

From the Back Verandah

I was delighted recently to learn that the BBC's 1999 production of *Shooting the Past* is available on VHS and DVD.

(The good news for Australian audiences is that there is also a repeat screening this summer on ABC TV.)

This magnificent made-for-TV series was written and directed by Stephen Poliakoff. On the face of it, the drama tells the story of the conflict between a wealthy American businessman and a group of librarians. He is planning to dispose of a collection of ten million priceless photographs housed in a mansion he has just bought. The librarians are the collection's custodians and they want to preserve it intact, so they attempt several strategies to thwart his intentions.

But under the surface story Poliakoff is presenting us with several important messages. One is the value of libraries and the staff who run them, know them and love them. Economic progress may be a good thing, but often it threatens the preservation of the world's heritage.

Even more significant is the idea of — to quote the words of a friend of mine — “making discoveries about mysterious, profound meanings from the past”. (If that description itself sounds a bit mysterious to those of you who've not seen *Shooting the Past* yet, I'm sorry, but I don't want to give away vital parts of the plot.)

The stars are Lindsay Duncan as the library curator Marilyn Truman, Liam Cunningham as the businessman Christopher Anderson, and Timothy Spall as the eccentric Oswald Bates, Truman's chief researcher. As always, character actor Spall gives a wonderful performance.

As far as I'm concerned, *Shooting the Past* ranks up there with those other classic British television dramas *Talking to a Stranger* (1966) and *Edge of Darkness* (1985). So, wherever you live, if you haven't experienced this TV treat, take my advice and buy or borrow it post-haste.

— Fizzgig

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Jazz with a Twist

Let's get the "twist" part out of the way first. Simply put, I'm twisting your arm again. I need some more contributions.

This time, it's a particular type of submission I'm thinking of, or, more accurately, a particular subject for submissions. I've been turning this idea over in my mind for a while (and even sounded a couple of you out on it), and the start of 2004 seems a good time to announce it.

What I want to do is begin a new series called *How I Became Interested in Jazz*.

Perhaps you heard a record on the radio that seemed somehow "different" to all the other music they played. It certainly wasn't

classical music, but it had some special quality that attracted you away from the run-of-the-mill pop music everyone else listened to.

Maybe an uncle of yours turned up with a new record: "You've got to listen to this!" Or was it seeing the movie *The Glenn Miller Story*?

Whatever it was, if you love jazz, you'll be sure to remember that magic occasion. So please write us a piece all about it: I know there will be lots of readers looking forward to this series.

More pointedly, I know that many readers have had an abiding interest in jazz for decades — some in a professional capacity.

In other words, no excuses!

Colophon

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Australia: \$A10
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The first music heard on the moon? 'Lava
Come Back to Me'.

Frank Muir

Let's get out of these wet clothes, and into a dry martini.

Robert Benchley

Quintessential Quirky Quotes

Laziness is nothing more than the habit of resting before
you get tired.

Jules Renard

My life is pure as the driven
slush.

Tallulah Bankhead

It is better to keep your mouth closed and let people
think you are a fool than to open it and remove
all doubt.

Mark Twain

Michael Jackson has a prosthetic nose and it fell off during a recent TV special.

Equally interesting is the discussion on whether throwing rice at a wedding is dangerous to birds:

Let's quit worrying about the birds. They'll be fine. Seagulls don't explode when they eat Alka-Seltzer; pigeons don't explode when they eat rice.

[cf. Editorial in *Bikwil* Issue 3 (September 1997)]

Vmyths — Truth About Computer Virus Myths & Hoaxes — is devoted entirely to the subject of computer security hysteria. There are several very useful sections at this site, under such headings as Hoaxes A-Z, How to Spot a Virus Hoax, Ways to Reduce Virus Hoaxes and False Identity Syndrome. Sadly, it

seems to have stopped being updated (perhaps temporarily only), but for all I'd know this news could be a hoax. Nevertheless it remains a comprehensive site well worth a visit.

Let me leave you with four examples of what are claimed to be actual newspaper headlines. They are from a collection of such headlines at *Net47 Presents Urban Myths & Legends*. Hoaxes or not, these very funny lines surely deserve a mention in *Bikwil*:

Safety Experts Say School Bus Passengers Should Be Belted

Drunk Gets Nine Months in Violin Case

2 Sisters Reunited after 18 Years in Checkout Counter

New Vaccine May Contain Rabies.

