

**FEBRUARY MEETING**

## *Verbatim Editor Erin McKean to Have Last Word on Words & Reference Materials*

**BY JAMES J. HODL**

**WHAT WRITER DOESN'T YEARN FOR THE PERFECT WORD?  
WHO DOESN'T NEED TO KNOW MORE ABOUT REFERENCES?**

Is there a word that most perfectly fits the thought or idea that you are trying to get across in an article? And are there reference materials available that one can check to verify a nettlesome fact?

Expect Erin McKean to have the last word on both subjects during her presentation, "Quidnunc: Little Known Reference Materials" during the next IWOC meeting on Tuesday, February 13.

McKean likes to call herself a "dictionary evangelist." She is chief consulting editor of American Dictionaries for Oxford University Press and editor of *Verbatim: The Language Quarterly*, a quarterly online magazine of language and linguistics for the layperson. She was editor-in-chief of the *New Oxford American Dictionary, 2e*, and is the author of *Weird and Wonderful Words*, *More Weird and Wonderful Words*, *Totally Weird and Wonderful Words* and *That's Amore* (yet another book

about words). McKean also has served on the board of the Dictionary Society of America and on the editorial board of the American Dialect Society. She currently serves on the advisory board of the Wikimedia Foundation (which reviews online additions to the Wikipedia ency-

where they can find them.

And McKean also has a passion for words and writing and will likely share her opinions on the state of word skills among today's population, some of whom have even taken to using e-mail shortcuts in their prose.

"Quidnunc: Little Known Reference Materials" will be the centerpiece of the IWOC meeting to be held Tuesday, February 13 at the Chicago Athletic Club's 7th Floor Lakeshore Room, 12 S. Michigan Ave. Come at 5 p.m. to network with other professional freelance writers over gourmet cookies and coffee. The main program, including a brief business meeting, begins at 6 p.m. Admission is free to all IWOC members and \$15 to nonmembers.

Attendees are invited after the meeting to continue discussing the presentation or simply network with other independent writers at a nearby restaurant over a buy-your-own dinner. ♦



clopedia).

Through her work, McKean has come upon many unusual reference books that many people may not have heard about. And she is very willing to share knowledge of their existence with writers, including

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## PRESIDENT'S COLUMN / HARRY KARABEL

# President's Day

Like almost everything, President's Day is not what it used to be. First of all, it was not just a day. It was two days: February 16 was (and still is, I suppose) Lincoln's birthday and February 22 belonged to George Washington.

The dates and the associated holidays suggested these were the only two good presidents we ever had. At Sawyer Elementary School we could count on a review of the lives of these two men and probably an assembly where we would sing Mrs. Thompson's favorite patriotic songs: "It's a Grand Old Flag," and "I Love the United States of America," and a solemn "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and all the verses of "America the Beautiful" and the national anthem. Mrs. Thompson had the best voice we ever heard and played the grand piano in the drafty, two-story assembly hall with great spirit. She once tried out to sing with Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians but didn't make the cut, she said, because she smoked. It was hard for us to imagine that he could actually find better singers anywhere, and we always wondered if we were being told the truth or a lesson. The name drop made us believe the former.

But that's what we did in school. We would get two days off, and those days would be the president's actual birthdays, unless they were on Saturday or Sunday, in which case we would get the Friday before

or the Monday after, respectively. Two weeks in a row we would get a day off, in the middle of winter. That meant sledding or snowball fights or building snowmen or snow forts or all-day visits at a friend's house.

Or we might go to the movies, specifically, to the Colony Theater at 59th and Kedzie. Despite the current mythology about the two-income family being a brand new wrinkle in the fabric of this American life, a lot of my classmates had parents who worked. So taking a day off in the middle of the week so your kid could throw snowballs could be a hassle. You had to find a sitter who maybe didn't want to watch your kids, or had three other friends whose children would have time on their hands thanks to the birthdays of these founding fathers.

On those days, the Colony would run a special kids-only feature: 25 cartoons and a movie — a swashbuckler or a Western — for a buck. This put you in the theater for about six hours. Two bucks for popcorn, candy, and soda and you were good to go. (Buttered popcorn was 50 cents. Candy was 25 cents. Pop was a dime.) The sitter could drop you off about 11:00 and mom or dad would pick you up at 5:00. Some particularly brave sitters might actually oversee a young horde all afternoon and spend lots of time in the lobby smoking.

