

## JANUARY MEETING

## Introducing Twitterature: The Short of the Long of Lit

BY DAVID EPSTEIN

If you never could get through the reading lists in college ... If you really want to clear five feet of dusty shelf space, but you can't bear to dump your Great Books set until you've read them all ... If you want to discover a creative shortcut to writing a best seller ... Then you simply must not miss IWOC's January 12 meeting, which will be the very first stop on our speakers' national book tour.

Alexander Aciman and Emmett Rensin, coauthors of the just-released (in the U.S.) *Twitterature: The World's Greatest Books Now Presented In Twenty Tweets Or Less*, will reveal their writing secrets. Their methods are way more useful for writers than speed-reading and short-hand combined.

According to Aciman and Rensin, this is how *Twitterature* was born:

"Like any good revolution, this one started in a college dormitory. Sitting in our suite at the end of another long day at the University of Chicago, we had an epiphany of the sort that many men wait for until their golden years, and which for too many others never comes before the grave. What, we asked, are the grandest ventures of our or any gen-

eration? And what, to give this a bit more focus, best expresses the souls of 21st century Americans?"



Rensin

Here's a less exalted scenario: Two University of Chicago sophomores are sitting in their dorm suite near midnight, after a grueling all-day study session. Finals start in two days, and their room is stacked floor to ceiling with thick unread tomes of the world's greatest literature. They ask themselves: If verbose writing is so terrible, why do great authors go on and on—and on?

Like, instead of beating around the bush, why didn't Dante just say, "I'm havin' a midlife crisis. Lost in the woods. Shoulda brought my iPhone." Why didn't Milton's Lucifer come straight to the point with: "OH MY GOD, I'M IN HELL"? And as for Virgil, "Well, yeah, Rome coulda been built in a day, but first, lemme tell ya ..."

Enter Twitter—the free web forum where we can broadcast our deepest earth-shattering insights in <= 140 chars incldng spaces

(or, in Tweetish, #s—wch savs 4 chars). Aciman and Rensin blended Twitter with the Grt Wrks of Wrld Lit and lo—they brought forth *Twitterature!*

An inspiration to more



Aciman

verbose scribblers, Aciman and Rensin have captured the essence of the classics in one 224-pg papbk

(jst pub by Penguin on Dec 29)—at a mere 20 Tweets per book. And all while mastering demanding courses at the University of Chicago. You should see their term papers—so quick'n'easy for their profs to grade!

*Twitterature* beats Reader's Digest Condensed Books all hollow. Using narrative nanotechnology, more than 80 of the greatest heroes, villains, and victims of western literature—from *Beowulf* to Virginia Wolf, with Kafka's giant cockroach squashed in between—each shrink their stories into a series of 140-character tweets. English teachers often praise Hemingway's concise style, but see how Aciman and Rensin have scaled down

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## PRESIDENT'S COLUMN/ROGER RUEFF

# Special Relativity



Every year about this time, I find myself thinking, "Where did that last year go? I turned around and swoop! It was gone." And every year, the feeling is slightly stronger than it was the year before... and the one before that... and before that. The years fly by, and the older I get, the faster their wings seem to flap. I prefer to take the positive tack and assume they're migrating to warmer climes.

At the heart of this annual end-of-year feeling is the issue of time-scale perception—why time seems to slip by more quickly as we grow older. My first recollection of addressing that question goes back to fourth grade and my science teacher, Mr. Johnson—a friendly, rational man against whom my parents developed a deep grudge when they found out that he was teaching my oldest brother that humans once lived in trees... and I don't mean the ones in the Garden of Eden. Mr. Johnson had a theory about why the years seem to pass more quickly as we grow older—a theory based on simple fractions. When you reach your first birthday, he reasoned, the year that just passed con-

stitutes your entire life. On your second birthday, however, it's only half of your life—so it seems shorter. Your third year spans merely a third of your life, and when you pass 50, each year is less than two percent of your life... which feels like not very much.

It's a good, sound theory that makes as much sense to me



now as it did

when I first heard it.

Is it true? Who knows? In a broad sense, it works well enough. Someone somewhere is probably right now penning a doctoral thesis on the matter, but until it's published, reviewed, and accepted by the scientific community, I'm sticking with Mr. Johnson as my expert. He seemed ancient enough at the time to have known what he was talking about.

