

TALES FROM TEGUCIGALPA

(I wrote these pieces about me and my fellow students when I did a teacher-training course a few years ago. The names are fictitious.)

Suggested reading for teachers of English to adults

The following books have all been recommended by students on CELTA courses around the world. While not intended as a substitute for in-depth reading of the assigned literature, these books will be useful for gaining further insights into the peculiarities of the English language (to say nothing of its teachers).

Karen Karsen

Me, Myself and I, Big House Publishers, hardback, \$45.

KK, as she is known to her millions of viewers, has finally written her long awaited autobiography. In her own words Karsen gives her side of some of the better publicised moments in her life. Sadly, the questions many will have about her perhaps ‘improper’ relationship with Frank Sinatra remain tantalisingly unanswered; and Ol’ Blue Eyes himself went to that big Vegas in the sky without breathing a word! However, Karsen does reveal that Sinatra was a firm believer in the old Sicilian code of *omerta*. “Ya gotta have honor,” she remembers him saying.

The better known periods of her life, after she shot to stardom as a talk-show host, are treated with great good humor; the marriages, the divorces, the ear-biting incident, and the roller coaster ride of rags-to-riches, riches-to-rags, and, triumphantly, back once more to rank amongst one of the best paid entertainers in America. Karsen says she has often asked herself if she was hopelessly stupid, or simply hopelessly bright. Why else would she keep on fighting to be number one?

Away from the floodlights Karsen likes to lead a relatively quiet life. Readers who know her energetic and up-beat personality from her show will be surprised to learn that her favorite pastime when at home is reading her Webster’s Dictionary!

Also new to the public are the revelations about the childhood poverty she endured while growing up in rural Minnesota. Winters were usually spent sheltering in a haystack (as Karson amusingly relates, this was known as a ‘Minnesota igloo’). When provisions ran low the family was frequently obliged to resort to cannibalism. Karsen has a knack for seeing the funny side of

life, and her description of her and her sisters arguing over the choicer pieces of an unlucky insurance salesman is, alone, worth the price of admission. If you like KK's show you'll love her book!

Ruth Ginsburg (reprinted with the permission of *TV Woild* magazine).

Tabitha Steele

The Golden Blackboard, Pieman & Shooter, paperback, \$19.95.

A young American woman, Emelia Pinkerton, is teaching English in late-thirties Japan. At an embassy party she meets a dashing Japanese navy pilot and a passionate love affair ensues. Despite the barriers of language and custom they learn to communicate with each other in a way that makes sense to them. But, alas, the clouds of war are gathering and before long the lovers realize that theirs is a love that cannot be.

Broken hearted, Emelia leaves Japan for the Phillipines. Sato is posted to special training to prepare for the imminent war. Their parting on a steam-shrouded platform in Tokyo railway station is beautifully rendered.

Sato held her tightly, the brass buttons of his uniform pressing uncomfortably into her breasts.

“When see you I again my carifonia rotus rossom?”

“Sato, when will I. Say it again, when will I...”

Her hands danced out the rhythm of the words.

“When will I see you again?”

“Very *good!* Oh! dahling Sato, I don't know *when* we'll meet again. Maybe when the world has come to its senses and this madness is over.”

“Sensei?”

“*Senses*, my dahling. *Senses*. If you have your senses you're not mad.”

“Ah so! Non-sense is mad-ness! I unhastan. I am no non-sense. I can much stan you!”

“I love you too Sato!”

The Phillipines prove to be no refuge and Emelia is forced to flee into the jungle when the Japanese invade. Unknown to her, Sato is serving aboard an aircraft carrier forming part of the Japanese invasion fleet.

After months of grueling trekking through the mountains of Luzon she makes contact with a

resistance group and spends the rest of the war fighting the Japanese alongside a handsome young Phillipino guerrilla by the name of Ferdinand. Sato meanwhile becomes an ace fighter pilot with many victories. He is killed in the closing months of the war defending a lump of rock in the Pacific no bigger than a beach blanket. When the war ends Emelia returns to California and starts an avocado farm in the San Joaquin Valley, and dreams of her beloved Sato.

This valedictory to love is also a powerful indictment of the absurdity of war. Against the grand sweep of the drama and pain of world conflict Steele has captured the essence of these spirits that love each other despite the horrors and allegiances that separate them. A remarkable tour-de-force for a first time author.

Mary Goodnight - *The National Titillator*. This review is reproduced with the permission of the Rupert Murdoch Corporation.

Dr Christopher St. John-Smythe

The Decline and Fall of American English, Mudflats University Press, \$NZ 75.

This is not the first time that Dr St. John-Smythe has put forward ideas that others do not understand. Not so long ago he was featured in these pages arguing in favour of bicycle driving licences; an idea that he presented with excellent argumentation but to little apparent effect. It is to be feared that this, his most recent book, will not change many minds either, despite the clarity and force of the exposition.

