Sir Ken Robinson, one of any number of presentations on ted.com which are both fascinating and thought provoking, and finally, there's no excuse for [misternicehands](#), which is neither.

Here's to the semi-colon

Revising and updating BAA's Style Guide, I endorsed (and explained) the semicolon's use, with caveats: *'Semicolons mark a pause longer than a comma, shorter than a full stop. Use sparingly. If you're not confident with them, use a full stop instead, splitting the sentence in two.'*

Yet no sooner had I 'saved' when articles by Trevor Butterworth in the FT and Ian Jack in the Guardian quoted all out attacks from growling Americans Donald Barthelme (*"Let me be plain: the semi-colon is ugly, ugly as a tick on a dog's belly, I pinch them out of my prose"*) and the Washington Post's Bill Walsh (*"The semi-colon is an ugly bastard, and I try to avoid it"*).

The gist seemed to be that the semicolon is somehow, to quote Jack, *"too effete, too genteel, too fuzzy a piece of punctuation to survive in such a rugged, demotic, plain-speaking country."* Gosh! Ugly, effete, genteel

and fuzzy. And here's me using 'em all the time. What does that say about me? Perhaps that I know how to...

- ...punctuate a list following a colon, as here, from that very Guide: "*So, choose the simple word, the one you'd naturally say: 'use' rather than 'utilise'; 'build' or 'make' rather than 'construct'; 'buy' rather than 'purchase'*".

- ...connect two separate but related ideas within a sentence, as here: "*As this example also shows, when quoted words form a complete and self-contained sentence, put a full stop before the closing quotation mark; when they do not, the full stop comes after the closing quotation mark.*"

Fact is, you could do almost the same job with other punctuation; but not quite the same job. The semicolon does exactly what it was designed to do - mark a pause longer than a comma, shorter than a full stop - and in a way nothing else quite can. Indeed, being deliberately provocative, I'd say Trevor Butterworth's rant would have benefited from one: ("*Let me be plain: the semi-colon is*

ugly, ugly as a tick on a dog's belly; I pinch them out of my prose").

So let's hear it for the beleaguered semicolon. There's nothing ugly about it. Nor is it effete, or genteel, or fuzzy. It's often abused, certainly. But it remains a valid and worthwhile tool; one which does a job no other mark quite does.

Savage protest

A couple of Guardian readers remember protests past...

At a demo in the 80s (Letters, 2 November) I saw a banner which said: "Clouseau fans against the bermb."

Dudley Turner
Westerham, Ken

My guitar-playing husband still has his "Music lovers against the bomb diddely-omb-bomb: bomb-bomb" badge.

Jenny Haines
Sandbach, Cheshire

The meaning of Tingo

A wee selection of definitions from 'The meaning of Tingo', a delightful book which trawls 'the collective wisdom of over 154 languages' for words and expressions which for the most part have no direct English counterpart - though on reading them, you often itch to create one. Such as:

Plimpplamppletteren (Dutch) - skimming stones across water

Areodjarekput (Inuit) - to swap wives just for a few days

Anaranjear (Spanish) - to throw oranges at someone

And at the risk of causing offense, may we caution all our valued readers against 'neko-neko' - an Indonesian word for 'one who has a creative idea that only makes things worse'...

PS Oh, and the meaning of 'tingo'? It is apparently an expression from Easter Island,

meaning *'to take all the objects one desires from the house of a friend, one at a time, by asking to borrow them'*.

Spring in the Bronx

Five or six years ago, I spent many fruitless hours trying to track down a half-remembered poem. Google found it in 0.21 seconds:

Spring in the Bronx
De spring is sprung
De grass is riz
I wonder where dem boidies is

De little boids is on de wing
But dat's absoid
De little wing is on de boid

Promise, large promise

"Promise, large promise is the soul of an advertisement."

Samuel Johnson

"Look after it well and it will outlive your grandchildren."

from the guide
accompanying my
birthday bonsai

Thanks again to all those whose contributions made my day, on many a day. I hope they've brightened up yours.

More such ponderings and related wordery can be found at www.wherewordswork.com.

Please feel free to email me at alan@wherewordswork.com with any thoughts. Potential contributions to Vol II particularly welcome!