I remember those days very well because, first of all, any time in a movie



theater was fine with me. I was

already in love with the movies for reasons that would require another dozen of these columns to explain. Cable was just a faraway dream, "couch potato" had not yet been coined, and the cartoons we got to see didn't make it to the Saturday morning line-up. Any movie on the big screen in color was better than the snowy black and white picture at home. At the movies, the world did not exist. At the movies, the world was fifty feet wide and 20 feet high, and flat and loud and brilliant. At the movies, the heroes were larger than life and perfect. When the show was over, it was dark. It was like the day never happened. When my own children started spending hours in front of the television watching reruns of shows I used to hate or building Olympian thumb muscles while clutching game controllers, and I found myself saying "why don't you go outside and get some fresh air?" I really did understand the allure. Been there, done that, and I'd go back to it in a New York minute.

But it had nothing to do with President's Day, any more than the current observance does. Now it's President's weekend, sandwiched in between the real birth dates and designed to give students, teachers, and parents a long weekend for bolstering the economy. This

*Continued on page 4.*

## IWOCers Get Inside Story on Political Corruption

BY CHUCK COFFIN

### MERRINER GIVES WITTY, INFORMATIVE PRESENTATION ON ILLINOIS POLS

James L. Merriner, veteran political journalist and author, gave a fascinating and often humorous behind-the-scenes look at Illinois politics as the featured speaker at the January 9, 2007, meeting of the Independent Writers of Chicago.

Merriner has covered the state's political scene for more than 25 years and is known for his exposes of corruption in high office. His newest book, *The Man Who Emptied Death Row: George Ryan and the Politics of Crime*, will be published in 2008.

Merriner is also the author of several other political books, including *Mr. Chairman: Power in Dan Rostenkowski's America* and *Grafters and Goo Goos: Corruption and Reform in Chicago, 1883-2003*. He worked as a political journalist and columnist for the Atlanta Constitution and the Chicago Sun-Times before deciding in 1995 to become a full-time author.

The speaker noted that both Rostenkowski and Ryan initially refused to cooperate with him in the writing of his books because they were intending to write books of their own. Later Ryan dropped his book project and allowed Merriner to interview him.

Merriner felt that Ryan had sincere misgivings about the death penalty and was not motivated entirely by political considerations when

he granted a blanket Death Row reprieve just before the end of his term as governor.

Merriner also commented on the notorious "license for bribes" scandal that occurred during Ryan's tenure as Illinois secretary of state. The speaker said that Ryan was unfairly assessed all of the blame when a truck driver who had obtained a fraudulent license caused an accident that killed several children. He said that the accident could have happened even if the truck driver had been properly licensed.

"How do you get people to talk about their involvement in corruption and scandals?" Merriner was asked. He responded that while a major figure under indictment may refuse to answer questions, it is often possible to get information from associates and others close to the scene. "Just remember that everybody likes to talk about himself," Merriner pointed out. He also noted that the Newberry Library is an excellent source of background information on politics and politicians.

While he has had a successful career as a political writer, Merriner did concede that opportunities for freelance writers in the political field are limited. With the demise and mergers of many newspapers in recent years, the market for political stories has declined. ♦

Herding freelancers is a

## Labor Union, Redefined, for Freelance Workers

BY STEVEN GREENHOUSE

This article, which appeared on January 27, 2007, is reprinted in its entirety with permission from the New York Times.

Herding freelancers is a bit like herding cats. Both are notoriously independent.

Nonetheless, Sara Horowitz has figured out a way to bring together tens of thousands of freelancers — Web designers, video editors, writers, dancers and graphic artists — into a thriving organization.

Ms. Horowitz has founded the Freelancers Union, offering members lower-cost health coverage and other benefits that many freelancers often have a hard time getting.

A former labor lawyer, Ms. Horowitz intends to form a forceful advocacy group for freelancers and independent contractors, the most mobile members of an increasingly mobile work force. In addition, she is trying to adapt unions to a world far different from yesterday, when workers often remained with one employer for two or three decades.

"This really is about a new unionism," she said, "and what it means is to bring people together to solve their problems."

Having signed up 40,000 freelancers from the New York area, she is now planting her group's flag across the nation, hoping to herd far more of the nation's 20 million freelancers and independent contractors into her union.

"These workers are the backbone for so many industries vital to our nation's economy — I.T., financial services, the arts, advertising and publishing," she said.

"Yet these same workers are not afforded simple job protections or a social safety net."

By creating a new type of union for nontraditional workers, Ms. Horowitz hopes to help revive the labor movement. Its membership has slipped to just 7.4 percent of the private-sector work force, down from one-third in 1960.

Unlike traditional unions, the Freelancers Union has no intention of bargaining with employers. Still, Ms. Horowitz says her group's main goal is identical to that of all unions — providing mutual aid, in this case health benefits, to their members.

