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Low Wit in Its Highest Form

Puns are a kind of verbal preening, usually praised more “for their ingenuity than for their humor,” as a 16th-century observer put it. Daniel Akst reviews “Away With Words: An Irreverent Tour Through the World of Pun Competitions” by Joe Berkowitz.



A punning postcard from the early 20th century. PHOTO: BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Daniel Akst

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As a critic, I’ve been around the block, buster. It’s a risky business—the margins are paper-thin—so I work in my best cellar, a bomb shelter where pros can sing. The book stops here, ok? And if it won’t hold still I hit it with a pan. Is that really so novel?

As that paragraph gratingly demonstrates, puns can be irritating. Yet the vast and diverse English language practically cries out for antics of this sort, and some people are so good at it that punning has evolved into a form of competitive sport. “Way more pun competitions exist than most sane civilians might presume,” we learn from “Away With Words,” Joe Berkowitz’s diverting account of the subject. “There’s Minnesota’s Pundamonium, Orlando Punslingers, the UK Pun Championships, the Almost Annual Pun-Off in Eureka, California, and several others.”

Mr. Berkowitz, a staff writer at Fast Company, rashly immerses himself in this world over the course of a year, palling around with punsters and competing repeatedly in Brooklyn’s Punderdome and once at the exalted O. Henry Pun-Off World Championships in Austin, Texas. “The O. Henry is without a doubt the Olympics of pun competitions,” he says, while “Punderdome is their X Games.”

The narrative engine of “Away With Words” is the author’s progress through this quirky landscape, from his first anxious appearance at Punderdome right up through his star turn in Austin. The competitions require firing off puns—preferably as part of a comic narrative—on a given or chosen topic, such as vegetables or fine arts, in front of a raucous crowd. Mr. Berkowitz is no wilting flower, but the performing isn’t easy for him. Competitions involve intense time pressure and one-on-one pun-offs; if words fail you, you’re out. (The O. Henry is governed by persnickety judges; in Brooklyn, applause rules.)

At this level, even the strangest topics provide almost inexhaustible fodder. At Punderdome’s fifth anniversary show, for example, the category is Italian food. On introduction: “I never *sausage* a crowd.” Want to try something weird? “I said ‘*wine not*’ . . . because I’m a *pro sicko*.” About cheating to win an award: “I think I could *rig a Tony*.”

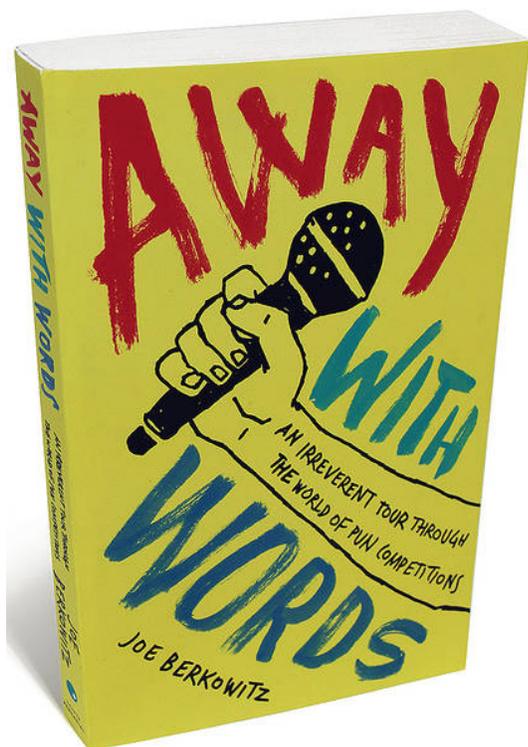


PHOTO: WSJ

AWAY WITH WORDS

By Joe Berkowitz

Harper Perennial, 272 pages, \$15.99

On reproductive rights: “The government wants to put its laws on your bodies,” one punster declares. “And I don’t want ‘em to put their *laws-on-ya!*” On the wonders of modernity: “How did scientists date anything before the *carbon era?*”

By now you may be reaching for the Alka-Seltzer, which illustrates the author’s problem: A little punning goes a long way, and at some point indigestion is inevitable. Mr. Berkowitz also tries readers’ patience with one or two ill-advised digressions, although his firsthand account of the dismally earnest North East Texas Humor Research Conference is a source of fun in spite of his sufferings there. Fortunately, the puns mostly come in concentrated outbursts, and Mr. Berkowitz works so furiously to

entertain us the rest of the time that you can practically see the flop sweat.

“Away With Words” is peopled, moreover, by a colorful and touchingly needy cast of punsters. With their noms-de-pun (e.g., Groan Up, Lex Icon), they are tough to keep straight but, like witty strangers at a cocktail party, amusing nonetheless. Benjamin Ziek, the Babe Ruth of competitive punning, is easy to remember, “buzz-cut and built like a cross between a circus strongman and *Sopranos* consigliere.” The book culminates in a thrilling Texas gunfight between a contingent of Punderdome all-stars and O. Henry veterans. One of the stars, Southpaw Jones, soars with a prepared riff on birds: “*Beek* kind to me, don’t *thrush* to judgment, I’m not *robin* anyone, *hawking* anything, *talon tails* out of school, *ducking* responsibilities or *emulating* anyone.” In a face-off segment, punster Jerry Yan is assigned the topic of pregnancy and starts on a pious note: “Baby Jesus didn’t *diaper* your sins.”

One question remains: Why has punning, which is as old as language, fallen into such bad odor that most of us feel compelled to groan when we encounter it, no matter how witty the wordplay? John Pollack, in his thoughtful 2011 book, “The Pun Also Rises,” notes that punning’s popularity has long ebbed and flowed. A case in point: Puns used to flourish in headlines, including at this newspaper. Oh, for the days of “Paramount in the Dark Before the Don,” an article concerning studio jitters about a forthcoming “Godfather” film. Nowadays cooler heads prevail, in part because the news has moved online, where wordplay in headlines is death for search-engine optimization. The rapid globalization of culture may also play a role. The English writer Kazuo Ishiguro has confessed to avoiding wordplay and colloquialisms in order to facilitate the translation of his works. World trade, it seems, is taking the pun out of literature.

Ultimately, the problem may be that pun-making is a kind of preening. Puns “are more usually praised for their ingenuity than for their humor,” a 16th-century courtier’s handbook observed, and pedantic vanity will always rub people the wrong way—especially in these times of disdain for the special claims of authority.

Back in Austin, after the final O. Henry round pits one of Brooklyn's best against a four-time national champ, Mr. Berkowitz hears talk among the sloshed New Yorkers of getting a pun tattoo. What should it say? "We can write 'ling,'" suggests one wag, "and it will be an *'inkling.'*"

But it's clear that a pun tattoo—the absurd made flesh—would be going too far. Mr. Berkowitz is sensitive throughout to the evanescence and contingency of punning and to the fleeting chemistry of a live pun-on-pun matchup crackling with energy. "A tattoo could never bring it back," he writes. "You had to be there."

Mr. Akst writes the Journal's weekly news quiz.

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