

LAST BUT NOT CEASED: Puns in Real-Life Situations

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A few years ago, I attended an elegant cocktail party at a beautifully furnished apartment in Manhattan. The event was sponsored by the Reason Foundation, the venerable libertarian think tank, and the invited guests were local supporters of the Foundation.

The hosts screened a short documentary video, the newest in a series narrated by Drew Carey. This episode focused on San Francisco hot-dog vendors whose businesses were threatened by regulators, ostensibly for reasons of health protection. But customers loved the popular “street food” and the draconian new regulations weren’t even being enforced. Thus, technically, all the hardworking vendors were lawbreakers.

At the conclusion of the screening, I raised my hand. The attentive audience members presumably expected an intelligent, thought-provoking comment. Instead, I said: “This is an outstanding film, but the producers missed an opportunity. They should have titled it “Black-Market Meat: It May Not Be Legal but It’s Tender.”

The remark generated surprised and appreciative laughter. Afterward, several people approached me with congratulations. “I’m a professional,” I mischievously cautioned. “Don’t try this at home!”

But maybe you *should* try it at home. In the February 2006 issue of *Word Ways*, I wrote an article called “‘Did You Just Make that Up?’ Puns in Everyday Conversation.”

This sequel presents more true stories of my own experiences deploying puns in real life. Originality can never be guaranteed, but I routinely do Internet searches. I sometimes discover something similar, but the writer didn’t get it right or know what to do with it. At any rate, I independently created all of the following puns—some of them years or decades ago—and found no matches. Mostly.

- Strolling in my neighborhood one fine day, I noticed a doorman with a huge and absurdly extravagant mustache. Reporting the incident later, I said, “It isn’t just a handlebar; it’s the entire bicycle!”

- Last year, I was in search of a gift for a hospitalized friend. I visited a nearby Borders, just prior to the unfortunate demise of that chain. I quickly found a suitable volume, but it had a few nicks and tears and other signs of abuse. Inquiring at the information desk, I was informed that this was the only copy in stock. “I don’t want to give my friend a battered book,” I complained. “Only onion rings should be battered.”
- Arguing with someone who unreasonably refused to agree with my position, I finally threw up my hands and exclaimed, “There are none so blind as those who will not *jsi!*”
- At fancy restaurants, waiters routinely clean debris from tables at the end of meals with a device designed for that purpose, sometimes called a sweeper or scraper. After witnessing one such procedure, I remarked to my companion, “If he comes back and does it again, it’s called the Second Crumbing.”
- Recently, I assisted with a fundraising campaign. At one point, we had many small donors, but they had not contributed enough in total to meet the goal. I told the sponsor, “We desperately need to find a few fat cats—or at least chubby kittens.”
- Acquaintances familiar with my interest in wordplay often forward puns from e-mails and websites. Over the years, I’ve received one particular compilation of humorous neologisms (you’ve probably seen it, too) at least 30 times. I always thank the sender, and then puckishly add: “Like Ms. Hawn, this list is an Olden Goldie.”
- Occasionally, I hear an assertion followed by a hasty qualification, such as, “Jim graduated in 1995—if memory serves.” I’ll respond: “... or only stands and waits.”
- For tax reasons, I made a contribution to a theater festival 10 months in advance. By the time the event rolled around, I had forgotten the benefits I had been promised. I phoned the organization and a staffer reminded me that, as a member, I was entitled to four free tickets. “Didn’t you check your package?” he asked. Fully aware of the double entendre, I riposted, “I didn’t even know I *had* a package!”
- After delivering a presentation last fall, I sent a message to friends who were unable to attend. The report concluded: “A good time was heard by all.”