Dr St. John-Smythe's thesis in *Decline and Fall* is that we can no longer speak of American 'English' as such. It has, he contends, degenerated to such an extent that it can no longer be usefully classified as English. Honesty requires that the language be recognised for what it is, namely the *American* language.

This idea is not new of course and nor does Dr St. John-Smythe make any claim to be its initiator. What *is* original is the fashion in which he brings razor-sharp linguistic insights to bear in identifying the causes of alienation from the model form. His research has established a wealth of what he has called "axes" that are the "engines" of degeneration. To give one example:

...the syntax and gun-ownership axis that leads to American (and *non-English*) locutions such as (note the primitive phonemes) "Stikmup!", "Aal tekdem keys", and "This taan aint bignuf ferther toofuz."

Interviewed recently on BBC4 Dr St. John-Smythe offered a clear synopsis of his so called

swamp-to-oil analogy that I can do no better than to quote.

[The American language] is really in the state of returning to the condition of an ur-language. Rather like the Primal Swamp it's *from* this soup that real languages grow. Of course in this case the language is in the decomposition phase. It still has some degenerating to do before it's ready to serve as a suitable culture for more advanced forms. This is one reason of course that the American language has been so successful in spreading around the world. It's quite easy to learn - I've learnt it myself! - and is convenient for understanding the American popular music that floods our airwaves...

In spite of the eloquence of Dr St. John-Smythe's argument it is probable that the current spoilation of standards that is powered by American cultural hegemony will continue unchecked. Professor Fiona Horseshare is the holder of the Baroness Thatcher Chair of English Language at the University of Spottiswood. This review is reprinted with the gracious permission of *Our Language Today* magazine and the English Labial Trust.

Dr Ulrike Mandela

Theology, Theocracy, and Thanotic Theory, Gombridge University Press, hardback, £75.

The publication of a new opus by Dr Mandela is always a welcome event but her latest research into thanotic theories in the realm of the theological underpinnings of theocracies is particularly exciting. It includes some extremely original work on the origins of the Spanish Inquisition and Tomás de Torquemada's philosophy of *conversión por medio de exterminio*.

Dr Mandela demonstrates with great lucidity the linking concepts that operated in Torquemada's use of thumb-screws to elicit the required answers when putting the non-Christians of Spain through what was known as *práctica controlada*. Torquemada showed great subtlety with the questions he posed during these somewhat one-sided theological debates.

To the question "What do you eat for breakfast?", for example, there was only one correct answer, namely, "Bacon and eggs." Heretics, Jews, and Muslims had no chance against this sort of dialectic and soon perished in an *auto-da-fé* for the crime of *sintaxis inacceptable*.

Nor was the *barrera lingüística* a problem. Torquemada organised the systematic translation of the *preguntas inductivas* into all the languages spoken on the Iberian peninsula at that time. Not until the development of the bi-lingual telephone directory in New York in 1958 would the world see such a bold attempt at post-cultural syntactical synthesis.

Dr Mandela also shows to what extent Torquemada's thinking was contingent on the specific

fifteenth-century context of different cultural concepts of functions. I do not believe that the the role of the falafel as a multi-cultural link-food in late fifteenth century Granada has been previously recognized.

This beautifully presented and well organized book includes a glossary which covers terminology that might be unfamiliar to the lay reader. The terms are explained in a clear and concise manner. The appendices are excellent, particularly the one on the metalanguage of cross-cultural fertilisation. Dr Mandela is to be congratulated for her very excellent, indeed perfect, work in the development of thanotic theory.

Professor Dr Dr Ernst Zeppelin, Dean of Theology at the University of Cottbus (reprinted with the permission of *Theological Trends* magazine).

Denise de Pontchartrain

Hardhats and Handbags, Berserker Books, paperback, \$14.99.

This is Denise de Pontchartrain's third novel in her popular Molly Maguire series. This time Lt. Maguire finds herself caught up in murder and mayhem in the oil business. As always with de Pontchartrain's novels the tale moves at a brisk pace and is set against a rich variety of backgrounds; from the boardrooms of New Orleans' business district to the oil-rigs in the Gulf of Mexico, ending in a fight to the death in an alligator-infested bayou. The settings are magically conjured up; as Maguire takes on a biker gang in a backwoods bar the reader can hear the zydeco in the background and smell the stale beer, cigarette smoke and deep-fried catfish.

Maguire is her feisty old self in *Hardhats and Handbags*. As, for example, in this scene where she is aboard the oil rig where a series of bizarre fatal 'accidents' have taken place.

The roustabout was preparing for a repetitive drill when she found him on the forward platform. She watched him from a distance for a moment. He clearly knew what he was doing; this man had done repetitive drilling before.

