

SEX, AMERICAN CITIES AND PALINDROMES

HOWARD RICHLER

Cote St. Luc, Quebec, Canada

In my May 1991 *Word Ways* article on composing palindromes, I discussed how to make palindromes by starting with a central core and moving outward. Thus, the mini-palindrome NOT ON can be expanded into STRESSED? NOT ON DESSERTS! because the balance between stressed and desserts (stressed in reverse) maintains the palindrome's equilibrium.

This construction process can be reversed. Instead of starting at the middle, a palindrome can be made by starting at the extremities and working inward.

Many words when reversed spell other words. The word semordnilap (palindromes reversed) has been proposed to describe such words. Thus, evil is a semordnilap because it becomes live when reversed. Likewise, red rum is a semordnilap because it transmogrifies into murder when reversed.

Three American cities that fit our semordnilap bill are Tulsa, Miami and Boston. Tulsa has the dubious distinction of spelling a slut when reversed. Thus, we start off with a sentence that looks like this: A SLUT ... TULSA. If we add palindromic words like SEES or DID we get A SLUT SEES TULSA or A SLUT DID TULSA. Like Napoleon, whose life was altered at Elba (ABLE WAS I ERE I SAW ELBA), our slut can also be transformed by Tulsa: A SLUT WAS I ERE I SAW TULSA. If we desire our slut to exercise choice without a total life-change, we get A SLUT NIXES SEX IN TULSA.

Miami also yields us some palindromic fruit. We start off with I MAIM ... MIAMI or conversely MIAMI ... I MAIM. Here are two possibilities for finishing our palindrome: I MAIM FOE OF MIAMI (spoken by a Dolphins linebacker) or I MAIM NIDAL LAD IN MIAMI (referring to the youth wing of the terrorist organization Abu Nidal).

Boston spelled backwards affords us two possibilities, not sob and not S.O.B. The addition of the word DID to the first scenario yields us BOSTON DID NOT SOB. Using the almost palindromic Chief of Staff (John) Sununu in the second case gives us BOSTON: SUNUNU'S NOT S.O.B. (a possible headline in a Boston newspaper).

Alas, I have digressed from palindromic sex to palindromic American geography. The word SEX is an acrobatic palindromic word. Aside from A SLUT NIXES SEX IN TULSA, it provides us with:

SEX AT NOON TAXES
SEX AT MY GYM TAXES
SEX-AWARE ERA WAXES

SEX ALERT RELAXES
 SEX? EVEN OZONE VEXES!
 SEX? EVEN A DANE VEXES!

Shakespearean archivists have retrieved Hamlet's lost palindrome (Act 1, scene 2, 142-146). It occurs in Hamlet's first soliloquy after the phrase 'Frailty, thy name is woman', in which Hamlet is lamenting his mother's turpitude:

SEX OF LEPERS REPELS FOXES
 RACE? NO SEX IF REVOLT; A FAT LOVER FIXES ONE CAR
 SORE SEX IN A TOYOTA NIXES EROS

If this last statement is being told to a lass named Naomi, we could expand it to:

NAOMI, SORE SEX IN A TOYOTA NIXES EROS, I MOAN

The aspiring palindromist should make a list of commonly used semordnilaps like LIVE-EVIL, REVELED-DELIVER and SAW-WAS. To this list sprinkle in some palindromic verbs like SEES, DID and DEIFIED, and add a soupçon of palindromic modifiers like NOT ON and SAID I AS. You now have some of the ingredients necessary for cooking up some palindromes. Bon appetit!

THE CAMBRIDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF LANGUAGE

This is the title of a book by David Crystal, originally published in hardcover by Cambridge University Press in 1987, and now (1991) in paperback. This book offers an overview of the entire range of language, from linguistics research to wordplay, from the acoustics of speech to the psychology of reading, from language dysfunction to the acquisition of language by young children, from translation problems to artificial languages. Yet it is written in a style accessible to the layman, relatively free of jargon, and full of illustrative examples (presented as sidebars on nearly every page). Much emphasis is placed on examples from languages other than English; one is continuously reminded of the enormous diversity of the world's languages and the rules governing their use.

Naturally, little space can be devoted to any given topic. I turned to word games, finding a two-page spread defining and illustrating acrostics, chronograms, grid games (Scrabble and relations), cryptic crossword clues, word squares, anagrams, lipograms, palindromes, tongue-twisters, rebuses, univocalics, doublets (word ladders), and pangrams. Although one might wish for more, this nicely conveys the flavor of the subject. And, consider that important topics such as grammar and semantics can be spared only 11 and 7 pages, respectively! Even dictionaries are disposed of in only 4 pages.

This book can be read in two ways: as a (brief) answer to a particular language question, or as a delightful browse.