

ASSORTED PALINDROMES

BARRY A. DUNCAN
Cambridge, Massachusetts

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 **stray 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

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,
 Safe buoy, no main. I won't. In if fits? No.
 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, tall 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 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 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
 nod.

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 49 palindromes were chosen from a list three times that many, and there are a lot more.

49 SHADES OF RED

RED LONE MEN OLDER
 Red? I won't No! Wider.
 red royal play order
 RED OCTET CODER
 Red, nude, bed (under).
 red a wader
 RED URN RUDER
 Red? No. Ponder.
 red nest sender
 RED LESS ELDER
 Red damsel, an ale's madder.
 red robots to border
 RED DEBT BEDDER
 Red? I snip insider.
 red eel bleeder
 RED NAGS GANDER
 Red? No wonder.
 red lock colder

RED NEON'S NO ENDER
 Red ribbons, a snob birder.
 red arts trader
 RED DAY ADDER
 Red light, a bath gilder.
 red ice cider
 REDDER
 red raw awarder
 Red? Now I wonder.
 RED LOFT FOLDER
 red a rapt parader
 Red? I? Red! A derider!
 RED DASH SADDER
 red dot odder
 Red label, I file balder.
 RED NETS TENDER

red debases a bedder
 Red? No. Yonder.
 RED LOGS GOLDER
 red nice cinder
 Red. Rumble. Help! Murder!
 RED OR ROCK CORRODER
 red name demander
 Red? Negate. Get a gender.
 RED ROSES ORDER

red lobster frets bolder
 Red! No. Fonder.
 RED A FADER
 red lewd welder
 Red is no. Consider.
 RED DULL UDDER

JUST ASK MR. WORDWIZARD

*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 misuse before taking a stand. He resurrects little-known words that have fallen out of favor (remember his 1986 book on Dimboxes, Eopts and Other Quidams?), organizing several chapters around related ones: body language, ancient obscenities, words that look like other words (tecnology, orignal), 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 (puff-corn) 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 recreational 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?*