Such a Lovely Word



Everyone has a set of favorite words. Even if you've never thought about it, you have a go-to collection that would represent pretty nicely in a wordcloud illustration. Even with kids and teens (allowing for some obvious weighting towards utterances such as the *quotative like* and *whatevs*<fn>Like totaly, like, whatevs.</fn>), there are just certain words that work, that ring, that roll off the tongue and end up becoming as much a part/reflection of your public identity as your choice of clothing, car, music, &c.

And so we observe our friends with their own style: some who regularly use *quite* as a modifier; others who would die rather than say *utilize* rather than *use* (or vice versa); and even some with a let-us-say *narrow* linguistic palate v. those who seem to have eaten a dictionary and *logorrheacally* spew synonyms and obscure references<fn>Geez, don't you hate that?!</fn>.

Which brings us somewhat discursively to one of my long-time faves: *discursive*. I've always taken this to describe a style of speech or writing that trips along more or less aimlessly from point to point, an amble, rather than a march, toward some destination at which we shall inevitably arrive, albeit with some mild surprise/disappointment at the banality of it all.<fn>Kind of like that sentence.</fn> A great example is the classic *shaggy dog story*, of which, say, *The Big Lebowski* is the classic exemplar.<fn>From Wikipedia: "In its original sense, a shaggy dog story is an extremely long-winded anecdote characterized by extensive narration of typically irrelevant

incidents and terminated by an anticlimax or a pointless punchline." Loyal readers of the i2b blog likely experienced a *frisson* of recognition just now.</fn>

But I began to doubt my understanding of *discursive, so* I opened the dictionary with no little worry that I had been mis-using this word all these years. And lo and behold, what I found was this:

> *1. passing aimlessly from one subject to another; digressive, rambling*

So far, so good. But then…

> *2. proceeding by reasoning or argument rather than intuition.*

Well then. What we have here is a word that means both itself and its opposite, and vice versa. My excessive fondness for the word has been validated; it's even better than I thought.

In honesty…most of the time my thoughts rattle around like a BB in a bucket, like a carrot in a bathtub, like a… Well, there I go again. Your Narrator often finds himself bouncing from pillar to post, often with a vague destination in mind, sometimes not, but always confident that the destination will be worth the journey.<fn>How we get there is where we're going?</fn> So off I lurch, dictionary recently eaten.

And admittedly, I happen to love writers who begin in one place, proceed to the next logical checkpoint, and then veer off into pasta-knows-what twisty turns and digressions that lead one to think that either the narrator or the reader/listener has lost touch with reality, only to arrive at a conclusion that elicits a "holy shit, where did that come from?" reaction alongside a recognition that there was really no other possible destination, all things considered, though we never could have guessed at the outset.<fn>Let's consider this a codicil and corrolary to one of the ruling precepts of

the blog, that being: resolved endings suck.</fn> Consider the explorations of Waterloo and the Paris sewers in *Les Miserables.*<fn>The novel, not the musical. I can't even bring myself to watch it.</fn> Consider James Burke's fantastic excursions in the TV series *Connections*; the flights of fancy in Proust and Wallace and Barthelme for example, and, again, *Lebowski*. All of the things that appear to be random and discursive turn out to be…well, given definition #2, they actually end up being *discursive* in both senses of the word. Random? Maybe not quite so much as it first appeared.

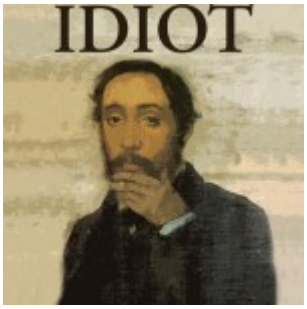
Are your Narrator's discursions actually random, or do they instead conform to some deeper pattern of rational argument that could not be clearly revealed through a more formal A+B=*x* sort of explication? Consider who you/we are asking? What kind of rigorously logical answer can you possibly expect from someone who just danced you through 650 words to get to the question in the first place?

And furthermore: What in perfectly fresh hell is a picture of Satan's Dick doing at the top of this ramble?

Think about it people. This is a post about discursion, which is exemplified by the shaggy dog story, which is in turn exemplified by *The Big Lebowski*, which is itself all about bowling. And discursion. And some other stuff, too, but do we have to spell it out?

Wheels within wheels, my friends. Wheels within wheels.

My Favorite World #8



I Like Big Books and I Cannot Lie

The astute follower of this blog<fn>The use if the definite article is pessimistically intentional.</fn> will have noticed that your Narrator loves books. Almost daily I add three or four titles to my “must read” list. It’s great to look at the list in anticipation of great reads to come. It is also to despair: so many books, so little time. We do what we can.

