



A Novel List

Stop Breathing: It's Dangerous

Fie upon you, AMA
If I smoked a pack a day
Who could tell with air so clogged,
Dirty, germy, and besmogged
If my badly blackened bellows
Were caused by me or by my fellows?
—VIRGINIA BRASIER.

Italics Subtracted

UNLESS I am misreading the signs, there is a shortage of italics in the nation's composing rooms—or, if not an actual shortage, a threatened one. I'm not worried; we are a rich country and I am sure that, in an emergency, we could pull through. One of the big foundations might arrange for a continuing supply of italics if the government doesn't start stockpiling them.

What has happened to our once bountiful store of italics? I can remember when long prefaces were italicized and when someone, in a mood of profligacy, published a whole book set in italics.

The book was hard on the eyes and the prefaces seemed pretentious, but these were extreme cases and I cite them merely to show that nobody talked about an italics shortage.

We didn't ask where italics came from; they were there. In the midst of an abundance unknown to our forefathers, we used italics freely and with no concern about tomorrow. And yet there were thoughtful men and women who wondered at the uncontrolled use of italics. Writers of articles and books would abruptly break from roman into italics for a brief typographical dance ending with an “(italics added).” The reader was to assume the italics were intended as a form of emphasis, but in many cases they seemed little more than self-indulgence. It was a dreadful waste.

Even so, I was not prepared for the shock of “(italics mine)” which lately has been appearing with greater frequency to the virtual exclusion of “(italics added).”

I can't recall when “(italics mine)”

became dominant. At first I regarded it as a silly boast and whenever I encountered it I remarked mentally: “What of it!” Then I began to comprehend dimly that maybe at last our prodigal use of italics was leading us to famine and that authors who said “(italics mine)” were either selfish or showing off their prudence.

I felt sensitive about the future of italics because I had once been witness to an extraordinary occurrence on a New York newspaper called *The World Telegram and The Sun*. The paper was accustomed to emphasizing certain points in some stories by running one-sentence paragraphs, each preceded by a symbol that looked like a large black ball—an outsized period set above the line. It was called a bullet and was a handy makeup device.

But one day a reporter named Tom Furey, who was writing an unusually long feature story, went berserk. There was no fault with the story—writing, construction, or accuracy. What was shattering was that Furey used no fewer than thirty-eight bullets, virtually depleting the paper's supply.

The composing room was in an uproar as men searched everywhere for fresh bullets—in their pockets, their lockers, among the playing cards, the racing sheets, the weekly pool lists. It was in vain.

The next day an order was posted. Bullets were not to be used in stories for at least ten days. The paper had gone on for years without umlauts; possibly it would forgo bullets.

I doubt that anything as drastic as that could happen with italics. We all love italics in moderation. But I am still uneasy when I see “(italics mine)” in place of the old “(italics added).” Is humility no longer a virtue?

—JOHN FERRIS.

Furdsley's Reading List

WAITE FURDSLEY, the eminent American novelist, slept late on this snowy Saturday morning in early December. He had been up half the night reading a Western titled *The Lawless Border*, by Allan V. Elston.

He carried the book downstairs and, before breakfast, placed it on the ledge by the bay window where he kept those volumes that were next in line for his reading pleasure. He glanced over the dozen titles, trying to decide which one he'd take to bed with him tonight.

There was *The Twisted Thing*, by Mickey Spillane, and *Harlow*, by Irving Shulman. Also *Sex and Everything Else*, by Helen Gurley Brown; *Octopussy*, by Ian Fleming; *The Bank Shot and Other Great Robberies*, by Minnesota Fats; *The Wit and Wisdom of Billy Graham*; and *Flying Saucers—Serious Business*,

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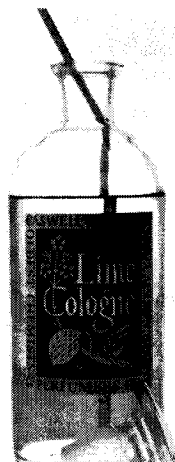
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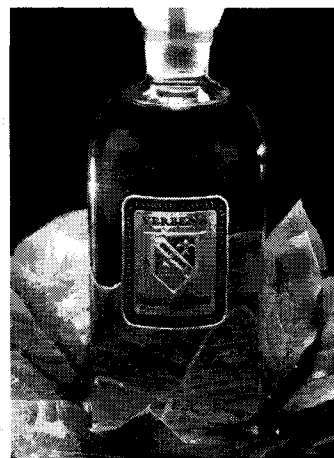
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While he was having his eggs, Mrs. Furdlesley brought him his mail. Monthly bills, for the most part, but there was a letter from the editor of the *Sunday Gazette Book Review*. It said:

Dear Mr. Furdlesley:

As is our custom each year, when we bring out our Christmas issue, we are asking prominent American authors to cite the five books they most enjoyed reading during the last year. The books need not have been published during the year. Could we have your five?

