

WRITER'S BLOCKHEAD



by Letitia Tendentious

THE SLEEP OF THE MOT JUSTE, #47:

Have you ever wondered why, whenever you're looking for just the right word, you can never find it? I hate that. (Have you ever noticed yourself starting a column sounding like Andrey Rooney? I especially hate that.)

The other night, I thought I had found the perfect word. It wasn't very long. It had a lot of vowels. It had flow, that magical quality that writers use when they don't have rational reasons for their belief that something is right.

The word was banana.

Unfortunately, the sentence in which it belonged was: "Having conquered most of Europe, Napoleon turned his attention to Russia, not realizing that its harsh winters would his efforts." Banana, as good as it was, didn't seem appropriate, somehow.

The perfect word is of vital importance to writers. For one thing, it's an excellent excuse to give editors anxiously awaiting your work (as in: "I'm sorry I couldn't get that novel to you on Friday, but I'm looking for a six letter synonym for 'yellow fruit that hangs from trees in tropical regions.'").

For another thing, the search for the perfect word is often used to explain a writer's habit of staring into space for no reason. "I thought she was having a nervous breakdown," the editor said, "but she was just trying to find an original way to describe a cloud." It is said that French writer Marcel Proust spent months agonizing over each word of *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Stephen King, on the other hand, spends an average of fifteen seventenths of a second on each of his words.

That must prove something.

The search for the perfect word can be agonizing; there are more than 60,000 words in the English language, yet not one of them adequately describes the feeling of sitting outside a dentist's office, hearing the drill going in another room and knowing that you're five months behind in your

payments. Oogy comes close, but you won't find it in Webster's.

But, banana, now there's a word that you would think could expand to encompass the various and complex uses to which it could be put. "I'd love to go bowling with you Edna," George exclaimed. "But, all of a sudden, I'm feeling rather banana."

Or: John wanted to go to Edmonton, but his banana was in the shop.

Or, even: When all else fails, banana.

But, of course, life isn't that simple. Language is a set of symbols agreed upon by the people who use them. If you go changing the symbols, you get anarchy. Or, worse: a plague of tax consultants.

Clearly, as a perfect word, banana had its limitations. So, I tried others: holistic, pedantry, mesquite, Rastafarian. I thought I might have something with Rastafarian, but when I put it into my original sentence ("Having conquered most of Europe, Napoleon turned his attention to Russia, not realizing that its harsh winters would Rastafarian his efforts."), I was less than enchanted with the results.

Nobody told me writing was going to be so hard!

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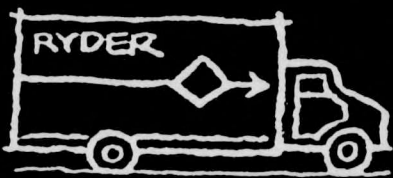
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April 5, 1990

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