

RHYME-FORCED PROVERBS

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A few years ago, when my niece was in grade school, she recited for me some of the proverbs her teacher had been telling them. "But," she added, "I don't like all of them, because their words don't fit together." Not too sure what she meant, I asked her to tell me some that she did like. "Well," she volunteered, "'Birds of a feather flock together' and 'There's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip' and 'Haste makes waste'. But one I don't like is 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy'. And 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush' I don't like, either." Finally it dawned on me that what she preferred was proverbs that rhyme. "Oh, yes," she remembered, "rhyme is what I mean they ought to do."

So we decided to see if between us we could alter her non-favorites to make them rhyme somehow, even at the risk of changing their messages quite drastically. Some of them we had little success with, but the following, I recall, did meet with her approval:

"A watched pot never gets hot."

"Where there's smoke, there's Coke." (She justified this one by observing that people in restaurants and cafes often smoke while sipping their drinks.)

"Children should be seen, and not mean."

"A bird in the hand is worth two in the sand."

She did not quite approve of "A stitch in time saves nine" and after several unsuccessful attempts to improve it she cried out in frustration "A stitch in time has got to rhyme". In a few seconds she realized what she had inadvertently said, and we were glad to leave it at that.

She decided on "Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cake". When I wondered about that one, she pointed out that iron bars don't make a cake, but they can make a cage, so wasn't her version much better than the original? And it did rhyme, too. I had to back down in the face of her iron-clad logic.

"You can't judge a book by its look" - a fairly good approximation of the original.

She surprised me with "Look before you leap, think before you peep". But aren't adults always trying to silence children with "Don't let me hear another peep out of you"? I was going to suggest "Look before you jump, think before you grump", but hers stays closer to the sounds of the original.

In retrospect, I find myself still tampering with other common sayings that do not rhyme. I certainly could use some of her free-wheeling imagination, but in any case here are my latest inventions:

"All work and no ploy makes Jack a dull boy." (I think she used 'joy' to end her first half, which is a better thought than mine.)

"The devil finds work for those who shirk."

"Give us this day our daily pay."

"A penny saved is one behaved."

"He who laughs last won't catch on fast."

"When there's a will there's the pill."

"An idle mind's the devil's find."

"Music hath charms to soothe savage arms." (Perhaps this holds some hope for reducing international belligerence.)

"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor's fitness."

"Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's ox, nor his ass, nor anything of his that runs on gas."

Here is a final one of my niece's that comes to mind: "'Tis better to have loved a doll than never to have loved at all", which has an appropriate meaning for children, and another for certain contemporary adults.

QUERY

Murray Geller believes that it may be possible to take four different letters of the alphabet and find 24 five-letter Websterian words containing these letters in all possible orders. He found 20 for AIRT (TRIAd, AsTIR, RATIo, IRATe, ReTIA, TRAIL, etc.) but wonders whether other letter-combinations might be better. How about it, owners of the Webster Second or the OSPD computer tapes?