

FADED DINOSAURS AND CLOSED PUPPIES More Mixed and Mashed Metaphors

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David Carr, the prominent journalist who died earlier this year, wrote in one of his final columns: “Contrast that with Verizon, whose effort to dip a toe into publishing turned out to be all thumbs.”

Mixed metaphors are usually errors. In this case, however, Carr used the device intentionally for effect.

In a just-published book, my friend John Clifton emphasized that his choice of words was premeditated: “To wildly mix a metaphor, the shotgun approach is simply not putting all your eggs in one basket.”

And I’ve deployed the device humorously in e-mail correspondence: “He’s on the lowest rung of the food chain.” “They’ve all gone to that great newspaper graveyard in the sky.” I’ve also puckishly penned “double-barreled punch,” “three rounds to the finish line,” “forging a new income stream,” and confessed to being “in the dark with both hands tied behind my eyes.”

Alas, this phenomenon is more commonly unintentional. In previous *Word Ways* articles, I’ve distinguished between classic *mixed metaphors*, which are characterized by incongruous or impossible or ludicrous images, and what I dubbed *mashed metaphors*, which are awkward juxtapositions, often strings of clichés.

First, a few examples of the classic form that I’ve encountered recently in routine reading:

- “Inevitably, other theater-district dinosaurs have been fading away.”
- “This dark current took a toll.”
- “She was a volcano of ferocity on a pillar of vulnerability.”
- “But based on the information we have so far, it isn’t clear that it was a slam dunk to put the pieces of the puzzle together.”
- “Let’s not screw around eating our own.”

- “The discovery of the folio in St.-Omer provides a bit more ballast, he said, if hardly a smoking gun.”
- “But it is really Shailene Woodley as Hazel who melts your heart with a dazzlingly fresh breath of air.”
- “We are closing this puppy up by noon today.”

Here are specimens of mashed metaphors:

- “I saw the writing on the wall and realized I needed to get on board.”
- “Now it’s a situation where the emperor has no clothes, and everybody is scratching their heads.”
- “For years we’ve been saying the chickens will come home to roost. Eventually someone has to pay the piper.”
- “Don’t come to us with hat in hand until you have your act together.”
- “She was trying to put the toothpaste back in the tube, spinning her wheels in the second term trying to undo the disasters of the first.”
- “It’s something that could be done that would send a very clear signal of taking the gloves off and not just dancing around it.”
- “We’ve been pretty squeaky clean, knock on wood.”
- “It wasn’t like we were the only guys at the table. We were late to the party, so we moved fast.”
- “For women, at times, it’s ‘Carry your own water,’ but this is a business [in which] you can learn a lot from people who have been around the block.”
- “The dire predictions did not pan out. The world dodged a big bullet, at no small cost.”
- “It’s a game-changer. Groundbreaking, if not exactly mind-blowing.”

So there’s the whole ball of wax in a nutshell. Are you new to the subject of mixed and mashed metaphors? If so, the above sampling could be just the ticket to whet your appetite!