— TR

Internet sites referred to above:

<http://urbanlegends.miningco.com/library/blhoax.htm>

<http://www.urbanlegends.com/>

<http://www.snopes.com/>

<http://www.kumite.com/myths/>

<http://www.delta-9.com/net47/myth/>

Mary Bennet

13

Strange to say, once *Renata* was safely in my possession I no longer felt so eager to read it. I had begun the first chapter that same evening — a lengthy account of a rough channel crossing, it was all cresting swells and creaking masts and the narrator's growing nausea, the stuff that boys delight in. Afterwards, having consigned the volume to the depths of my bureau drawer, I was not impatient to take it out again. (At the same time, I was not about to let Elizabeth read it either.)

But in the days that followed, the secrecy of the whole business began to weigh on me. While I had grown used to concealing my thoughts from the members of my family, I was not at all comfortable hiding anything from Mr Knowles — still less from George. But if I were to confide in Mr Knowles, I was afraid I would never be permitted to go to Netherfield again.

And I could not, in conscience, unburden myself to George: I was certain he could know nothing of *Renata*'s real-life origins. This then was the end of the perfect confidence that George and I had enjoyed. Now, when we were practising together in the music room, I was in constant fear of Mrs Allardyce walking in. She would invariably ask: "Well Mary, and how are you progressing?" And such was my shame at having to prevaricate — knowing George believed her to be alluding to the Mozart sonata — I could not answer without blushing and stammering.

Scarcely a day passed that I did not feel a degree of anxiety. Images of the three red leather volumes in my bureau drawers (wrapped now in petticoats and covered with a cunning latticework of handkerchiefs) began to surface in my dreams. Indeed, I am convinced that the melancholia which was to afflict me in later

years had its roots in this experience. But once again, I am getting ahead of myself. At the time and for the most part I was cheerful enough. I continued religiously to practise the Mozart sonata, both with and without George, and undoubtedly the nature of the composition itself (perfect, Godlike) helped to preserve my peace of mind.

Meanwhile, the Musical Evening was drawing closer, and some five days before, Mama, in a rare show of interest in my affairs, bethought herself to enquire what I was to wear. "Here it is Sunday and your concert is on Friday. I doubt there's time to have a new gown made up. What think you, sister?" (Aunt Gardiner, Mama and I were on the point of setting out from Longbourn to walk to church — Papa and my sisters having gone on ahead.)

"Oh I think it might be contrived," said Aunt. "If Jane and Lizzy were to help."

The two of them went on to discuss materials and patterns,

but I paid little attention. It was a beautiful September morning, the air very still and faintly chilled from the night before-- the first breath of autumn. Rounding a bend in the path, we had a clear view of the church, and I could see a group of people assembled on the verge outside, all talking to a man on horseback.

At such a distance it was impossible — for me at least — to make out who they were, but presently I heard Mama say to Aunt that the horseman was Mr Coates. And I could then see that it was indeed he and that he was talking down to Papa and my four sisters and to Charlotte Lucas.

"So that is Mr Coates, is it?" (Mr Coates had been in London during the early part of Aunt's visit and for one reason or another they had not met after his return.) "He certainly is a remarkably fine young man."

"Oh to be sure, yes, very handsome." For once, Mama was not interested in talking of Mr Coates; her mind was

I'll start with the one site I mentioned in this context in the previous article: the About Network's *Urban Legends and Folklore*.

It has these sections:

A - Z List - Index of Internet hoaxes, rumors, urban legends

The Top 25 - Most popular topics of the past week

What's New - Latest additions to the Netlore archive

Updates & News - Internet hoaxes and urban legends in the wild.

More usefully, it has also myths arranged by category, including

Animals & Insects

Bogus Websites

Celebrities

Companies & Products

Computer Virus Hoaxes

Crime

Faux Photos

'Free Stuff' Chain Letters

Health & Medical

Sept. 11 Terror Attacks & Aftermath.

Did you miss the dead-frog-found-in-a-can-of-peas hoax, for example? You can find it here.