"More and more people are not going to get their benefits from an employer," Ms. Horowitz said. "Our ultimate goal is to update the New Deal. It is to create a new safety net that's connected to the individual as they move from job to job."

Jennifer Lebin joined the Freelancers Union while living in Manhattan after seeing one of its subway ads that say, "Welcome to Middle-Class Poverty." Ms. Lebin, a political consultant, bought the group's health coverage and paid \$20 to attend a union-sponsored seminar offering tax advice to consultants and independent contractors.

Ms. Lebin, who has moved to Chicago, expressed disappointment that she could no longer use the union's

Continued on page 4.

## Freelancers' Union *Continued from page 3.*

health plan — doctors in Illinois are not part of the network. "If there is a way that the Freelancers Union could offer the same benefits to members outside the New York area, I'd sign up in a heartbeat," she said.

The Freelancers Union, which sells benefits à la carte, hopes to offer health benefits in 10 states by the end of this year. It is already offering

its discounted disability and life insurance nationwide.

More than 14,000 freelancers in the New York area have bought its health insurance, generally for about \$300 a month, some 40 percent below what they would normally pay elsewhere. The organization has also used its group purchasing power to help freelancers obtain discounted dental, disability and life insurance.

Membership in the Freelancers Union is free. To finance itself, the group uses an entrepreneurial model: it earns modest commissions on the benefits that its members buy.

Robert Bruno, a professor of labor relations at the University of Illinois at Chicago, praised the group's innovative approach, although he said it could not replace traditional unions.

"This needs to be part of labor's repertoire," Professor Bruno said. "To the degree it helps to reshape what we've come to understand what a labor organization is, it's all to the good."

Ms. Horowitz, 44, won a MacArthur genius award in 1999 after she established Working Today, a group based in Brooklyn that focused on providing

benefits to New Yorkers in flexible work arrangements. She founded the Freelancers Union in 2003, with a more ambitious vision.

The group intends to do advocacy work just like a labor union. In New York, it is backing legislation to let freelancers obtain unemployment insurance. Even if freelancers are laid off after working for an employer for two years, they cannot receive unemployment benefits because they are considered independent contractors.

Some members do not expect the group to play the role of a traditional union.

"Unions represent members in negotiating wages and benefits," said Barbara Scott, an artist in Berlin Center, Ohio. "I don't see the Freelancers Union functioning that way. I see it as a networking tool."

Bobby Ambrose, a graphic designer in Chicago, disagreed.

"I was hoping that they would be like a labor union," Mr. Ambrose said. "There are a lot of situations that freelancers face regarding pay rates and job hours, like when you're doing full-time work when you're only hired to be part time. It would be nice if they could push to make things better."

Several traditional unions are studying the freelance union's progress, perhaps to borrow some ideas on organizing nonunion workers and offering benefits.

"The labor movement," Ms. Horowitz said, "went from guilds through mutual aid societies through craft unions and through industrial unionism. You're not going to persuade me that there is not going to be a new form of unionism. The story's not over on what we're creating." ♦♦

## Before You Get Too Excited . . .

*The adjacent New York Times article brings a ray of hope that affordable insurance might become available to freelancers — if the union comes to Chicago. However, we consulted an expert, an IWOCer who spent 20 years marketing health insurance, who has some cautionary words about coverage. Read her comments below, and consult someone you trust before buying any insurance. — Editor*

I would caution that the kind of insurance you can get for \$3600 per year tends to be what's known as a "defined benefit" plan. Offered by such companies as MegaLife, these plans pay only a specified amount and no more for things like doctors' visits. For example, they might pay a \$1500 annual benefit for physicians' and other charges and an annual benefit of \$2000 for hospitalization. That means, if you go to the doctor for an annual physical and tests, buy a couple of prescriptions, and so forth, you've used up your annual benefit. If your doc prescribes an expensive test, such as an MRI or colonoscopy, you will pay for it out of your own pocket.

To compare: typically, the cost for single coverage with a traditional insurance plan — one that pays 70 percent or 80 percent of expenses (after a deductible) and has a stop-loss of \$10,000 or \$20,000 — ranges from about \$10,000-\$11,000 per year. With a high deductible (\$2500-\$3000), the cost ranges from \$6000-\$7000. Group rates are somewhat lower than those for individual plans. ♦♦

## President's Column *Continued from page 2.*

will be a shopping, room service, hotel-pool- and-sauna weekend for my family: an expensive escape from the winter doldrums.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not nostalgic for the old days where we were forced The Mythology of Great Men. Few politicians live up to their reputations, and I suspect that, along with their stellar impact on history, George and Abe had secrets to keep. Demythologizing holds a lot more appeal for me, but I don't really expect us to take a pause as a nation and give the banks and the post office the day off and hold public meetings to debunk the presidency of those long-dead men.

