“WHEN I HEAR THE WORD ‘CULTURE,’
I REACH FOR MY PUN!”

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Contrary to popular belief, puns are not all bad. Indeed, they can be intelligent, literate and witty. But a high-quality pun must meet several criteria. The best ones are: (1) original, (2) ingenious, (3) natural and meaningful rather than contrived or labored, and of course, (4) funny.

Following are a few specimens I’ve collected that may qualify.

When Martha Stewart was on trial, New York Times columnist Clyde Haberman reported on her arrival at the courthouse, where a group of supporters had assembled to greet her. “They included a man in a chef’s hat who stood with the others behind a metal barrier—one toque over the line.”

If you remember your Shakespeare from high school, you know that the three witches foretold that Macbeth would be doomed only when Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane—an ambiguous prediction that ultimately comes to pass. In a quip attributed to humorist Max Shulman, a lookout might have been posted to shout a warning: “Cheese it, the copse!”

George Gamow, a prominent physicist who led a parallel life as a cartoonist, light versifier, and author of children’s books, evidently possessed an impish sense of humor. In 1948, he collaborated on an article with a student named Ralph Alpher. He decided to add his colleague Hans Bethe’s name to the list of authors, just so it could be called the “Alpher Bethe Gamow” paper. (It’s also routinely cited as the “αβγ paper.”)

Recently, at an off-Broadway theater, a staff member appeared prior to the performance to apologize for the elevator being out of order. With seeming spontaneity, an audience member shouted, “Otis regrets!” The allusion, to a Cole Porter song not likely to be heard on American Idol, was not lost on this sophisticated crowd, which responded with appreciative laughter.

Scholar Joel Conarroe, reviewing a snarky book of reminiscences by Kingsley Amis, described the gossipy essays as “nasty, British and short.” And in a review of his own, critic and translator James Marcus referred to certain neglected minor authors as “canon fodder.”

Now, here are some of my own creations that—it is to be hoped—also meet the official criteria.
• Review of *The Ten Commandments*: “Chock Full o’ Nots.”

• What’s always missing when you buy a portable hot tray: A Salton battery.

• *The Compleat Bloodhound’s Manual: A Scent of Man.*

• Radioactive cereal: Curie-O’s.

• Neil Simon’s only unsuccessful play: *Chapter 11.*

• Lotion for pack animals: Llama Sheen.

• TV series about a stripper turned prosecutor: *Tarara Boom, D.A.*

• Cliché prison movie scene: hokey pokey.

• Macho line of frozen foods: Mean Cuisine.

• Combination artificial sweetener and tranquilizer: Equal/Librium.

• *Lawrence Welk’s autobiography: Square Roots.*

• Jesus’ Mom, entering his room, in exasperation: “Were you born in a barn?”

Then there was the occasion I spotted a health-oriented café displaying a sign reading “California Shakes.” Obviously, I thought.

Many of the above items appeared as my entries in the *New York Magazine* Competition. Modeled on a similar contest in the U.K.’s *New Statesman*, the Competition began in 1968 and over several decades built an enthusiastic following of contestants and readers. The challenges varied from week to week, but often called for punned submissions.

In 2000, the Competitions ended abruptly and without explanation, leaving many veteran entrants perplexed and disappointed. At that point, the number of contests totaled 973; one woman claimed to have entered all of them. For those interested, the most accessible sources are three compilations of Competition entries. Though all are out of print, copies are available via the usual Internet book-hunting methods.

Finally, I always relish pointing out to skeptics and scoffers that among the many virtues of puns is their power to change the world. Far-fetched? Consider this remarkable news report, filed from Beijing on June 4, 1991 by a *New York Times* correspondent:

“In a bold protest against China’s senior leader, Deng Xiaoping, students at Beijing University early this morning smashed nearly 100 glass bottles to mark the second anniversary of the military crackdown on the democracy movement. . . . In Chinese, ‘xiao ping,’ meaning ‘little bottle,’ is a homonym for Mr. Deng’s given name, and protesters often express their feelings about Mr. Deng by shattering bottles.”

Perhaps this incident contributed in some way to the subsequent increase in rights and freedoms in China. But the country still has a long way to go, and more puns might help.