THE GREAT OXYMORON CONTEST

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An oxymoron is defined by Willard Espy in The Garden of Eloquence (Harper and Row, 1983) as "a figure in which an epithet of contrary meaning is added to a word". He gives several examples, including "their love was bittersweet", "wise folly", and "a deafening silence".

This article summarizes the results of The Great Oxymoron Contest which I conducted recently for the pure fun of it. Entries came in from all over the country, 461 of the little devils in all. Reading them, I found that oxymorons often depend upon one's personal biases. Most entries were, not surprisingly, concerned with war, sex or politics. Many contained ethnic or sexual slurs - it was not a contest for the faint of heart. Italians and politicians were the most maligned groups, but others were not spared.

I note three especially poignant entries: language purist (coined after several entrants said they thought too many entries were not pure or strict oxymorons), perfect asshole (a comment on the author?) and useful oxymoron (I disagree -- all oxymorons are useful).

[Editor's note: Oxymorons maligning individuals (President Nixon) or those containing racial, sexual or national slurs (white basketball player, Polish literary society) have been excised unless the phrases are well-known ones. Among the remainder, preference has been given to oxymorons that are phrases in their own right. (A few uncommon phrases, in quotes, were noted in newspapers, seen as signs, or heard as announcements.) The entries on the list can be broadly divided into two classes: linguistic oxymorons which contain two words with opposite or conflicting meanings, and sociological oxymorons which wryly comment on various stereotypes (noted with asterisks). The most evocative of these were the three unmodified adjectives pure, unbreakable and permanent. Linguistic oxymorons grade imperceptibly into those which contain words different but not opposite, such as cow palace, science fiction, chairperson, rock candy, peppermint, cherry tomato, acey deucey and secretary-general; most of these have been eliminated. Readers of Word Ways will recognize linguistic oxymorons as self-contradictory terms, discussed by Philip Cohen and others in the August 1978 and later issues. Apparently, the idea came from a George Carlin record, "The Window Box".]

Bad

Limit

Wedded

Holy

Guest

Military

Cheer

Great

No-Fair

Happy

Free

Immaculate

Russian

War

Length

Horn

Safety

Mercy

Postal

Useful

Soviet

Rules

Jumbo

Maxi-

Four-

Crash

Real

Good

Soft-

Liquor-

A couple

Military

Accurate

Velvet

Positive

Permanent

Thunder

Sweet

Dull

Sharp

"Water"

Orderly

Honest

Go for

Motor

Quiet

Second


THE WINNERS

Bad sex *
Limited nuclear warfare *
Wedded bliss*
Holy war

Guest host
Military intelligence*
Cheerful pessimist
Greater Cleveland*
No-fault divorce*
Happily married*
Free lunch*
Immaculate Conception
Russian diplomacy*
War games
Lengthy briefing
Horny panda*
Safety razor
Mercy killing
Postal Service*
Useful oxymoron*
Soviet Republic*
Rules of advertising*
Jumbo shrimp

Long Island Expressway*
Middle East peace*
Virgin birth
Reagan's economic plan*

FINALISTS

Positively no!
Fresh barbecue
Balanced budget*
Clear implication
Small miracle*
Cheap drugs*
Perfect asshole
Language purist*
Vintage Sangria*
Short meeting*
Born again
Long term weather forecast*
Simulated genuine leather
Free sex*
Great Depression
Cold war
By reason of insanity
Eternal closeout (sale)
Sanitary war

THE FIELD

Maxi-thin
Four-color white
Crash landing
Real phony
Good cry
Soft-edged
Liquid crystal
A country club prison
Military music*
Accurate rumor
Velvet hammer
Positive objection
Permanent substitute (teacher)
Thunderous silence
Sweet sorrow
Dull knife
Sharp fool
"Water landing"
Orderly retreat*
Honest hookie*
Go for broke
Motor home
Quiet diesel*
Secondary primary target

Voluntary compliance
Sergeant major
Lieutenant general
Plastic wood
Light opera
Dry gas
Terrible quality
White chocolate
Definite possibility
Lead balloon
Fog lamp
Living death
Unmatched set
Reformed alcoholic*
One of a kind
Nuclear freeze*
Future history
Dry ice
Speed limit
Dry lake
Water wings
Successful attempt
Volunteer Army*
Inhumane person
License to steal
CIA ethics
Accurate economic forecast
Idiot savant
Genuine fake
Blatant innuendo
Political facts
Agree to disagree
Educated electorate
Innocent affaire
Fresh sour cream
"Original joe's #2" restaurant
Constructive criticism
Harmonious discord
Quiet revolution
Terribly pleased
Immensely slight
Closet claustrophobic
Antepost
Fast food
Growing small
Light heavyweight
Monopoly
Negative goodwill
Noyes
Pretty ugly
Creative discipline
Punk rock music
Divorce court
Peace offensive
Cardinal sin
United Auto Workers
Flat busted
Liquid gas
Original copy
Standard deviation
Death benefits
Diplomatic blunder
Drag race
Good grief!
Inside out
Spendthrift
Unbiased opinion
Unemployment compensation
Half-completed
Turn up missing
With your baby mine
Superette
A clean New York
Honest advertising
Old initiative
Alone in a crowd
Airline food
Unindicted co-conspirator
Frightfully good
Slightly pregnant
Living legend
Well-paid secretary
Uniquely common
"Klansman black-balled"
"NAACP whitewashed"
Military justice
Disco classics
Cheap trick
Rush hour
Baked Alaska
Liquid hydrogen
Loyal opposition
Perfect idiot
Management supervisor
Trust company
Established trend
Open mind
Home office
Stagnation
Human computer
Tragicomic
Manic depressive
Stillborn
Live on tape
Low raise
Living memorial
The lady is a tramp
Open secret
Loud whisper
Hard water
Word picture
Clear deception
Accidentally on purpose
Warm ice cream
Sexual neuter
False truth
Strictly creative
A definite maybe
Moral depravity
California champagne
Honest injun
Alphanumeric
Peace activist
Creative accounting
Independent auditor
Soft lead (pencil)
Dry mop
Sweet sixteen
Wake up dead
Beyond Crossword Puzzles

Not another book on crossword puzzles! Mike Miller’s soft-cover book with the above title, published by Prentice-Hall in 1983 for $5.95, covers familiar ground: how to solve diagramless and cryptic crosswords and double acrostics, and how to construct a crossword. For jaded crossworders, he recommends superghost, the license plate game (finding words with specified trigrams in proper order), and radar (a close relative of jotto, involving guessing a five-letter word by matching its letters against a series of trial words). For many more games of this sort, I recommend David Parlett’s The Penguin Book of Word Games (Penguin Books, 1982).

His book is written with unusual clarity, carrying the reader carefully step by step through the mechanics of solution or construction; I suspect that his expository skills were honed by the two courses he taught on crosswords at the New School for Social Research (in the Introduction, he engagingly describes what it was like to teach a course at the age of 15 to twelve students between 25 and 75).