

IMPLOSION

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Implosion: The Fanzine that proves anyone can publish a fanzine.
Member, fwa.

My Punishment

By Arnie Katz

I've been reading Burbee lately. As if you couldn't tell.

Producing **The Incomplete Burbee** was a refresher course at fanwriting school. Prof. Burbee's lessons have changed my life. Well, at least the part that involves writing for fanzines.

Thanks to his influence, my prose is leaner. My phrases are razor sharp. The characters in my anecdotes leap off the page.

I've got my edge.

That's not the way it was before I spent so many nights with the Burbee anthology. My prose was laid back, languid. My Shield of Umor was mirror-bright, but the Rapier of Wit was a little rusted here, a bit pitted there. All right, since I'm telling the truth. It was busted in half.

It crystallized at Magicon. Ted White, more in sadness than in censure, said to me, "You've lost your edge." He said it with the confidence of a man who knows that his writing has Edge.

"I think you're right, Ted," I admitted. I couldn't look my mentor in the eye. I was ashamed. Edgeless and ashamed.

"Maybe you wanted to lose it," he offered, trying to toss me a life preserver.

"Maybe I did," I said, though I knew I didn't. I wanted my writing to have an Edge. Just at that moment, I wanted an edge as big as the continental shelf.

Ashamed and edgeless and incontinent. I slunk into the night. In the solitude of my hotel room, I pondered my fannish future.

I banished illusions and faced the

undeniable truth. My prose had packed on some pounds around the middle, gotten flabby in the muscles.

I resolved to do something. The first step, of course, was to analyze the problem.

I turned to my spell checker for facts and figures. Hard as it may be for some to believe, I do own one. *Thunder 7* can run copy through the Flesch Index and Grunning's Fog Index. Both measure readability.

BB (Before Burbee), my stuff generally hit the high school reading level. Only when the rating ballooned to university level did I run the piece through the machine for one last revision.

The Incomplete Burbee (35th Anniversary Edition, \$10) changed all that. Now I hit seventh grade reading level every time. The Burbee Academy has guided me from hemming and hawing to Hemingway. It makes me want to chase the bull, Or perhaps throw it.

I am a satisfied customer.

A proud (and lonely) graduate. Charles Burbee, the Jack Lalanne of fanwriting, has made me a sinewy literary machine.

So, I'm satisfied. Burb can use me in an ad if he starts Burbee's Famous Fanwriters School.

Except for one thing.

The process which transformed me into a fanwriting colossus somehow extinguished my ability to pun.

I've always fancied myself a renaissance man of fannish humor. I don't let the fact that no one else has seen fit to make this observation stop me. You name it, I've tried it. If I'm not the best at any one type of fan humor, flexibility ought to be worth something. My willingness to try any and every approach, from slapstick to repartee, is one of my strengths.

I'm no Willis at puns. He'd easily vanquish me in any waw of words. My punning was a humbler gift, the kind you buy for a two-buck holiday grab

bag.

But I enjoyed it. It gave me pleasure on nights when it was impossible to jump for Joyce. I'd stumble onto a pun, insert it into an article, and bask in self-admiration.

I always knew my pun-making ability was limited, so I rationed it. I used them here and there to spice up articles and faan fiction like "Willis Plays Vegas".

Willis' "In Defense of the Pun" is a definitive statement about wordplay. If I wrote an article about this art, I would probably title it, "In Offense of the Pun".

It would plead for moderation in punnery. Self-censorship could cure 90% of hammy puns. I've gained a small reputation, because I don't try for quantity. Though unable to create a lot of great puns, I could stop myself from swamping the world in bad ones.

And then the punning stopped. The problem burst upon me full blown during a fanwriting session. I reached a place in on article that cried out for a pun. A good one could turn an amusing paragraph into a roil on the floor comedic turn,

I couldn't think of anything. I was im-pun-tent. On reflection, I realized I hadn't made a written or verbal pun in weeks. That's carrying restraint too far.

Like a slumping baseball player, I began to push too hard. I'd warp an article to admit a hideous pun -- and then delete it in the final revision.