Or the one about the ankle-slashing gangs? What about the story of the proof-reader George Turklebaum, who had been dead five days before his co-workers realised? Or the endless series of scams about free gifts you can get just by forwarding a chain letter?

In all, this site lists and describes hundreds of hoaxes and myths.

The AFU & Urban Legends Archive also is arranged by category: Animals, Books, Celebrities, Collegiate, Death, Food, Language, Movies, Religion, and so on. There is a good discussion on the old we-only-use-ten-percent-of-our-brain idea. Several rumours are shown to have had an origin in fact but been much distorted since.

Let's go over to *Urban Legends Reference Pages*. Here again, the material is classified by topic. These include Autos, Cokelore, Computers, Disney, Love, Music, Pregnancy, Titanic and Weddings. I was interested to read the full background to the news that

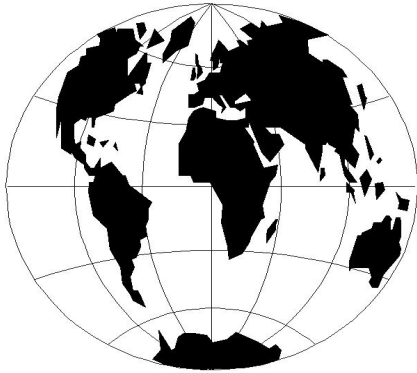
Web

In Issue 28 (November 2001) I wrote on the subject of the reliability of information found on the Internet. In that column I alluded briefly to urban myths and the particular problem of Internet rumour and hoaxes. Today I'm going to look a bit more closely at the trend and some of the antidotes available on the Net itself.

What's an "urban myth" (sometimes called an "urban legend")? According to Harlish Goop, the *Oxford Dictionary of New Words* of 1997 describes it as

an unverifiable and usually apocryphal anecdote of some aspect of modern life, widely recounted as if true, which has acquired the status of folklore.

It goes on to say that term arose in the 1980s, though the phenomenon of course is ages old, as I indicated in the earlier column.



Line

In today's world such myths are likely to be spread electronically. A good example of an electronic urban myth is the now notorious

Nine-Eleven photo supposedly showing a man ("Tourist Guy") on the roof of the World Trade Center tower oblivious to the plane approaching from behind. This concocted picture arrived sometime late in 2001 in someone's email Inbox, and though few believed it genuine within minutes it was circulating the world thousands of times.

Another example you may have heard about is the report of the flesh-eating bananas from Costa Rica. Mind-boggling.

So what about those antidotes? Believe me, there are thousands of Web sites with info on what's fact and what's myth, some better than others, so I'm going to look at just a handful in the expectation that they will suffice to stimulate your interest.

running on straw-coloured taffeta. ("Precisely the shade for someone like Mary with a sallow complexion.")

Mama continued to talk on as we drew nearer the little group which was now beginning to disperse — Jane having taken Lydia and Kitty by the hand to lead them towards the church, followed shortly by Charlotte Lucas and Papa.

Only Elizabeth lingered. She was patting the horse's neck and smiling up at Mr Coates, quite unaware of our approach. That was when I saw it, plain as day: Mr Coates had reached down and covered her caressing hand with his own. It was the action of a moment, over in the blink of an eye. My mother, I was certain, had not seen it, but whether my aunt had not I was less sure.

Elizabeth had immediately turned away to follow the others into the church, and Mr Coates was about to ride off when Mama hailed him. "You are not going to church then, sir?"

"Mrs Bennet!" Startled, he checked the horse. "Good-day to you."

He was smiling but his expression — his pleasure at seeing us — seemed forced. He apologized for not dismounting, explaining that he was in a hurry to return to Netherfield. But when Mama went on to introduce Aunt Gardiner ("My brother Edward's wife — of whom you've heard so much.") his face relaxed; he began to look more like himself.

"Yes indeed, how do you do, ma'am? I have been looking forward to meeting 'Aunt Gardiner' for a great while." He then reminded Mama that the Bennet family was to come early to Netherfield on Friday evening to approve the arrangements for the concert. "And Mrs Gardiner too of course."

I had hung back a little during this exchange, but now he touched me lightly on the shoulder with his whip. "Mary. You have not been practising too much I hope?"

