

A CANTATA OF ERRATA

Book review by Don Hauptman

Recently published, and sure to delight wordplay enthusiasts, is *The African Svelte*, subtitled “Ingenious Misspellings That Make Surprising Sense” (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, hardcover \$20, Kindle \$10). The author is Daniel Menaker, who recruited his *New Yorker* colleague, cartoonist Roz Chast, to provide amusing illustrations.

As a blooper collector myself, I was attracted by the book’s premise: a compilation of genuine published malapropisms and mondegreens (some favor the term *eggcorns*), specifically those where words are misspelled out of ignorance, yet serendipitously become funny or unintentionally meaningful. Examples: *bad wrap*, *last-stitch effort*, *roman o’clay*, *slight of hand*, *unchartered waters*. Menaker provides 100 such specimens, of varying risibility.

He nominates *baklava* for *balaclava* as possibly the best of the bunch. I agree; I spotted this same gaffe a while back. (See *Word Ways*, February 2015, p. 40.)

Any objections? Yes. Each boner is accompanied by a short essay containing attempted connections between the correct and incorrect versions, etymologies, personal anecdotes, free associations, and other excursions. Though these pieces are well-written and usually interesting, some are simply irrelevant and self-indulgent. The selections would have worked well on their own, or followed by brief witty ripostes, a formula used successfully for almost a century in the column fillers in Menaker’s very own *New Yorker*. Frankly, his approach is just “building the lily”! My hunch is that the author and/or publisher decided to pad the book to justify the price.

A final whinge and cringe: A superior and more accessible title could surely have been chosen. After all, neither *veldt* nor *svelte* are words used in everyday conversation. But this particular howler evidently captivated Menaker. He even adopted *svelte* as a generic term for funny misspellings and deploys it repeatedly. This neologism is both twee and gratuitous, given that many existing words serve the purpose.

These reservations aside, *The African Svelte* is a worthy edition—er, addition—to the library of every recreational linguist.