"But *where?*" she wondered.

Fabrizzi finally noticed Maguire's presence and stopped in mid-repetition, staring at her.

"I'm Lt. Maguire from the Norlens Police Department. I'd like to ask you some questions? I think you could fill in a few blanks for me," she said.

The oil-slicked laborer looked her slowly up and down. An unpleasant smile grew on his unshaven face.

"Man! You sure are cute fer a lootenant!" he leered.

Maguire looked around. Nice quiet spot, nothing but the Gulf and a few seagulls. She smiled sweetly at the man and stepped up to him, sending her rock-hard fist slamming into his solar-plexus. The surprised oil-worker bounced against the bulkhead and slid, gasping, to the deck.

“OK? You were saying?” she said.

It was hard to understand what Fabrizzi was trying to say; not surprising, given the lack of air his vocal chords had to work with.

“Y’know, people learn more when the experience is an enjoyable one. Don’t ya think?” said Maguire. The sea air had put her in a contemplative mood.

“Kr3:jk!” said the roustabout.

What has contributed enormously to the character’s appeal is the fact that the hard-boiled Maguire has a softer side. When not breaking jaws she likes to sit curled up in her armchair with a steaming cup of green tea and a book on her favorite subject, phonology. She collects phonemes the way some people collect stamps. It is not giving too much away to say that her hobby proves decisive in her solving of the crime, giving the book’s ending an extremely ingenious twist!

This is de Pontchartrain’s best work so far. If you like your gumbo spicy this is the book to buy.

Mark Wurdig - *The Baton Rouge Sentinel*. This review is reproduced with the permission of the Rupert Mudcock Corporation.

Christine Feya and Gregory Brimstone

Tales from Tegucigalpa, Apostle Press, hardback, \$55.

Who says the devil has all the fun? As itinerant preachers Christine Feya and Gregory Brimstone show, with this wonderful collection of anecdotes gathered from a lifetime of bringing English grammar and the Good Book to those most in need, it’s not just bad boys and girls that know how to have a good time!

Right from the start Feya and Brimstone launch into a breathless yarn about purse snatchers in the Vatican. Brimstone takes off after the band of brazen young female robbers. He catches the girl who stole Feya’s handbag and beats her senseless with a rolled up copy of the *Christian Science Monitor*. Feya is no slouch either, scaring off a would be mugger in Rio de Janeiro by giving her ‘God’s Uses for the Subjunctive’ sermon in Portuguese.

Feya and Brimstone are quick to note that it’s not all fun and games. There are the long hours

of English teaching for a start. As they say,

The old saying asks, how do you make a Venetian blind? The answer is, of course, poke him in the eye. Similarly, it can be asked, how do you make a Kurd mad? Answer; teach him English. It seems that the *sounds* of English are very irritating to the Kurdish ear, and that certain Anglo-Saxon habits are very likely to be deeply insulting to a Kurd. For example the Anglo-Saxon need for a greater degree of personal space (particularly the British) leads a Kurd to imagine that you think he has bad breath. This is bad news, because about the worst insult you can direct at a Kurd is to suggest that their breath does not smell like lily of the valley.

Aside from the simple cultural difficulties they encounter the authors also have to contend with the forces of nature. Once, when teaching English in a remote jungle village in Papua-New Guinea, a nearby volcano began to fume ominously. The local medicine-man having fallen into a ravine the week before, Feya and Brimstone were pressed into service by the alarmed villagers to intercede on their behalf with the god of the volcano, Kont Ishnl.

They marched to the base of the smoking mountain and offered prayers. To make it look good Feya played some loud piano music from a cassette player while Brimstone threw to the winds small pieces of paper with role plays printed on them (a trick he picked up while teaching English and Hygiene in Nepal). Two days later the plume of smoke had gone! Needless to say they made quite a number of converts, which didn't make the replacement medicine-man any too pleased when he turned up to take over the vacancy!

It is, the authors observe, always a good idea to do *less* in these situations. That way you have something in reserve in case you are called upon for another miracle. And, very important, miracles should look effortless to the untrained eye!

Further adventures included in this volume are their time among the Eskimos (and the poor Eskimos' total bewilderment when they find out there is only one word for 'snow' in English!) and the eight months they spent in Ulan-Bator teaching Business English (the demise of Communism having left the Mongolians short not only of last names but also everyday capitalist language e.g. 'How much is that yak in the window?', 'Do you have low-fat?', and 'My yurt has been struck by lightning! Who do I sue?'). I'm looking forward to more of these rousing tales from the frontlines of preaching. This collection is a wonderful tonic for all of us in the preachin' business!

The Reverend Mary-Lou Pilgrim - *Preaching Times*. This review is reproduced with the permission of the Rupert Mudcock Corporation.