

JOAQUIN THROUGH THE PANGRAM WINDOW

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Quick brown foxes and lazy dogs the world over were vexed recently by an incident that set the field of "accidental pangrams" agog, threatening to smash its beloved "window".

To explain, an *accidental pangram window* is a continuous string of naturally occurring text which contains all of the letters of the alphabet¹. Some have required that the text be in a printed work, while others have cited on-line examples. More on this later – first to the incident.

Apparently, a famous actor flipped his car and was helped to safety by a famous director, who was passing by quite coincidentally. That the two were both Oscar™-nominated this year added to the curiosity. But where the story became of interest not just to gossip-mongers but to logophiles was in the names of the two celebrities: JOAQUIN PHOENIX and WERNER HERZOG. Word enthusiasts will immediately notice that between them they contain the difficult JQX and Z. Surely a pangram would ensue. Sure enough...in the February 17th, 2006 issue of "Entertainment Weekly", a blurb on page 22 contains the sentence:

Then on Jan. 26, Her[zog happened by Joaquin Phoenix's car wreck and pulled the actor from the v]ehicle.

As I read this, my brain began the subconscious scan it habitually starts when encountering a promising core like "Joaquin Phoenix". Yup, A to Z - all there. A quick count confirmed that the letters between the brackets represent a short 61-letter pangram window – to my knowledge, a record-tying specimen!

Word Ways regulars will be familiar with the history of this record: In 1907 A. Cyril Pearson discovered a 65-letter window in Sarah Grand's 1897 work The Beth Book. This stood for 95 years until Mike Keith's 64-letter discovery in 2002. Others improved on the record, leading to Dave Moore's 61-letter discovery reported in the November, 2005 issue². And that, as far as I knew, was where the record stood as I sat reading that day. With Keith and Moore playing Sosa and MacGwire to Pearson's Maris, I was feeling quite like the Barry Bonds of pangrams³. So it was with disappointment that I received an email from the editor informing me that the February issue, which I had not received purely due to the vagaries of the U.S. mail, contained a slew of sub-60-letter examples discovered by Keith's computer search – the shortest measuring only 56. Not quite a steroid scandal, but certainly a letdown. So close to pangram immortality, I had to look deeper at the Phoenix/Herzog incident.

The keys to a short pangram window are: 1) a dense "core unit" with a number of less common consonants, including at least 2 of JQXZ and 2 of WFVBMPK, and 2) enough luck to include all the rest of the letters. The core of "Joaquin Phoenix", "from wreck by", and "Herzog" has only 31 letters, using 21 of 26 and leaving only the relatively easy DLSTV. To break the record, we

¹ Contrived examples, such as typewriter-testing text and discussions of pangrams themselves, are not counted.

² Dan Tilque had also discovered a 63 character window including 2 digits – technically 61 letters.

³ Readers, especially non-baseball-fans, will kindly indulge the strained analogy.

would only need a headline or sentence somewhere adding those 5 letters and less than 20 more. Piece of cake, right? (Maybe he was driving through veldts?) The *L.A. Times* headline was:

Joaquin Phoenix Pulled From Car Wreck by Director Werner Herzog. [54 -VS]

(The code means "54 letters, missing [VS]")

For an uncontrived headline this is pretty darn close to a pangram record. A Yahoo.com news page contained this listing as an update to a previous headline:

**Joaquin Phoeni[x Pulled From Car Wreck by Director Werner Herzog.
Previously: Joaq]uin Phoenix rises from car wreck."**

From the X in the first through the Q in the second, we have a record-breaking 55 letter window.

However with a little imagination we can do oh-so-much better (begin dream sequence... hypothetical examples are in *italics*). Note that "Car" and "Werner" are redundant, and if we also remove "Director" we are down to a cozy 37 letters needing only [STV]. Surely it is but a minor stretch to imagine:

TV's Joaquin Phoenix pulled from wreck by Herzog. [40]

A 40-letter pangram which is eminently plausible and starts to look like the made-up ones we see in books (ok, so he's a film actor - but we're in a dream sequence here...)

But we can do even better. Didn't they work together on a few projects? The critics loved the directing, but hated the acting. In fact, it was generally agreed that:

Joaquin Phoenix wrecked TV films by Herzog. [36]

Now we're getting somewhere. Given that Joaquin himself repeats 3 letters, our theoretical minimum based on his name would only be 29. Wait...it seems poor Joaq was a bit dazed - it wasn't Werner at all who appeared angelically to help him from his car, but rather a famous pollster frequently seen on CNN. And he wasn't so much "pulled" as "led":

TV's Zogby led Joaquin Phoenix from wreck. [33]

Considering that *Joaquin Phoenix wrecked Zogby's TV film [33]*, I'd say that was mighty nice of him. (End dream sequence.)

Yes, this Phoenix guy is surely pangram-friendly. A cursory scan of some of his other projects makes it very likely there is a record-smashing example 'printed' somewhere online. To wit, a Google search of "Joaquin Phoenix" and "The Yards" returns this title of a film-review page:

JoBlo's movie re[view of The Yards: Mark Wahlberg, Joaquin Phoenix, Charliz]e Theron... [47]

It contains a record-shattering 47-letter pangram window - if one accepts online examples. So depending on your standards, either the record is now 47, or the challenge remains.

As more online text becomes searchable, with much of it ephemeral, it would seem reasonable to track multiple records, perhaps one for a printed book, one for other printed media (anything from periodicals to peroxide bottles), and one for online text. There is something very elegant about a printed volume and less so about a Google link, but for pangram fans all are worth noting.

Holy Tango of Literature

In the May 1988 *Word Ways*, Australian logologist John Holgate anagrammed the names of twenty famous people into their putative last words such as

JAMES AUGUSTINE JOYCE “Jesus, I enjoy a cute mag”
(he is caught reading a Swiss girlie magazine by the visiting priest)

In *Holy Tango*, Francis Heaney asks what would happen if poets and playwrights wrote works whose titles were anagrams of their names. He presents a set of clever literary renditions. For example, William Blake could have written *Likable Wilma*, a celebration of the *Flintstones* comic strip:

Wilma, Wilma, in thy blouse
Red-haired prehistoric spouse,
What immortal animator
Was thy slender waist’s creator?
When the Rubble clan moved in,
Was Betty jealous of thy skin?

There are 44 more of these parodies, from Tennyson to Plath, from Mamet to Euripides. Published by Emmis Humor for \$12.99 (ISBN 1-57860-159-2), this paperback features droll illustrations by Richard Thompson and even a set of 20 commemorative stamps of ten authors!