

PNEUMONULTRAMICROSTUFF

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In 1932, Frank Scully wrote Fun in Bed, a book of light-hearted anecdotes and puzzles for the diversion and amusement of the hospitalized patient. Its success led to More Fun in Bed and in 1936 to Bedside Manna, the Third Fun in Bed Book (Simon & Schuster, New York). In its 202 pages are stories, puzzles, cartoons and witty material from many sources, all to soothe the soul of the suffering inpatient. On pages 87-88 is the Scully Spelling Bee where the author refers to Greg Hartswick, who was, apparently, a world-champion speller, and goes on to state:

He'd never get any competition from us, that's sure, though pronouncing, let alone spelling, a 44 letter word like:

Pneumonoultramicroscopic silicovolcanokoniosis, a disease caused by ultra-microscopic particles of sandy volcanic dust, might even give him laryngitis.

The bulk of these two pages contains 74 misspelled medical words (syphillus, vaxinate, caster oil, etc.) and challenges the reader to spell them correctly.

The "44 letter word" found its way into the Addendum to the Second Edition of Webster's New International Dictionary, in the form of a 45-letter word: PNEUMONULTRAMICROSCOPICSILICOVOLCANOKONIOSIS, and as such stands as the longest word in the Webster dictionaries. It is interesting and perhaps ironic that the original and only literary use of this word has two misspellings, and appears in an article on medical spelling. It is a 44 letter word because of the fragment -MICROSOPIC- instead of -MICROSCOPIC- and it is further incorrect in using -VOLCANA- for -VOLCANO- later in the word.

The 1982 Supplement (Volume III, O to Scz) to the Oxford English Dictionary records:

PNEUMONULTRAMICROSCOPICSILICOVOLCANOCONIOSIS (-KONIOSIS), a factitious word alleged to mean "a lung disease caused by inhalation of very fine silica dust" but occurring chiefly as an instance of a very long word.

But consider: if a nonce word is consciously created, and used only once by its creator, can it be said to have been misspelled? The learned lexicographers may have had good linguistic reasons for escalating Scully's brainstorm to 45 letters by "correcting" the two errors, but Webster's was on pretty thin ice all along in welcoming this monster to its pages. In the same book (page 25), Scully give us several other nonces: Nira (a serum), Niralogy, and

Pastvoron 515 (a wonder-drug named for Pasteur and Voronoff, the latter of whom achieved fame for transplanting monkey glands into people to rejuvenate them), all of which appear to have been correctly spelled, but not found worthy by Websterian seers.

We may agree that P-44 (or P-45) is a word deserving annulment from the English language. Yet, if reference is made to it, there appears to be a better case for using its original "incorrect" form than for the P-45 we all know and love.

ALLUSIONS

*This reference book is based on the premise that most dictionaries fail to report cultural, literary, Biblical or historical allusions: calling an improbable economic success a **Horatio Alger** story, or characterizing a good-hearted scatterbrain as an **Edith Bunker**. In this book, such allusions are organized into 712 categories, or themes, from Abandonment and Abduction to Zeal and Zodiac. Most allusions consist of the titles or characters of well-known books, plays, comic strips, radio and television programs, or historical places, organizations or events that epitomize the category under consideration. Occasionally, mottoes or eponyms also appear. The piquant flavor of this work is best captured by examples:*

CONSERVATISM: George Apley, Conservative Party, Daughters of the American Revolution, elephant, John Birch Society, laissez-faire, Luddites, Republican Party, Daddy Warbucks

MISERLINESS: Collyer brothers, Monsieur Grandet, Hetty Green, Harpagon, Silas Marner, Trina McTeague, Plyushkin, Scrooge

DIMWITTEDNESS: Gracie Allen, Jethro Bodine, Bullwinkle, Edith Bunker, Benjy Compson, Lou Costello, Bentley Drummle, Elspeth, Happy Hooligan, Jeff, Stan Laurel, Moose, Joe Pa-looka, Barnaby Rudge, Zero

Each entry is amplified by a sentence or two giving the historical or literary setting.

This Gale Research Company book, edited by Laurence Urdang and Frederick Ruffner Jr., was reissued in 1986 for \$68.