

An Editor Goes Into a Bar . . .

Fair warning: serious column. No jokes. Well, maybe one:

Q: How many science authors does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Forty-seven. One to change it to “electric current activated heated filament incandescence illumination device” and 46 others to list their names as coauthors.

I’ve been thinking about jokes lately, after reading a wonderfully funny, serious book on the subject by Ted Cohen, a philosophy professor at the University of Chicago (*Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*. University of Chicago Press, 1999). In a chapter titled “Jewish Jokes and the Acceptance of Absurdity”, Cohen identifies what he considers two salient features of Jewish humor: one, that it is the humor of outsiders, and two, that it “exploits a deep and lasting concern and fascination with logic and language”.*

From their occasional e-mails, I know that some readers of this column are bona fide insiders—elite members of the scientific establishment. But others of you, like me, are outsiders in the rarefied worlds in which we ply our trade—liberal arts majors, many of us, generalist immigrants in a country of native-speaking specialists, where errors are standard, confidence has limits, and survivors of sudden death walk among us.

In addition, of course, we green-eyeshade types share with Cohen’s Jewish jokesters their fascination with language and logic—especially with the point at which the two sometimes part company, a point often located in the pages of the manuscripts we edit. Maybe these shared characteristics help explain why humor has so often been the preferred idiom of “The Word Watcher” and its readers. The ironic perspective of the outsider allows us to air our bewilderments, frustrations, and obsessions without losing sight of their essential absurdity in the scheme of things.

In all this, as I’ve tried to show in recent columns, TWW has been blessed with wonderful readers, fellow linguaphiles (I

made it up), generous in their encouragement and savvy in their reports from the field. Whether challenging me with their questions or sharing their howlers, they have enthusiastically seconded my belief that clear and accurate communication is not a matter of life and death. It’s much more important than that.

If all this has a valedictory sound, it’s because it’s my last column—at least for a while. When I retired from the *New England Journal of Medicine* 2 years ago, I still had things I wanted to say here about how scientific writing might be improved and a folder stuffed with evidence of how much it needed to be. From time to time my former colleagues have kindly sent me tidbits from manuscripts, but they have their jobs to do and my file of examples has grown thin. Cut off from what had been my daily dose of inspiration, I find I have run out of windmills to tilt at and nits to pick. Barbara Gastel, kind and gifted editor of this magazine, has assured me that if ever my temples begin to pound again over some particularly irksome new assault on the language, I may return with an ad hoc jeremiad. Until then, thanks for being such a great group to go word-watching with.

* All right, all right—one more. The Jewish jokes Cohen includes are all too long for this space, but here’s a shorter, Indian one (with apologies to my Sikh readers):

A Sikh walked into a travel agency in New Delhi and said to an agent, “I wish to purchase an airplane ticket to the Netherlands. I must go to the Haig-you.”

“Oh, you foolish Sikh,” said the agent. “Not ‘Haig-you’. You mean ‘The Hague’.”

“I am the customer and you are the clerk,” replied the Sikh. “Do as I ask, and hold your tung-you.”

“My, my, you really are quite illiterate,” laughed the agent. “It is not ‘tung-you’. It is ‘tongue’.”

“Just sell me the ticket, you cheeky fellow. I am not here to arg.”