Immediately after breakfast, then, Waite Furdlesley went to his study and sat down at his typewriter and made up his list. This is the way it went:

Dear Editor:

The five books I've most enjoyed during the past twelvemonth were:

Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry.

The Days of Henry Thoreau, by Walter Harding.

Dag Hammarskjöld: A Spiritual Portrait, by Sven Stolpe.

Freedom in the Modern World, by Herbert J. Muller.

John Hus at the Council of Constance, translated by Matthew Spinka.

Much thanks for asking me in.
Sincerely,
W. G. FURDSLEY.

Waite Furdlesley put the list into an envelope and sealed it, stamped it, and then settled down to Chapter XI of his work-in-progress, a novel called *Brazen in the Back Seat*. He hoped he'd be able to finish the chapter by mid-afternoon. There were a couple of television shows he wanted to watch. And he had decided to take the Mickey Spillane to bed later on.

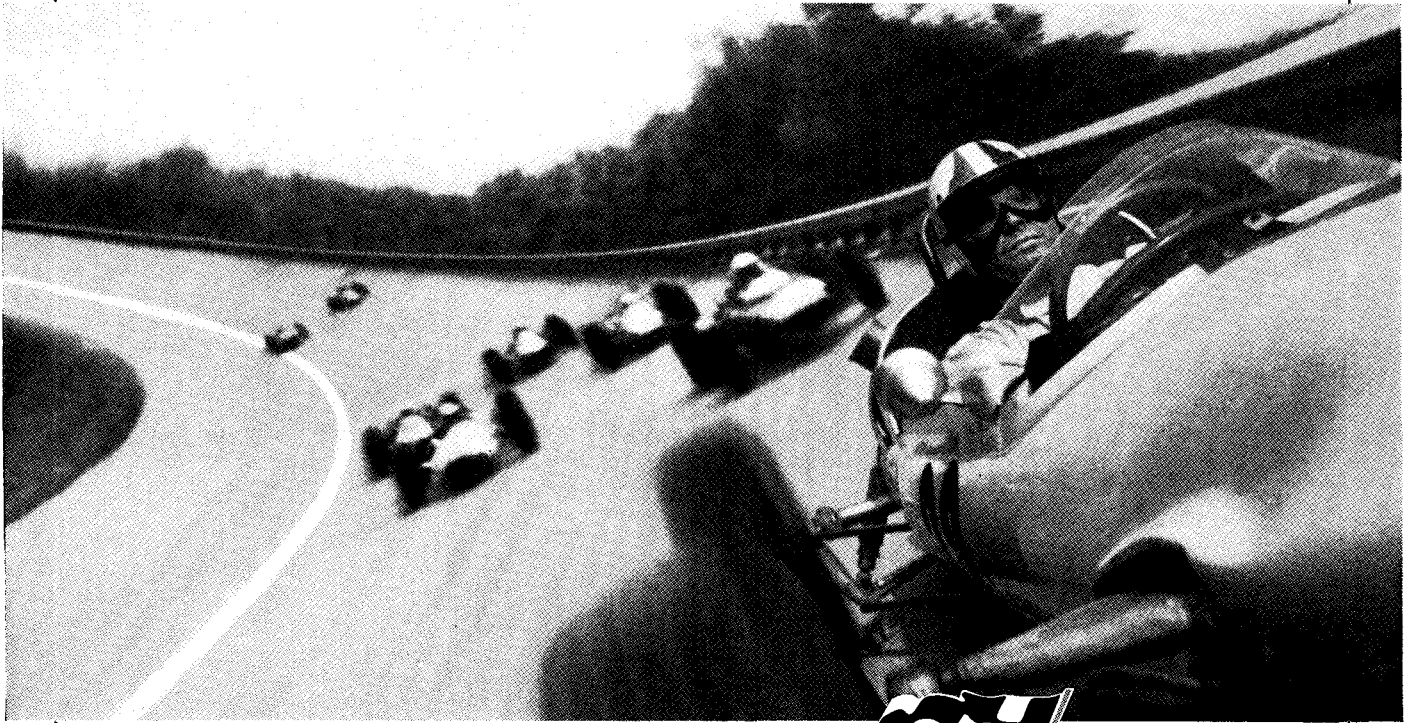
—H. ALLEN SMITH.