The other things I think about this time of year have to do with right now and the year ahead. The right-now things tend to take the form of counted blessings. My son and his girlfriend driving safely here from South Carolina for the holiday—his car breaking down a mere 10

miles from my house instead of on an isolated highway in Georgia or in the middle of an Indiana snowstorm. The fact that I got to ring in the new year with 14 good friends on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan and to christen it with a champagne-laced kiss from my lovely fiancée. A recent uptick in writing work that might be a good and hopeful omen for 2010.

The year-ahead things have mostly to do with the knowns of what's on tap for 2010. The tour of my play in Spain. Its opening in Lisbon and subsequent tour of Portugal. A writing project that will take me to Brussels in the spring and Naples after that. The premiere of a new play in Florida and another here in Chicagoland. My son returning from a year and a half away to attend college nearby. A Cubs season without Milton Bradley in the outfield.

A wedding in October. So much to plan on, hope for, look forward to. So much to look back on next year at this time—as this year is carried away on the wings of time.

Of course, like the impurities in corundum that give sapphires their color, it's the unknowns that will ultimately flavor the year ahead and leave its final taste in my mouth. Here's hoping I embrace those, too... and think of them as gems.

Happy New Year. 🍷

# Your Website: If You Optimize It, They Will Come

## SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION (SEO) TIPS AND TRICKS TO GET TOP BILLING

BY DON TALEND

**W**hen it comes to helping the universe find one's website, Jim Grosspietsch says don't settle for second best. At IWOC's November meeting, the president of Barrington marketing firm The Prairie Studio, stressed



that any website that does not top the list of results in a Google search might as well not exist. Grosspietsch offered attendees a list of search engine optimization (SEO) tips and tricks which, while seemingly minor, can provide a huge payoff in the form of site traffic.

Grosspietsch pointed out that he previously spent more than 20 years in marketing roles for small, venture-backed firms—organizations too lean to allow him to outsource functions such as website development. "I had to show results in terms of site traffic or I was out of there," he said.

He founded The Prairie Studio as a hobby and, when several of his former employers were acquired by larger firms, former coworkers began calling him for website development advice, and the hobby turned into a viable business. In recent years, Grosspietsch also launched interior design and kitchen design firms and has generated most sales leads through their websites.

Why optimize site exposure? Grosspietsch displayed results from a 2007 survey indicating that SEO provides the biggest marketing "bang for the buck." He pointed out that research indicates that the upper left corner of any Web page draws the most eyeballs—reinforcing the necessity of ensuring that one's site comes up number 1 in search-engine queries.

Citing other research indicating that Google has a 60 percent share of searches on the Internet, Grosspietsch urged attendees to focus on claiming the top spot in Google searches in particular.

How can Web developers optimize their site exposure? For starters, Grosspietsch argued that Google's proprietary search methods rank more highly a name that is relevant to a given company's niche. Additionally, he recommended using keywords for page descriptions and avoiding pedestrian labels such as "Services." In cases where the company owner has a preferred geographic market, include desired cities in page descriptions, he added. Be as specific as possible in describing the company, using "healthcare writer" instead of "writer," for example. Introductory text—which should be displayed in a sans serif font that Google reads more easily—should include descriptive keywords instead of "Welcome to Company X," Grosspietsch said. In short, Google's proprietary website

"crawling" technology seeks unique combinations of keywords in ranking sites, he stressed.

Grosspietsch urged attendees to avoid using Flash animation on their Websites, calling it "instant suicide" in regard to SEO. The reason: search engines look for keywords and Flash animation loads slowly, potentially pushing a site with more relevant keywords higher on results lists. However, one potential SEO-enhancing trick relevant to site graphics is labeling embedded files and images with descriptive keywords—Grosspietsch noted that Google even "crawls" these keywords.

Web developers should also use relevant keywords in hyperlinks that take site visitors to other pages; avoid pedestrian descriptors such as "Click here," he said.

A key tactic for generating site traffic is to link to relevant websites because Google ranks sites with a relatively high number of "friends" more highly, Grosspietsch added. He recommended linking to other sites with keywords that are relevant to one's particular type of writing.

Getting listed in online directories is another way to generate more site traffic. Grosspietsch suggested getting listed in directories such as dmoz.org, Google, Yahoo! and the Yellow Pages.

Posting insightful blogs and press releases that report recent company news are other good ways to gener-

ate buzz—and traffic, he said. Press releases should not begin with pedestrian phrases such as "Company X is pleased to announce..." however. Paid press release distribution services such as PRNewswire are accessible to numerous news outlets.