Mama, as usual, answered for me: “Oh she never stops, Mr Coates — she is forever at her instrument. And I trust her performance will not disappoint, although —” (in a stage whisper) “Mary is nervous, you know — she takes after me in that respect — she is a nervous child. But while I cannot answer for her *performance*, her *appearance* at least will not disgrace you. I shall be taking her into town tomorrow to have her hair cut, and Sister and me will be making up a new gown of straw coloured taffeta —”

Thankfully — perhaps out of pity for my scarlet cheeks — Mr Coates cut her off at that point. Declaring that he had every confidence in my performance, he touched his hat and bid us all a hasty farewell. Mama watched him go complacently, admiring his excellent seat. Aunt, however, contemplated his receding figure with a more thoughtful air.

And that same evening whilst measuring me for my new gown, I heard her say in a low voice to Elizabeth: “You

and Mr Coates appear to be very good friends, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth was bending over the long breakfast room table, unrolling a bolt of straw coloured taffeta — Mama having on hand a quantity left over from covering a sofa — and perhaps the colour in her face flowed from this exertion. “Oh! Mary is far better acquainted with everyone at Netherfield than I am, Aunt.”

I said nothing but I could not help reflecting that as far as Mr Coates was concerned, this was not strictly true. I might have been in his company more often, but his mind was open to Elizabeth in a way it could never have been to me. He was clearly fascinated by her — he *talked* to her — she must know his character more thoroughly.

But at that point Mama and Jane entered the room with pins and pattern-cards and several recent copies of *The Ladies' Monthly Museum*, and Aunt — now kneeling before me with the measuring tape — did not pursue the subject.

— Jennifer Paynter

stretches away on every side, though one could not see much of it on account of the grassy hillocks. I, a white man, was alone among the blacks in the terrible land of “Never Never,” — as the Australians call their *terra incognita*; and I was wrestling with a gigantic cannibal chief for the possession of two delicately-reared English girls, who were in his power.”

It never happened. Louis de Rougemont was the assumed name of Swiss-born Louis Grin. The *Oxford Companion to English Literature* describes him as “an adventurer who decided at the age of sixteen to see the world. He began as a footman to Fanny Kemble, touring through Europe and America, and eventually became butler to the governor of Australia. After spending many years there he contributed to *Wilde World Magazine* in 1898 sensational articles relating to his extraordinary, mostly bogus, voyages and adventures in search of pearls and gold, where he encountered an octopus with tentacles 75 feet long and rode turtles in the water.” It seems that, after

great public excitement in the UK over the stories, he was eventually rumbled when, in a passage of poetic beauty, he described the wonderful “flight of the wombat.” This is a very entertaining book of shipwreck, isolation and adventures with the Australian aborigines, which I found, for the most part, quite unputdownable. You just have to admire an author who can achieve that!

My dictionary defines *treasure-trove* as “treasure found hidden without evidence of ownership.” There really is a treasure-trove of early Australian literature in libraries throughout Australia. Why not skip down the aisles and grab a few titles. Taste them and discard the ones that don't appeal. Who knows what treasures you might unearth. What is more, it won't cost you a cent.

— Col Choat

[Col Choat runs the Project Gutenberg of Australia site, where many of the books mentioned above may be accessed as etexts: <http://gutenberg.net.au/plusfifty>]

great novel about Sydney. It has been the subject of a television series and has been adapted for the stage. Yet it is certainly not well-known by the reading public in Australia.

Another Dutton selection is *The Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson*. This was republished as 1788 to coincide with Australia's bi-centenary. Watkin Tench, who served as a marine on one of the vessels of the First Fleet to arrive in Australia in 1788, provides a first hand account of the voyage and then goes on to describe the subsequent settlement in Sydney. He details the natural environment of Port Jackson and its environs; the efforts to establish food production; the exploratory trips into the hinterland; and, most interestingly, the first interaction between Europeans and the Australian Aborigines. This is a remarkable eye-witness account by a thoughtful, humane man who was also a talented writer. Tench was interested in everyone and everything around him. This work may be

considered the first work of Australian literature.

