The New York Times ran on December 18 a “Super Mega Contest: where readers were asked to start by solving a 50 x 50 crossword by Frank Longo and edited by Will Shortz. The contest was to arrange 8 unclued answers into a particular order and sound them out to form approximately a familiar phrase and submit the phrase to the NYT. 55 winners would randomly be selected. The 8 words were NESS, VENT, HISSED, UDDER, ACITY, DUMB, SHUN and ROUGHEN. The correct answer your editor sent in is found in Answers and Solutions.

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.