Conversation went no better. I'd start to utter some ghod-awful play on words and realize it was unworthy. Sometimes I stopped myself, sometimes I didn't.

My friends began looking at me funny. Then I heard the whispers. "He's lost it," said the wagging tongues of Las Vegas Fandom.

They weren't sympathetic, at least at first. "Here comes the ex-punster" they would say when I walked into a room. "Got any jous de mot for us," they taunted.

Maybe they were trying to jolly me out of my punlessness. Whatever their motivation, my punning faculty remained frustratingly inert.

I knew I'd reached some kind of breakpoint when their scorn turn to pity. We were talking about the fan articles we all intended to write, when Joyce said to me,

"Arnie, you're always so good at names. I need one for a faan fiction piece I'm thinking of doing about my incessant head colds."

"How about 'Sinus Fiction'?" I said immediately. For an instant, I felt the old confidence return. I could still launch one.

It was too easy. Then Joyce said, "That's so wonderful! I knew only you could think of such a punderful title!"

Now I was certain it was a set-up. You don't live with a woman for 23 years without learning something. She was faking all that heartiness and enthusiasm. She'd concocted the exchange to feed me a patently obvious pun opportunity, probably in hopes of stimulating my dormant faculty.

It make me feel better, but not for long. When more puns didn't follow, I grew desperate.

When someone mentioned a recently closed fast food joint, I said that eating there was like a sentence to burgatory. That was fine, except that Charlene Komar Kunkel Storey said it 20 years, and several surnames, ago.

I had sunk to recycling puns! Pardon, recycling stolen puns. All I needed to complete my degradation was an "I Pun for Food" sign and a spot in front of the next worldcon.

I tried everything to shake the malaise. I even attempted a Feghoot. The result seemed unusually vapid, even for that puerile medium.

Nothing goes right when you're slumping. Four days of labor produced one pun. And it wasn't usable, because it referred to a Vegas fandom *liaison dangereuse*. It was of interest only to the participants, possibly not even them. I couldn't imagine an appropriate written or spoken opportunity. The sad part is that I tried for 20 minutes.

Joyce put a consoling arm on my shoulder. Once again, she had watched me strain for a pun, the kind I once concocted so effortlessly, and fail.

I sat there, hunched over with shame. Beads of sweat from my vain exertions dripped down my forehead.

"Maybe you're trying too hard," she offered.

"Trying too hard?" I repeated. "They don't happen by themselves. At least not to me."

"Maybe it's time to consider other alternatives," she said.

"Other alternatives?"

"You could stop making puns," she said tentatively.

"Never!" I was adamant.

"Well, have you considered Rehab?" Joyce looked away.

"What do you mean?"

"We could retrain you, like they do people after strokes or incapacitating accidents."

"We'?"

"The Vegrants! They'll help you."

"They will?"

"We, your fannish students, must now turn teacher," she declared. "We'll get you up and punning in no time!"

"When could we start?" At that point, I would have tried anything.

"No time like the present!" She picked up the phone and started gathering the shiftless band.

Two hours later, they were sitting in the living room. Joyce patiently explained the problem. "Let me try first," she concluded, edging closer to me on the couch.

"OK, Arnie," she said in an especially low and soothing tone. "Let's try something simple.

"We will try to restimulate the roots of your punning power. I'll start the pun, and you finish it."

"I'm ready."

"My fingers are willing but my thumb..."

"... is recalcitrant!" I completed. It sounded good to me, but the way Raven flicked her bull whip in my direction suggested that it was not the answer they sought.

"Maybe that wasn't a good choice," Joyce said. "How about this: My father was a printer..."

"I thought your father was a railroad man?" I inquired.

"And you're getting off the track, Joyce snapped, stubbornly maintaining her train of thought. "You've got to cooperate if your rehab is going to work. Now, My father was a printer..." I don't see why she had to pronounce each word so distinctly.

"... and mine managed a factory!"

"No, that is not correct, Arnie." she shook her head. "Give him three, Raven!"

By the time they brought me around, Joyce had regained her composure. "I hope

that provides sufficient motivation. Begin again. My father was a printer and I have reverted..."

I laughed. "That's a good one!"