There is a large body of early Australian writing which covers the journals written by early explorers including Sturt, Giles, Leichhardt and Carnegie. Dutton includes a number of these in his list, including Sturt, who had this to say as he and his crew were swept down the Murray River in a whaleboat: "I still retained a strong impression on my mind that some change was at hand, and on this occasion, I was not disappointed; but the view was one for which I was not altogether prepared. We had, at length, arrived at the termination of the Murray. Immediately below me was a beautiful lake, which appeared to be a fitting reservoir for the noble stream that had led us to it; and which was now ruffled by the breeze that swept over it."

One of *my* favourite books about Australia by an early writer is *The Adventures of Louis de Rougement*. To quote a short passage: "Just picture the scene for yourself. The weird, unexplored land

The Trip

Energy! Vital! A Purpose! Icy winds gust along the platform. The train pulls in. Whoosh! Inside. Quick! Pull the windows down — clip, clack, crash, move, and repeat, repeat. Close the carriage against the biting gusts of wind ripping into the metal and wood rattling the ancient carriage and glass. The carriage is nearly empty, in forlorn half-light, and the wind gusts through the passages of the stationary train.

Soon — it is warm, the doors and windows shut: a creak and grind and the train chugs off to the place where I will get off. The lights of the outer city are intermittent — flashing by as echoes of reality. Detached from me inside the carriage.

Too soon the creak of slow braking and the station's here. The carriage stops abruptly as I rise and brace myself for the stop. Outside — the wind is howling now, gusts of currents seeming to rip at my clothes in a frenzy of finding somewhere to land. The street light is yellow — odd against the black sky as I see the patterns the wind is making, creating, as dust flies

past the lamp post, into, then out of, the light, flying to the heavens, as if home were there tonight.

I shiver, clutch my clothes against me. The dust flies. Looking up, the paddock across the way seems to have mist over it — yet the wind denies that thought quickly as the storm increases. The mist is dust, rising from the earth as a sheath of the earth's cover splits. Plastic bunting from the car yard picks up the crescendo of the storm and I close my eyes down against the dust and run faster as the heavens seem to fly. No rain, Just dust. Today's dropped garbage zings along the gutter as the world hides inside away from the storm.

It feels exhilarating — free — my hair flies around me — then the parked truck protects me. I look up and see the heavens fly in particles of dust too small for the eye to contour — yet it is there — all round me — even in my breath. Yet, it's free and so am I. Feet lift under me as I race the wind to the car, head down, heart out. Life! Begin? I am in!

— Lavinia Godfrey

A Word in Your Pink Shell-like

Have you ever heard discussions about the word *Australia* in sporting contexts? I mean, debates about which of the following sorts of cricketing statements is correct English:

Australia are 2 for 137

or

Australia is 2 for 137.

Let's have a look at this.

You'll no doubt know the expression *collective noun*, applied to nouns which refer to a group (usually of people or animals), but which are singular in form. Common examples are these words: *family*, *government*, *committee*, *clergy*, *flock*.

Most language sources (e.g. Pam Peters in her *Cambridge Australian Style Guide*) also include under the term groups of inanimate objects in addition to groups of living creatures. *The American Heritage Book of English Usage; A Practical and Authoritative Guide to Contemporary English* (<http://www.bartleby.com/64/C001/020.html>), on the other hand, prefers the expression *mass nouns* for inanimate objects. It distinguishes such words (e.g. *furniture*, *luggage*)

from collective nouns because “they cannot be counted individually”.

Nevertheless, there are other mass nouns where this does not apply, such as *bunch*, *heap*. While you can't say *a furniture* or *a luggage*, you can say *a bunch* or *a heap*.

Questions then arise as to whether collective singulars take a singular or plural verb — as in our cricket team sentence.

Well, it depends on the context. Peters writes,

The choice of verb and pronoun (singular or plural) accords with the writer's meaning, rather than being dictated by grammar.

In other words, the matter boils down to this: does the writer/speaker want to emphasise “the collective body or its individual members” (Peters)?

The American Heritage Book of English Usage gives these examples:

The family was united on this question.

The enemy is suing for peace.

In those cases the reference is to the collection as a whole, whereas

buried treasure she must unearth.

