ASSORTED PALINDROMES

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Palindrome writing is a quirky, challenging discipline that has never attracted the sizable following it would seem to deserve. One reason for that may be that most people find a way to lead perfectly fulfilling lives without ever stopping to consider what reversible combinations the twenty-six inhabitants of the alphabet are capable of arranging themselves into. Another reason is that those who might have been sympathetic to the palindromic cause have been embarrassed and alienated by the bad palindrome writing that always seems to flourish. I suppose it would be unrealistic to imagine that I could persuade more than a handful of readers of the versatility and power of this reversible art. Still, I hope that these few observations about craftsmanship, along with some samples of my own work, will prove instructive and entertaining.

If one has read any of the collections of palindromes published in recent years, one might very well conclude that it is all but impossible to write a palindrome without using acronyms, abbreviations, proper nouns, or questionable exclamations. In fact, quite the opposite is true, and the serious palindromist will venture into this territory only with a specific purpose in mind. It would be a mistake to write Marge, let's telegram - unless one had received a specific request to build a palindrome around the name Marge. Often, one's early efforts will rely heavily on brand names, abbreviations, the names of people one knows, that sort of thing (in the way that one will often become proficient in the obscenities of a foreign language before one has achieved anything like a mastery of that language). As one acquires skill and range in palindromizing, however, one would do well to leave these unfortunate habits behind.

Another mark of inexperience or poor training is the tendency to compose palindromes with an even number of letters. With one exception, this practice is unacceptable and should be avoided. The palindromist's job is to find the middle and hide it; doubling in the middle only calls attention to the palindrome. When one sees the word straw, for example, one should not think straw warts - the double W makes the reversal too obvious. Instead, one should think straw arts. The palindrome turns effortlessly on the single W, which acts as a kind of removable hinge. I say removable because one may insert other letters in its place, creating straw arts or strap arts. The exception I mentioned above, in which an even number of letters is acceptable, happens only when the doubling occurs naturally. In turn off on rut, the double F is just fine (you would have a hard time spelling off without optimis­

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it). We might say that the palindromist should feel free to turn off on rut but should change direction before deciding to turn at tan rut.

I began writing palindromes in 1981, and it took about five years for me to become a capable practitioner of the invisible craft. It was another five years before I mastered the automatic palindrome: a short palindrome (up to 25 letters or so) written without pen or paper (automatically, if you will). But the beginner, who may be discouraged by the prospect of a decade-long apprenticeship, should bear in mind that I was probably a slow learner. I continue to evaluate the palindromic potential of almost every word I say, hear, read, and write—it is, after all, the only way to stay in shape—and I write hundreds or even thousands of automatic palindromes a week. For the most part, though, I spend my time searching for palindromic homonyms and working on special projects, as illustrated below.

When I was toiling away at Borders Book Shop in Philadelphia, a co-worker asked if I had ever written an erotic palindrome; I hadn’t. Before I began work on this one, I had never attempted a long palindrome on a specific theme. To make it a bit more appealing visually (and to throw the reader a curve), I set it up to resemble a poem and gave it a convincing subtitle. It seems to be that its chief virtues are a decidedly romantic opening sentence and a very strong finish.

TO HER I FLEE (a semi-erotic verse)
To her I flee; fine position. Trap all up,
I won hat, last ewe, kilt, rat sets, a tooth,
Self, no wars. I, lion, a leg? Nay.
Men impugn in rub mill: animal spirit,
Is sap a spill? Later. I fall asleep
Till it’s a help mission. On back!
Curtsey fixes her, eh? Sex if yes;
Truck cab, no. No is simple. Ha! Still, it peels,
All afire, tail lips, a passion stiff in it.
Now! In! I am on you! Be fast! I rip!
Slam in all! I’m burning up! Mine! My angel!
An oil is raw on flesh, too; tastes tart,
Like wet salt. Ah, now I pull apart!
No, it is open. I feel fire: hot.

When my friend Tim bought his first new car, a Nissan Maxima, I wanted to write a palindrome in honor of the event. I knew I would use Tim and Nissan, and I chose the term U.S.-made to add a touch of automotive honor of the event. I knew I would use Tim and Nissan, and I chose the term U.S.-made to add a touch of automotive authenticity. (I know nothing about things automotive, but it occurred to me that the nationality of a car is always a topic for discussion.) What is noteworthy about this palindrome is that it’s more or less about the same subject from start to finish. It’s extremely difficult for me to maintain that kind of control when I’m speeding past the hundred-letter mark.

