

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Dim Wit

Rosemarie Jarski

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About the Book

'They misanderestimated me.' - George W. Bush

Einstein said only two things are infinite - the universe and human stupidity. So in deference to the dumbing down of our culture, comes *Dim Wit* - a collection of the most jaw-droppingly stupid things ever said. The cast includes every famous foot-in-mouther from George W. Bush to Prince Philip, Paris Hilton to Jade Goody, not to mention hundreds of unsung idiots plucked from villages the world over.

The result is a confederacy of dunces more pro-fun than profound - a clever witticism may coax an inward smile but it takes a really stupid remark to deliver a belly laugh. So pick up *Dim Wit* and prepare to embrace your inner moron - it may be the smartest thing you do ...

'My grandma overheard two women talking in a doctor's surgery. After a while, one said to the other, "Do you know, Mary, I don't feel too well. I think I'll go home."' - Robyn Jankel

'I don't think anyone should write his autobiography until after he's dead.' - Samuel Goldwyn

'Winston Churchill? Wasn't he the first black President of America? There's a statue of him near me - that's black.' - Danielle Lloyd

About the Author

Rosemarie Jarski is a blonde of Irish-Polish parents, living in Essex. She hasn't the foggiest why she was asked to compile this collection.

DIM WIT

rosemarie jarski



EBURY
PRESS

To Richard Madeley - The Gaffer

If stupidity got us into this mess, then why can't it get us out?

Will Rogers

INTRODUCTION

Mark Twain once said, 'Better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to speak out and remove all doubt.' But who listens to wise advice? A fool and his words are soon parted, and *Dim Wit* is here to prove it with a double hernia's-worth of the dumbest things ever said.

If you're thinking that sounds like a pretty dumb premise for a book - a trivial undertaking for the trivial-minded - you may be surprised to hear that there is a long and illustrious tradition for such collections. Gustave Flaubert, the author of *Madame Bovary*, compiled one, as did the celebrated American satirist, H. L. Mencken. There's even a dedicated literary term. A collection of stupid remarks is known by the French word *sottisier*. The closest English translation would probably be 'Hansard'.

The French may have supplied the word but when it comes to *la stupidité*, our Gallic cousins can't hold a candle to *les rosbifs*. For this dubious honour we have our language to thank - or blame. Infinitely rich in words, metaphors, proverbs, similes and slang, endlessly malleable and notoriously inconsistent, the English language is fraught with linguistic traps ready to trip up the unwary at every turn. One little word out of place and you can find yourself suffering from foot and mouth disease - I mean foot in mouth disease. See what I mean?

But one man's blunder is another man's belly laugh, and this *sottisier* aims to maximise mirth by covering verbal, written and even the odd behavioural bloomer. So strewn with verbal banana skins are these pages that the book

might very well be designated a 'health and safety' hazard. Don't say you haven't been warned ... Mind the gaffe!

Of all the verbal mishaps, the 'mondegreen' is surely the most delightful. If you aren't familiar with the term, the best way to explain it is to tell the charming story of how it came by its unusual name. The word was coined by American writer Silvia Wright. Growing up, she learned an old Scottish ballad, 'The Bonnie Earl of Murray', which contains the couplet:

They have slain the Earl of Murray
And laid him on the green.

But what young Silvia heard was this:

They have slain the Earl of Murray
And Lady Mondegreen.

The sad death of Lady Mondegreen touched her childish heart and it wasn't until many years later when she encountered the poem in written form that she realised she'd misheard the words. And so the 'mondegreen' was born.

Relatives of Lady Mondegreen pop up in the most unexpected places and have even been known to gatecrash our cherished Christmas carols. There's a Wayne in a manger; Round John Virgin in 'Silent Night' (as in, 'Round John Virgin, mother and child'); Buddy Holly in 'Deck the Halls with Buddy Holly', and let's not forget Good King Wence's lass who looked out on the feet of heathens.

Song lyrics are the natural home of the mondegreen or, at least, they were until record companies started including the words of songs on record sleeves, thereby enabling us to discover that what we'd always known as 'Scare a moose, scare a moose, will you do the damn tango?' was, in fact, 'Scaramouche, Scaramouche, will you do the

fandango?’ Not that we were any the wiser in that particular instance.