An emerging means of attracting more visitors is using social media, Grosspietsch pointed out. A Facebook Fan Page or Twitter page allows customers to keep in touch with one's business and links to one's site. Creating a LinkedIn public page boosts awareness of the business, and it's possible to link to one's site using relevant, descriptive keywords in the hyperlink.

Grosspietsch also recommended periodic evaluations of one's SEO metrics using tools such as Google Analytics and Webmaster Tools. These resources can reveal the effectiveness of keywords or reveal referring sites from which visitors are led to one's site. 📍

### Welcome New Members

**Christine Harmon**  
**Sophie Sparks**  
**Carol Weinrich**

and returning member

**Elizabeth Fagan**  
**Adelman**

# The Intrigue and Conflict in Compiling Words

This is yet another review in an irregular series devoted to books and Internet sites that are popularly classified as reference source material.

BY RICHARD L. EASTLINE

*Lost for Words (The Hidden History of the Oxford English Dictionary) / Linda Mugglestone / 273 pp. plus preface and acknowledgments / Yale University Press, 2005 / Hard-cover\*/ ISBN: 0-300-10699-8*

Pay attention to the subtitle to this book. It's more meaningful than the larger, bold-face jacket title. Not a book about word usage, it's a low-key suspense story about putting together the contents of what is regarded as the pre-eminent English language dictionary. Don't expect anything along the lines of the DaVinci Code, with its history-tinged adventure a la Indiana Jones. This storyteller, the current editor of *The Oxford History of the English Language* (and with a formidable last name that echoes a Harry Potter tale), prefers to relate an event that tickles the brain.

When we think of the learning institutions in England, we link Oxford and Cambridge with the passing of centuries, rich in scholarship and academic lore. So, it may be surprising to learn that the first complete edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* goes back scarcely more than three-quarters of a century and a full 100 years after publication of the first edition of Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828). It did not spring suddenly from the nurturing fount of wisdom at Oxford but rather was the nearly 50-year summation of input from

an assembly of knowledgeable—often garrulous—men and women of letters. Issued in installments, the first fascicle (devoted to the letter "A") appeared in 1884 while the final section was not completed until after World War I, yielding a complete edition in 1928.

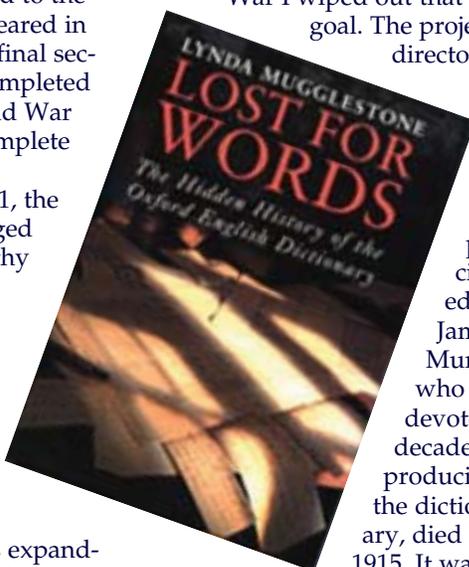
Begun in 1881, the *OED* content aged during its lengthy gestation and before arriving at the end of the alphabet, it became apparent that many new words had come into existence as well as expanded definitions of words that were included in the previously released installments. The solution was to issue *Supplements to the First Edition* and these followed in more timely succession.

To exemplify the scope of compilation, the letter "P" consumed 150 hours of one editor's time and a single word, "pass," occupied six-two columns of text.

Thoroughness was not to be denied. The immensity of the project became apparent as each section eventually was completed. As the first decade of the 20th century

ended, only then did *OED* editors feel confident enough to predict completion within four to seven years. World

War I wiped out that goal. The project's director and



principal editor, James Murray, who had devoted decades to producing the dictionary, died in 1915. It was until April 1928

that the final installment reached its conclusion. At that point, the editors and staff had produced 15,488 pages and a tally of 50 million words.

This accomplishment is not told in the conventional style of recounting the results of known meetings or group discussions, but in the detailed examination of personal notes among the participants and especially in the annotations made on the pristine proof sheets. Reproductions of some of

the pages are placed within the text and (as they are not readable in the reduced-size images) the hand-written comments become the basis for Mugglestone's construction of events. As a matter of record, there are 30 pages in this book devoted to the listing of notes that were examined along with the preserved proofs.

