

SIGN HERE

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I've had more than 500 poems published. Of course, they've been mostly in obscure publications, and by the time I ticked them all off to you they would have disappeared from view. I write a weekly column for our local newspaper, but based on the feedback (none), I wonder if anyone is reading it. Occasionally I get an honorable mention or even a first prize in the New York Magazine Competition and someone might tell me, "Hey, I saw your limerick in The New Yorker." O.K., it's not a limerick (not usually) and, it's not the The New Yorker.

So what we have is lots of writing and no one reading. That is, until, the sign. It sits there on my front lawn in its rough-hewn home-made glory, an 8-by-11 piece of plyboard attached to 3-foot pole and stuck in the pachysandra behind the front lawn. The sign stapled to it never fails to elicit favorable comments from passers-by. And even drivers-by.

It all began a couple of years ago on Halloween.. All my neighbors were outdoing one another in front lawn decorations. Beside the usual witches, jack-o'-lanterns and gravestones there were over the top (and sometimes on the roof) enhancements: animated skeletons, mist rising from the ground, grave holes and eerie music. And that was just from the guy next door.

I wanted to contribute even though I planned to turn out the lights on Halloween, retreat to an upstairs study and hope to be spared the incessant pounding on the front door from 6 to midnight.

Anyway, in the spirit of the holiday and because it didn't take too much effort, I printed out a sign on my computer, lower-case, Geneva font, size 100, landscape direction, centered horizontally and vertically, that said simply, "boo." I stapled it to a hastily put-together holder, stuck it in the ground and forgot about it.

Until the next day, that is. One of the neighborhood kids, wheeling by on his bike, shouted out to me, "Hey, Mr. Conti, I like your sign." Aha, I thought, demographics. I've found my reading public. But then, later on, a young mother pushing her stroller and two children stopped on the sidewalk, looked, smiled, and continued on. A couple of days later, an elderly couple stopped on their daily walk, considered the sign and moved on. I don't know if they subsequently smiled but at least they didn't frown.

Halloween came and went and it was time to take down the sign. But then I had another inspiration. So in anticipation of Thanksgiving, "gobble" replaced "boo." That would be that, I thought.

Enough is enough. But "gobble" also caught on and I was beginning to wonder if my neighbors needed a life. Or a Christmas present. For the month of December they got one, with a sign that

said "ho." And that, finally, should have been that. We had celebrated the year-end holidays, my neighbors and I. It was fun, but it was done. The sign was coming down.

Or so I thought. Well, the new year was coming, so why not "new"? And why not "shadow" for Groundhog Day? A tradition was quietly asserting itself and was beyond my control. Once, the sign was stolen. Aha, I thought, a sign! Someone has made a critical comment and I was heedful. My readers wondered where the sign was and why didn't I just make a new signpost. Good questions. I thought I could ponder them for a few months until it was forgotten. But no. One of the drivers-by made me a nice new sign holder and I was back in business.

The words weren't coming thick and fast, but I managed a new one every couple of weeks: "hugs" for Valentine's Day); "rare" (in June); "medium" (it kind of follows), "well-done" (it figures); "burnt" (during a hot spell); "greener" (complete with arrow pointing to my neighbor's lawn); "acornucopia" (made that one up). My latest was "May oui." O.K., it's two words and it's June already--time for "rare" again, I guess. Or maybe the next one will be "mai non."

I've had neighbors knocking on my door in the evening to express appreciation for the sign. I've been given gifts of chocolates and chrysanthemums. Every once in a while my wife will come in from her mowing (she says she likes to do it) to pass on a new compliment for the sign. When giving directions to my house, I'm interrupted with, "Oh, yes, you live in the house with the sign."

I don't know if there's a Pulitzer Prize for sign making, but for a writer it beats anything I've done for gratification and reader appreciation. I have a feeling I've tapped into something. (A universal need for a sign on my front lawn?) Will I continue making my signs? In a word, yes.