But I do think it would be valuable to reflect on the

perception of heroism that gave rise to these February celebrations in the first place. It was their heroism that earned them our homage. The heroism of our larger-than-life public figures gave us the courage we needed to get through the challenges of our day-to-day lives. While there is plenty of heroism to observe if you squint through the rose-colored filter of network news, little of it comes from our public figures. And if you don't think heroism is important, then you have never been shopping with my wife and daughter. Perhaps I will just let them linger and browse up and down Michigan Avenue looking for bargains. And I'll go to the movies. ♦♦

## Musings on the Language

*This column originally appeared in the October 1998 issue of Stet, but we thought it might whet your appetites for the February program, which is about words as well as references. The column came from the internet, and the author is unknown.*

There's no egg in eggplant nor ham in hamburger and neither apple nor pine in pineapple. English muffins weren't invented in England nor French fries in France. Sweetmeats are candies while sweetbreads, which aren't sweet, are meat.

We take English for granted. But if we explore its paradoxes, we find that quicksand can work slowly, boxing rings are square, guinea pigs are neither from Guinea nor are they pigs.

And why is it that writers

write, but fingers don't fing, grocers don't groce, and hammers don't ham? If the plural of tooth is teeth, why isn't the plural of booth beeth? One goose, two geese. So one moose, two meese? One mouse, two mice. So one house, two hice?

Doesn't it seem crazy that you can make amends but not one amend, that you can comb through the annals of history but not a single annal? If you have a bunch of odds and ends and get rid of all but one of them, what do you call it?

If teachers taught, why didn't preachers praught? If a vegetarian eats vegetables, what does a humanitarian eat? If you wrote a letter, did you perhaps also bote your tongue?

Sometimes I think all English speakers should be committed to an asylum for the verbally insane. In what other language do people recite at a play and play at

a recital? Ship by truck and send cargo by freight? Have noses that run and feet that smell? Park on driveways and drive on parkways?

How can a slim chance and a fat chance be the same, while a wise man and a wise guy are completely different? How can overlook and oversee be opposites, while quite a lot and quite a few are alike? How can the weather be hot as hell one day and cold as hell another?

Have you noticed that we talk about certain things only when they are absent? Have you ever seen a horseful carriage or a strapful gown? Met a sung hero or experienced requited love?

Have you ever run into someone who was com-bobulated, grunted, ruly, or peccable? And where are all those people who *are* spring chickens or who *would* actually hurt a fly?

You have to marvel at the unique lunacy of a language in which your house can burn down at the same time it burns up, in which you fill in a form by filling it out, and in which an alarm clock goes off when it is on.

English was invented by people, not computers — though one has to wonder sometimes — and it reflects the creativity of the human race (which isn't a race at all). That is why, when the stars are out, they are visible, but when the lights are out, they are invisible. And why, when I wind up my watch, I start it, but when I wind up this essay, I end it. ♦

## Calendar

### February 13

**IWOC monthly meeting.** "Quidnunc: Little Known Reference Materials." Chief consulting editor of American Dictionaries for Oxford University Press, Erin McKean reveals unusual, unheard-of, invaluable reference books and where to find them. Tuesday, February 13th, Chicago Athletic Club's 7th Floor Lakeshore Room, 12 S. Michigan Ave. Program 6 p.m. Networking 5 p.m. Nonmembers, \$15; IWOC members free. For more information, call 847-855-6670 or visit [www.iwoc.org](http://www.iwoc.org).

### March 13

**IWOC monthly meeting.** Save the date. Details to come.

*The monthly food and networking get-togethers listed below meet at the same time and place each month unless otherwise noted, but call ahead in case of cancellation. The groups welcome nonmembers. If there's no group in your area, why not start one? Contact [webmaster@iwoc.org](mailto:webmaster@iwoc.org).*

### February 22 (4th Thursday)

**IWOOP monthly lunch.** Join near-west suburbanites at noon for an outdoor lunch at Poor Phil's, 139 S. Marion St., Oak Park (summer location). For more info, call Barb Dillard at 312/642-3065.

### March 1 (1st Thursday)

**IWORP monthly breakfast.** Join the Rogers Park IWOC contingent for breakfast at 9 AM at the A&T Grill, 7036 N. Clark St., Chicago. For more info, call Esther Manewith at 773/274-6215.

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