

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".]

THE WINNERS

Bad sex *	Long Island Expressway*
Limited nuclear warfare *	Middle East peace*
Wedded bliss*	Virgin birth
Holy war	Reagan's economic plan*

FINALISTS

Guest host	Positively no!
Military intelligence*	Fresh barbecue
Cheerful pessimist	Balanced budget*
Greater Cleveland*	Clear implication
No-fault divorce*	Small miracle*
Happily married*	Cheap drugs*
Free lunch*	Perfect asshole
Immaculate Conception	Language purist*
Russian diplomacy*	Vintage Sangria*
War games	Short meeting*
Lengthy briefing	Born again
Horny panda*	Longterm weather forecast*
Safety razor	Simulated genuine leather
Mercy killing	Free sex*
Postal Service*	Great Depression
Useful oxymoron*	Cold war
Soviet Republic*	By reason of insanity
Rules of advertising*	Eternal closeout (sale)
Jumbo shrimp	Sanitary sewer

THE FIELD

Maxi-thin	Voluntary compliance
Four-color white	Sergeant major
Crash landing	Lieutenant general
Real phony	Plastic wood
Good cry	Light opera
Soft-edged	Dry gas
Liquid crystal	Terrible quality
A country club prison	White chocolate
Military music*	Definite possibility
Accurate rumor	Lead balloon
Velvet hammer	Fog lamp
Positive objection	Living death
Permanent substitute (teacher)	Unmatched set
Thunderous silence	Reformed alcoholic*
Sweet sorrow	One of a kind
Dull knife	Nuclear freeze*
Sharp fool	Future history
"Water landing"	Dry ice
Orderly retreat*	Speed limit
Honest nooker*	Dry lake
Go for broke	Water wings
Motor home	Successful attempt
Quiet diesel*	Volunteer Army*
Secondary primary target	Inhumane person

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

Buying sales	Horseman
Rapid transit*	Low interest rates*
Old New York	Customer service*
Antique reproduction	Stand down
Express Mail*	Locked open
Soft punch	Day dream
Love tap	Lucky accident
Bottoms up	Baby elephant
Darkness at Noon	Mild heart attack
Dimwit	Extremely seldom
Benevolent tyrant	Budget surplus*
Upbeat	The Sounds of Silence
Dull roar	Down escalator
Batman	Terribly cute
Painless dentist*	Baby grand
Honest politician*	Educated consumer*
Sure bet	Dry martini
Smart ass	Lady Chatterly*
Good loser*	Made-up facts
Black comedy	Perimeter Center (Atlanta)
Black light	Fighting Quakers
Split union	Wild boar [homonym]
Genuine vinyl	Confidential press release*
Natural naugahyde	Perfectly terrible
Cowboy	

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).