FOR TIM
One car, a made
I raced, a footrace
I like to read, as sort of to keep the mind
it works a three consecutive
I
Don’t nod

Every line a color! When the middle word one might sort of to keep the color. I

29 SHADES
RED LONE
Red? I won't.

RED OCTET
Red, nude

RED URN
Red? No.

RED LESS
Red

RED NAGS
Red? No.
FOR TIM AND HIS NISSAN (a cautionary palindrome)

One car, too fast? I see. Speed trap! I saw a limit sign, I?
U.S.-made car in rut; one damn ass in a Nissan made no turn.
I raced. am suing. Is Tim? I? Law, as I part deep, sees it's
a footrace. No!

I like to think of the following palindrome, The Sleepless Night,
as sort of a palindromic haiku, though there's an extra syllable
to keep the reader from mistaking it for the genuine article. While
it works as a continuous palindrome, it's actually made up of
three consecutive palindromes (and the first and third are identical).
Something like eye level eye is a similar construction on
a smaller scale.

Don't nod
put on pot
sonic cup
pace
cappuccino
stop
not
up
don't

Every line a different palindrome! Every palindrome the same
color! When one is working on a palindrome, one is standing in
the middle and looking to the left and right. Therefore, though
one might be determined to build a palindrome around a certain
word, one would rarely see at the outset how the palindrome would
begin. There are, however, a few words that are particularly
useful for opening or closing—words that begin and end, I like
to say—and red is one of them. These are

49 SHADES OF RED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RED LONE MEN OLDER</th>
<th>RED NEON'S NO ENDER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Red? I won't No! Wider.</td>
<td>Red ribbons, a snob birder.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>red royal play order</td>
<td>red arts trader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RED OCTET CODER</td>
<td>RED DAY ADDER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red, nude, bed (under).</td>
<td>Red light, a bath gilder.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>red a wader</td>
<td>red ice cider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RED URN RUDER</td>
<td>REDDESS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red? No. Ponder.</td>
<td>red raw awader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>red nest sender</td>
<td>Red? Now I wonder.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RED LESS ELDER</td>
<td>RED LOFT FOLDER</td>
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<tr>
<td>Red damsel, an ale's madder.</td>
<td>red a rapt parader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>red robots to border</td>
<td>Red? I? Red! A derider!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RED DEBT BEDDER</td>
<td>RED DASH SADDER</td>
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<tr>
<td>Red? I snip insider.</td>
<td>red dot odder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>red eel bleeder</td>
<td>Red label, I file balder.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RED NAGS GANDER</td>
<td>RED NETS TENDER</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This is the title of a delightful addition to Dell Publisher's Intrepid Linguist Library, based on a weekly newspaper column by David Grambs. Although he makes most of the old familiar stops on the word-usage-and-abusage railroad, he comes up with fresh viewpoints. Like most pop linguists, he deplores solecisms like flaunt/flout or hopefully-but he reminds the reader that language arbiters are far from united on what constitutes "bad" English, and furthermore that one should study the often-surprising history of an apparent misusage before taking a stand. He resurrects little-known words that have fallen out of favor (remember his 1986 book on Dimboxes, Epopts and Other Quidams?), organizing several chapters around related ones: body language, ancient obscenities, words that look like other words (technology, original), words of death and torture. He wittily dissects the jargon of politicians (oil-of-sanctity phrases), of athletes responding to reporters' questions (proflatitudes), of movie critics (puffcorn) and of cereal box designers (cereal killers). And, speaking of jargon, what do conversational platitudes like "to tell you the truth" really say? How many other language mavens tell you about Pedro Carolino's hilarious Portuguese-English phrasebook? He recognizes the existence of logology in a chapter on humorous typos. Terming it "ingenuity and pranksterism at the purely abecedarian level", he notes that "true adepts suspend...reading-for-sense for these pursuits" but "it must be conceded...there's a kind of genius in re-creational linguistics." To keep readers on their toes, he deliberately misspells one word in each chapter, identifying it in the subsequent one. For $5.99, how can you go wrong?