Many years ago I purchased a “psycho-analytical” book titled *Dibs, in Search of Self* by Virginia Axline. It was then, or has become, a classic in the field of “play therapy”. However, I didn't know that at the time. I don't know what attracted me to it and enticed me to pluck it from the shelf in the bookstore, but it has remained one of my all-time favourite non-fiction books. Over the years, I have given away three or four copies to friends but have always managed to buy another. I won't be giving anything away here, in stating that the book is about a small child who seems to be intellectually retarded. Ms Axline interacts with him and it soon emerges that he is a genius with an IQ of 168. Of course that is not so important. More important is the sympathy displayed by the therapist and the incredible courage shown by the little boy in overcoming all of the problems unwittingly heaped upon him by his parents. It has always haunted me that I may never have known this

beautiful book if I hadn't stumbled upon it.

Only a small number of “modern” works survive the test of time to become part of the *treasure-trove* of literature; and those that do survive may not have been best-sellers in their time. Geoffrey Dutton, in *Australia's Greatest Books*, set out to review approximately one hundred books, only one per author, which form part of Australia's literary heritage. Not all were written by great stylists, but they were all instrumental in helping form Australia's literary heritage and all are worthwhile in one way or another.

One of Dutton's selections is *Jonah*. This is a novel set in Sydney in the early 1900s. Many of the places described — Chinatown and Paddy's markets, Botany Road, Sydney Harbour and its foreshores — are icons of Sydney. The characters — members of the “Push”, rags-to-riches businessmen like Jonah, and battlers like Chook and Pinky — are just as recognisable today. This novel has been described as the first

Sleeping Giants

A television series was shown recently on Australian television about Ernest Shackleton's Expedition to the South Pole in the early years of the twentieth century. Shackleton wrote the account soon after the expedition ended and the book, whilst popular at the time, has remained in relative obscurity for over half a century. It, no doubt, became popular reading again following the television series as viewers, intrigued by the story, went back to the original source.

As with Shackleton's book, much of the early literature of Australia has remained in relative obscurity. It might seem to be as "dry as old bones" and there are certainly few people singing its praises in order to convince people otherwise. There is, after all, no profit in promoting books which are out of copyright, and there is such a mountain of modern work which *is* promoted by publishers and reviewed in newspapers and lit-

erary journals. With such a bewildering number of books to choose from we, as consumers, are often more than willing to be guided by a trusted reviewer towards the novels which we read. Or we might choose the latest novel of a favourite author in the firm knowledge that we won't be disappointed with it. Such an author, of course, already has "runs on the board."

However, not everybody adopts the "recommendation" method of choosing books. Recently a newspaper carried a story of a reader who maintained that she simply walked down the aisles of her local library once a week and chose four books at random, from the shelves. She walked through a different section each week — fiction, biography, history, it mattered not to her. She reported that she could only read one book each week, but chose four so that she could discard the "fizzers" and move on to the next one. What courage! Oh, but what

in the following the reference is to the group's individual members:

My family are always fighting among themselves.

The enemy were showing up in groups of three or four to turn in their weapons.

This "rule" seems to apply in America and in Australia, then, but not necessarily in Britain. According to *The American Heritage Book of English Usage*,

In British usage, collective nouns are more often treated as plurals:

The government have not announced a new policy.

The team are playing in the test matches next week.

In his *Usage and Abusage*, however, the New Zealand born British lexicographer Eric Partridge took the opposing view:

Such collective nouns as can be used either in the singular or in the plural . . . are singular when unity (a unit) is intended; plural, when the idea of plurality is predominant.

So did good old Henry Fowler (*Modern English Usage*):

Nouns of multitude . . . are treated as singular or plural at discretion — & sometimes, naturally, without discretion . . . In general it may be said that while there is always a better & a worse in the matter, there is seldom a right & a wrong . . .

Characteristically, Fowler had a go at non-agreement between

noun, verb and pronoun, as in this example:

A waiter might as well serve one on a dirty plate as a journalist offer one such untidy stuff as:

The University of London Press hopes to have ready the following additions to their series of . . .

Mass nouns like *furniture* and *luggage*, by the way, always take the singular.

But coming back to the cricketers, is it *Australia is* or *Australia are*? On this one, opinions vary, so make up your own mind. Most people in Australia, wrongly or rightly, use *are*.

What about those wonderful collectives for animals, like *a pride of lions* or *a gaggle of geese*? Do they take a singular or plural verb? The short answer, as above, is "Depends".