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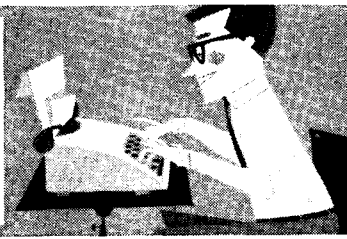


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Top of My Head



How Not To

THE MAN in the electrical supply shop listened attentively while I explained that my electric razor was working well. All I wanted was an extension cord that would reach from the wall socket in the bathroom to my bed, a distance of twenty feet.

"Twenty feet?" he asked.

"Yes. I can't stand looking at myself in the mirror before I'm shaved."

One eyebrow shot slightly upward but his eyes never left the razor as he made a mental note to tell his wife about this one. She'd never believe it.

"OK," he said. "Have it for you a week from today."

"A week just for an extension cord?"

"That's right. Don't you know there's a war on?"

Now it was my turn. That was one epiphonema for which I wasn't prepared. I couldn't recall having read that

the President had asked Congress to declare war. Nor had I heard that Lucky Strike green had gone to war. But if this was austerity time again I could be as patriotic as the next fellow. I said I'd be back in a week.

And that's when I bought *The New York Times Complete Manual of Home Repair*.

"When was the last time you called a handy man to fix a dripping faucet?" the ad asked. "Have any luck? *The New York Times* to the rescue! Here's a book that gives you clear, up-to-date instructions on how you can take care of every repair problem that may arise."

Let it be shown that I'm as unhandy a handy man as there is. But, armed with this manual, I went about keeping the home fires burning. I came across a diagram showing how to replace a noisy wall switch with a silent wall switch.

We've been having a lot of problems with our noisy wall switches. Neighbors have been complaining. So I bought a noiseless switch and went about installing it.

"First," the instructions with the diagram said, "remove the outer switch. Two screws remove it." I put the screw driver in the first screw and it knocked me out of the room. I had skipped an instruction which said to turn off the power by unscrewing the fuse. I climbed up a small ladder and unscrewed the fuse. That knocked me back into the room.

I removed the outer cover. Now the instructions were to remove the two screws which remove the wires from the switch. I did that. Then it said to attach the same wires to the new switch. I did that. I clicked on the switch and sure enough it was noiseless. Only one thing—the light didn't come on.

Then I remembered I hadn't turned the power back on. I went to the fuse box, climbed the ladder and did that. I looked at my watch. It was lunch time. And then like any handy man I knocked off for an hour's nap.

Refreshed, I came back to the job. The power was now on. I tiptoed over and silently turned on my noiseless switch. The ceiling light didn't light up but the crystal lamp on the piano did. I went back to the fuse to see what was wrong. I climbed up again and felt in back of it. There was an accumulation of dust which I cleaned out. After which I went to wash up. And sure enough, just as the manual had said, my faucet was dripping.

Now I was beginning to envy Lucky Strike green. It had only gone to war. It didn't stay behind and fix a noiseless switch and a dripping faucet. I hadn't ever noticed that it dripped. But the Devil and *The New York Times Complete Manual of Home Repair* find work for idle hands. I sat down to read the instructions about the dripping faucet. They were even more simple than the instructions about the noiseless switch. Which made them more suspect.

So I went to this other handy-book I have. It's called *The Yellow Pages*. I let my fingers dance across the pages until they came to Handyman. It said "See Fixit Shops." I turned to Fixit Shops. No, it did not say "See Handyman." There was a list of several fixit shops. I called one of them. I now have an appointment for a man to come fix our dripping faucet. February 10, he'll be there.

"I'll be there at 6:30 in the morning. Will anybody be home?" he asked.

Sure, we'll be home. Wide awake. Who can sleep with that noisy faucet? But our switch is noiseless, all thanks to *The New York Times Complete Manual of Home Repair*. —GOODMAN ACE.

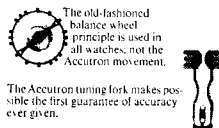


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