"He may be worse than we thought," Bill Kunkel blurted. Laurie Yates began crying.

"Shall I motivate him again?" Raven asked.

"Maybe later," said Ken Forman. "We don't want to tire you out before we motivate JoHn to write something for **Wild Heirs.**"

"We should try it again," Joyce said, "It'll work. I know it!" She returned her attention to me. "Now try very, very hard, Arnie.

"I really can't promise anything, Joyce," I said nervously. "After all, my father was a gourmet chef, and I'm addicted to tripe."

The room got very quiet.

"Did you hear that?" Bill asked.

"He made a pun!" Joyce marvelled. Laurie Yates wept for joy.

I had made a pun. Not my best work, granted, but a definite pun. In my agitated state, my subconscious mind had taken over and created a minor witticism. "Am I cured?"

"...like the big ham you are..." JoHn muttered.

"No, Arnie, rehabilitation is not accomplished in an instant," Joyce explained.

"But you have had a wonderful success, possibly even a break through."

"I want to get well. I want to walk in the fannish sunlight again."

"Then we have work to do," said Joyce with new resolve. "Try the one we started before. My father was a printer and I..."

"...have reverted..."

"Go on, go on," Ken prompted.

"You can do it, Big Guy, you can do it," seconded Bill.

"...reverted to... to..." It was agonizingly close. I knew there was something I was supposed to say, some type of remark. Wait! That was it! "... reverted to type!"

"That's wonderful!" Joyce said.

"Repeating an old pun doesn't seem like much to me," I said. "I guess I can't help plagiarizing Himself."

"Why is that?" Bill said.

"Because my father was a printer, and I'm just a copy Katz!"

Joy reigned among the Vegrants. I had climbed, haltingly to be sure, over the first hurdle.

"Arnie, that was wonderful," Joyce said. "You're on the way back."

"Willis would have been proud to make that pun," Ken said.

"He would have been silly to make it," Joyce corrected. "Who ever heard of a 'copy Willis'?"

Laurie began to cry again. This time, I felt like joining her.

"This is the big step, Arnie," Joyce encouraged. "See if you can make a premeditated pun."

A solo flight already? The hair at the back of my neck stiffened. Every eye was on me.

"My father was... was...." I had to think of a profession. "My father pitched for a baseball team, and I..."

"...and you?...." I felt like Joyce was attempting to will the words into my mouth. I had to do it. I couldn't let her down. I couldn't disappoint the legion of eager young neofans who had only recently looked to me as the font of fannish humor.

"My father pitched for a baseball team, but I've struck out on my own," I said. There was polite laughter. Well, that might be stretching the point. A couple of them coughed convivially.

"That was good, Arnie," Joyce assured me.

"More universality," Bill offered. "Willis, White, and Shaw may not get the baseball reference.

"Maybe he should lie down, gather his strength," Laurie said.

"No," I told her. "I need to go on."

"Concentrate hard, and pull out all the stops!" Raven ordered.

"I can't do it any other way," I said. "My father was a dry cleaner, and I'm always pressing."

"Did you hear that?" Joyce said to the others. "Did you hear that?"

"Not vintage, but a definite play on words," John Hardin judged. I knew he spoke for all of them.

"It's a breakthrough! He's made a breakthrough," Joyce exulted. "We've got to build on that." She fixed me with a resolute stare. "All right, Arnie, give us another one."

"My father was a composer, but I've done nothing of note!" The sound of groans and laughter lifted the invisible weight from my shoulders.

"By Ghu, I think he's got it!" said Moshe Feder, no doubt surprised to find himself in what seemed to be a serious, or at least dull, Fortunately, he had the presence of mind to perform an a capella version of "The Pun That's Fun Shines Brighter Than the Sun?"

"He's got it! He's got it!" the Vegrants chorused.

Moshe's sudden appearance didn't faze these veterans of more than two years of Katzian fan-literary madness.

I left during intermission, booted up the word processor and wrote this article.

And to those who feel cheated that I didn't print the entire second act of this mythical version of "My Fair Femmefan", I say. "My father was a sculptor, but I'm just a chiseler.