Here is a short list of other such nouns culled quickly from various sources, a few of which you may not have seen before. Whatever else they are, some sure reflect great imagination. Interestingly, most are quite old, and many are obsolete — except for their use in lists like this:

- shrewdness of apes (15th century)
- clowder of cats (19th century)
- skulk of foxes (18th century)
- kindle of kittens (13th century)

exaltation of larks (15th century)
 parliament of owls (1960s)
 covey of partridges [also of grouse and ptarmigan] (15th century)
 muster of peacocks (15th century)
 eye of pheasants (15th century)
 bevy of quails [also of roes, larks and, of course, ladies and maidens] (15th century)
 plump of [animals that go in flocks, e.g. seals, fowl, whales, ducks] (16th century)
 rout of wolves (17th century).
 Not so old are the humorous (and sometimes derogatory) concoctions to do with various occupations:

- column of accountants
- galaxy of astronomers
- bond of British secret agents
- goring of butchers
- pound of carpenters
- solution of chemists
- quaver of coloraturas
- decorum of deans
- wince of dentists
- cross-section of geologists
- guess of diagnosticians
- recession of economists
- grid of electrical engineers
- hush [or shush] of librarians
- stack of librarians
- consternation of mothers
- slumber of old guard
- flush of plumbers

complex of psychologists
 goggle of tourists
 lot of used car dealers
 absence of waiters.

Before I conclude, I'll mention the fact that a few nouns are commonly not thought of as collectives — but they should be. Some of these are scientific terms. An interesting example is *plankton*, which the *OED* defines as

A collective name for all the forms of floating or drifting organic life at various depths in the ocean, or, by extension, in bodies of fresh water.

Trouble is, once you know this, every time you're about to use it you have to decide whether to use a singular or plural verb. Not to worry. From what I've read, more often than not it gets a plural verb. For example,

Plankton generally have limited or no swimming ability and are transported through the water by currents and tides. (<http://www.chesapeakebay.net/info/plankton.cfm>)

Even so, some writers correctly use it as a singular when the emphasis is on the group as a whole:

As a human resource, plankton has only begun to be developed and exploited. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*)

But look, unless you're a marine biologist how often are you going to say or write this word, anyway?

— Harlish Goop

bath-size Dial. I was able to locate some bath-size Ivory which I left in your room.

Elaine Carmen
 Housekeeper

Dear Mrs. Carmen,

Just a short note to bring you up-to-date on my latest soap inventory.

As of today I possess:

On shelf under medicine cabinet:

18 Camay in 4 stacks of 4 and 1 stack of 2.

On Kleenex dispenser:

11 Camay in 2 stacks of 4 and 1 stack of 3.

On bedroom dresser:

1 stack of 3 Cashmere Bouquet, 1 stack of 4 hotel-size Ivory, and 8 Camay in 2 stacks of 4.

Inside medicine cabinet:

14 Camay in 3 stacks of 4 and 1 stack of 2.

In shower soap dish:

6 Camay, very moist.

On northeast corner of tub:

1 Cashmere Bouquet, slightly used.

On northwest corner of tub:

6 Camays in 2 stacks of 3.

Please ask Kathy when she services my room to make sure the stacks are neatly piled and dusted. Also, please advise her that stacks of more than 4 have a tendency to tip. May I suggest that my bedroom window-sill is not in use and will make an excellent spot for future soap deliveries.

One more item – I have purchased another bar of bath-sized Dial which I am keeping in the hotel vault in order to avoid further misunderstandings.

S. Berman

– Forwarded by Katisha

I can be of further assistance, please call extension 1108 between 8AM and 5PM.

Thank you,
Elaine Carmen,
Housekeeper

Dear Mr. Kensedder,

My bath-size Dial is missing. Every bar of soap was taken from my room including my own bath-size Dial. I came in late last night and had to call the bellhop to bring me 4 little Cashmere Bouquets.

S. Berman

Dear Mr. Berman,

I have informed our housekeeper, Elaine Carmen, of your soap problem. I cannot understand why there was no soap in your room since our maids are instructed to leave 3 bars of soap each time they service a room. The situation will be rectified immediately. Please accept my apologies for the inconvenience.