One of my favorite places of any kind is a good bookstore. When we lived on the other side of Lake Pontchartrain, the nearest bookstore was a Barnes and Nobles about 35 miles away. The family would sojourn there for a Friday night’s outing, and as soon as we opened the door, the smell of paper and glue and coffee would turn me into a ravenous book beast. Everybody went their separate way, and we would meet back at the cafe about 30 minutes later. Because the store was so far from home, I would turn up with an armload of books, because who knew how long it might be before I returned. Better safe than stuck without a book.

Occasionally we would travel and find ourselves in a town with a great, independent bookstore. In Asheville there was Malaprops, a truly magical place. Here, my frenzy was even more pronounced. Because who knew how long it would be until I found myself in a great, *indie* bookstore? Two armloads, minimum. Beach trips to the Forgotten Coast always begin with a trip to Sundog Books where everybody picks out their reads for the vacation.

You get the idea.

When we moved to our current humble burg, no indie local store of this sort existed.<fn>Purely used book vendors are a different breed, and awesome on their own terms, but not what I'm talking about here.</fn> Sure, there was a Borders (now gone) and a B&N and a Books-A-Million.<fn>In my snark, renamed Books a Dozen and a bunch of other crap.</fn> But these are not especially appealing places for the book browser.<fn>B&N was at one time a terrific chain for book lovers, but the tchotchke-to-book ratio has taken a decided turn for the worse in recent years.</fn> For the book lover, the best option is the local library.

Our library is one of the things that makes this My Favorite World. The selection is terrific, the online reserving system easy and efficient. The place is well-laid out and well lighted. The staff, many of them volunteers, is helpful and cheerful. And if they don't have what you want, they will move mountains to find it through another library system. I've had books borrowed from libraries as far away as Miami and Houston, University of Chicago and Chapel Hill. Seriously, our library rocks.

But I miss the bookstore experience. I miss the feeling of finishing a book and placing it on my shelf – maybe to be read again, maybe not – and the conundrum of where to put a particular book. Did I like it so much it might displace a cherished hero volume? Does this belong in the philosophy section or science? Burning questions that fall to the wayside, because now when I finish a book I dump it, unceremoniously, into a slot in the wall at the library.

So while books, and the pursuit of books, and the dogged determination that *I will read every book in the world worth reading before I die*,<fn>Hubris is never pretty.</fn> are a major element of MFW, I find myself in recent days wondering:

Why doesn't our community have a great local bookstore?

Does our community really need one? Is it supportable?

Who has the stones/insanity/vision to create such a place? A place where people linger over the printed word and exchange ideas about what makes a book great; argue passionately about whether Oprah picks have ruined reading or saved it; quibble over whether the Booker Prize has gone soft by considering non-Brits; &c. Even more, a place that serves as a fulcrum for a vital community that values the inspirational and aspirational cocktail that comes from that luxe mixture of books and magazines and music and really excellent coffee.

Whoever that person is, s/he will be creating a vital component of My Favorite World. I'll be waiting.

> ***V:****What'll we do?*
>
> ***E:****If he came yesterday and we weren't here you may be sure he won't come again today.*
>
> ***V:****But you say we were here yesterday.*
>
> ***E:****I may be mistaken. (Pause.) Let's stop talking for a minute, do you mind?*

MFW.

The Management wishes to….



Here at i2b, we love a good story well told. Alas, even though we have several to tell and – arguably – the skills to tell it well, the twain have not made acquaintance for several weeks now. It's not for lack of writing. In fact, the Writer has several pieces he feels merit publication and an increased daily ration of gruel and breadcrust. Lucky for you, dear reader, that the Publisher and Editor, in cooperation with the arbiters of decency in the Standards & Practices Department – good, earnest people whom the writer insults as "pecksniff simpletons" – have intercepted the notes in a bottle the Writer dropped into the privy in hopes of bypassing our essential and benevolent oversight.<fn>We had left him alone – shackled, of course – for our weekly shareholders and board of directors banquet. The menu was sublime, but we lost track of time and gave him time to attempt his deception. Luckily, we foiled his chicanerous efforts.</fn> We find them in poor taste, shocking to the conscience, and an insult to human decency. The Writer wept as we burned his makeshift foolscap (inscribed in his own blood with a sharpened toothbrush handle), but he is being made to understand that this is all for his own good. How he wept tears of gratitude when we cancelled today's flogging in favor of a light racking! It was touching, indeed, to see a man getting his mind right.

The Writer yearns to unlimber his quill on a range of topics – from what it means to dare greatly as an artist, to what in the hell difference is there between a wall-eyed undertaker and an alleged Democrat who votes just like him – but until that wretched scribbler learns to behave in polite society, the Management has no choice but to keep him under wraps. For his own good, of course.

Immune to Failure? Not so much…

Another week, faithful readers. Once again I enter the arena to wrestle an idea to ground, and once again I find myself with a foot on my chest. Mea culpa. Maxima maxima.