By and large, the action in this story moves at glacial pace. The rewards in reading it come from the recognition and realization that personal beliefs as well as upbringing will color the judgment of even those most learned of scholars who profess to an objective stance. Their quirks in personality and the adroit proclamations of opinion provide the insights into the efforts of compiling definition and pronunciation for thousands of words. What seemed the hopeless task of arriving at consensus ultimately is resolved—the equivalent of a band of literary heroes overcoming the philistine marauders, but done in passive voice. ♣

*\*Note: No specific price was shown in the header for this review because of cost variance among online book vendors, retail sellers of remainders, and mail-order establishments.*

## In Memoriam: Dianne Rowland



It is with deep sadness that we report the death of longtime member Dianne Rowland. Dianne died in December of natural causes. Although Dianne had attended few meetings in recent years—she was visually impaired—we all knew her as a tireless worker for IWOC. She had been Writers' Line chair for the past ten years, and before that she served as a wonderful Program chair, filling the room for most meetings. But first and foremost, Dianne was a journalist. She graduated from J-school at the U. of I. in Urbana and later became a reporter for the Associated Press. She also served as Press Secretary for a Texas congressman. After she lost her sight at the age of 30, she worked as a public relations specialist for the EPA in Chicago. When the Reagan administration came in, she was out—wrong politics—and she joined the freelance ranks and IWOC. Dianne was vivacious, funny, the telephone's best friend, and fiercely political. We will miss her terribly. ♣

### January Program

even *The Old Man and the Sea* (/ indicates end of a tweet):

"I have caught the fish,  
and he is grand / ... / And  
he is too big for the boat so I  
will have to pull him / And  
the sharks are coming / and  
they are eating the fish / and  
I have returned to Cuba and  
I have nothing to show / and  
the struggle has been valiant  
but I am unchanged (except  
this beard I have grown)!"

*Twitterature* provides everything you need to master world literature, including a glossary of online acronyms and Twitterary terms and—y'know—whatever. When the book was published in the UK in October, reviewers were alternately amused and appalled—and also mercifully brief.

Like their book, Aciman and Rensin, both 19, have crowded a great deal into a short span. They are frequent contributors to *The Chicago Maroon*. Aciman has published several essays in *The New York Times* and is a devoted follower of Napoleon Bonaparte (who, as is well known, was very

*Continued from page 1.*

short). He is known on occasion to enjoy pugilism or a game of bocce.

Rensin is a *Huffington Post* contributor, an ordained reverend, and a candidate for President and/or Vice President in 2008 (and possibly 2012). He holds office as the Religious Affairs Supervisor of The Society for the Destruction of the Pacific Ocean. His life goals are to pen (or tweet) the Great American Novel, master card magic, and invent the perfect shaggy-dog joke. You can follow them on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/acimanandrensins>.

The meeting will be held in Room 5008 at National-Louis University, 122 S. Michigan Avenue (across from the Art Institute) in Chicago. Networking with snacks and beverages begins at 5 p.m., followed by the program at 6 p.m. The meeting is free for all IWOC members. Nonmembers pay \$15. Plan to stay for a buy-your-own dinner at a nearby restaurant afterwards. ♣

## Calendar

### January 12

**IWOC Monthly Meeting.** IWOC is honored to be the first stop on the book tour for the authors of the just-released (in the U.S.) *Twitterature: The World's Greatest Books Now Presented In Twenty Tweets Or Less*. This promises to be an entertaining program. The meeting will be held at National-Louis University, Room 5008, 122 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago. Program 6 p.m. Networking 5 p.m. Nonmembers, \$15; IWOC members free. Buy-your-own dinner follows. Nonmembers welcome. For more information, call 847/855-6670 or visit [www.iwoc.org](http://www.iwoc.org).

*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).*

### January 28 (4th Thursday)

**IWOOP Monthly Lunch.** Join near-west suburbanites for a noon lunch at Poor Phil's, 139 S. Marion St., Oak Park. For more info, call Barb Dillard at 312/642-3065. Check before you come. This lunch is monthly only if there are enough people who can attend.

### February 4 (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.

## It's Happening on the Web!

Check Out Writers' Line

Browse Resources

See What's Doing in IWOC Events

**WWW.IWOC.ORG**