Martin L. Kensedder
Assistant Manager

Dear Mrs. Carmen,

Who the hell left 54 little bars of Camay in my room? I came in last night and found 54 little bars of soap. I don't want 54 little bars of Camay. I want my one damn bar of bath-size Dial. Do you realize I have 54 bars of soap in here? All I want is my bath size Dial. Please give me back my bath-size Dial.

S. Berman

Dear Mr. Berman,

You complained of too much soap in your room so I had them removed. Then you complained to Mr. Kensedder that all your soap was missing so I personally returned them. The 24 Camays which had been taken and the 3 Camays you are supposed to receive daily. I don't know anything about the 4 Cashmere Bouquets. Obviously your maid, Kathy, did not know I had returned your soaps so she also brought 24 Camays plus the 3 daily Camays. I don't know where you got the idea this hotel issues

Summer Morning

Quickly now the black tide is ebbing.
Summer light foams from its hidden spring,
pale-pink-frothing over earth's brink,
over cloud ranges whose peaks turn pink.

Morn tide in warm waking waves
ripples through countless windows,
laps the ships of sleep
where lie the sheeted voyagers
wanderlusting over the seven-sea'd,
four-cornered universe of their dreams.

Waves of light begin to break upon them.
Tossing from eyes the spray of wanderlust,
they drown their dreams
and venture forth, explorers
dreaming now, awake, of real discovery
upon the shore of unmapped country, day.

— Bet Briggs

The Feral Joke Collector



Bars of Soap

[Correspondence purporting to have occurred between a London hotel's staff and one of its guests]

Dear Maid,

Please do not leave any more of those little bars of soap in my bathroom since I have brought my own bath-sized Dial. Please remove the six unopened little bars from the shelf under the medicine chest and another three in the shower soap dish. They are in my way. Thank you,

S. Berman

Dear Room 635,

I am not your regular maid. She will be back tomorrow, Thursday, from her day off. I took the 3 hotel soaps out of the shower soap dish as you requested. The 6 bars on your shelf I took out of your way and put on top of your Kleenex dispenser in case you should change your mind. This leaves only the 3 bars I left today which my instructions from the management is to leave 3 soaps daily. I hope this is satisfactory.

Kathy, Relief Maid

Dear Maid,

I hope you are my regular maid. Apparently Kathy did not tell you about my note to her concerning the little bars of soap. When I got back to my room this evening I found you had added 3 little Camays to the shelf under my medicine cabinet. I am going to be here in the hotel for two weeks and have brought my own bath-size Dial so I won't need those 6 little Camays which are on the shelf. They are in my way when shaving, brushing teeth, etc. Please remove them.

S. Berman

Dear Mr. Berman,

My day off was last wed. so the relief maid left 3 hotel soaps which we are instructed by the management. I took the 6 soaps which were in your way on the shelf and put them in the soap dish where your Dial was. I put the Dial in the medicine cabinet for your convenience. I didn't remove the 3 complimentary soaps which are always placed inside the medicine cabinet for all new check-ins and which you did not object to when you checked in last Monday. Please let me know if I can of further assistance.

Your regular maid,
Dotty

Dear Mr. Berman,

The assistant manager, Mr. Kensedder, informed me this A.M. that you called him last evening and said you were unhappy with your maid service. I have assigned a new girl to your room. I hope you will accept my apologies for any past inconvenience. If you have any future complaints please contact me so I can give it my personal attention. Call extension 1108 between 8AM and 5PM. Thank you.

Elaine Carmen
Housekeeper

Dear Mrs. Carmen,

It is impossible to contact you by phone since I leave the hotel for business at 7.45 AM and don't get back before 5.30 or 6PM. That's the reason I called Mr. Kensedder last night. You were already off duty. I only asked Mr. Kensedder if he could do anything about those little bars of soap. The new maid you assigned me must have thought I was a new check-in today, since she left another 3 bars of hotel soap in my medicine cabinet along with her regular delivery of 3 bars on the bath-room shelf. In just 5 days here I have accumulated 24 little bars of soap. Why are you doing this to me?

S. Berman

Dear Mr. Berman,

Your maid, Kathy, has been instructed to stop delivering soap to your room and remove the extra soaps. If