I can’t help thinking it was more fun when we had to rely on our own interpretations. As a child, I honestly believed that ‘Super Trouper’ by Abba opened with the legend: ‘I was sick and tired of everything when I called you last night from Tesco.’ What Agnetha and Frida were doing in what was in those days one of the most downmarket of British supermarkets, I didn’t like to ask, but I was gutted when I finally found out that they were actually calling from the cosmopolitan city of ‘Frisco.

‘Frisco schmisco, I prefer my version. And I also prefer the version of a Prince song I heard my sister belting out as it played on the car radio: ‘She wore a raspberry soufflé ...’ Maybe it’s hereditary, this susceptibility to mondegreens, because my entire family suffers from it. Apropos this book, I was chatting about mondegreens with my mum and she said, ‘I’ve always wondered what the real words are to that song they do the actions to.’ ‘Agadoo?’ ‘Yes, that’s the one. I keep hearing the words as, “Push pineapple, shake the tree, push pineapple, grind coffee.”’ Mum, I hate to have to break it to you but sometimes a stupid lyric is only a stupid lyric.

I was in two minds whether to give houseroom to malapropisms, having long felt towards them the way other people feel about puns, or Céline Dion records (you know that feeling when you’re chewing the silver-paper wrapper from a chocolate bar on a tooth with a cavity?). A malapropism is a confusion of words that sound alike (think, affluent/effluent), and my antipathy dates from a school trip to see a play called *The Rivals*. Written by Richard Sheridan in 1775, this Restoration ‘comedy’ features the character Mrs Malaprop after whom the verbal slip is named. I vividly recall this preposterous bewigged and bepowdered old bat strutting about the stage shrieking things like this:

He is the very pine-apple of politeness!
She's as headstrong as an allegory on the banks
of the Nile!
She might know something of the contagious
countries!
It gives me the hydrostatics to such a degree!

I'd been told these malapropisms were the original and the best, 'the height of hilarity', but they didn't raise so much as a titter from me, or my schoolmates or, indeed, the rest of the audience for the simple reason that none of us had a blinking clue what the 'correct' words were. I have since noticed that when these 'classic malapropisms' appear in anthologies, most editors take no chances: they provide the correct word in parentheses after each malapropism. To my mind, that's like explaining the joke. What's the point?

Call me heretical, but the 'immortal' Mrs M and her clapped-out old chestnuts have been consigned to the bin marked 'Jokes Past Their Amuse-By Date'. In their place is a selection of freshly minted malapropisms, and I can confidently say, without fear of contraception, that the only nerve they'll hit is your funny bone. See if this hits the spot: 'A few years ago when there was a solar eclipse in England, I overheard my neighbours wisely advising a friend not to look directly at the sun as it would burn the back of their rectums.' Ouch. Pass the Anusol.

As Mrs Malaprop gave her name to the malapropism, so Reverend Spooner gave his name to the spoon, I mean spoonerism - a slip of the tongue in which the initial letters or sounds of two or more words are switched (think, nosy cook/cosy nook). As he was both a real-life Oxford don and man of the cloth, it might be argued that this Victorian gentleman already enjoyed an unfair advantage in the inanity stakes. Apparently he was prone to riding through the city of 'Spreaming Dires' on his 'well-boiled icicle' and addressing the students at New College thus:

You have hissed all my mystery lectures, and were caught fighting a liar in the quad. Having tasted two worms, you will leave by the next town drain.

Crikey, did no one ever think to check the level in the old buffer's claret decanter? Let us raise our glasses to the queer old dean, I mean, dear old ... dear me, it's catching! Which of us hasn't got our words in a mucking fuddle - especially when drink has been taken? It doesn't help if, like me, the name of your local is the Boar's Head: if ever there was a spoonerism waiting to happen ...

But I count myself lucky. Only the taxi firm I call for a cab home at the end of a long night on the sauce is witness to my embarrassment ('I'm red as a sheet,' as Yogi Berra would say). Broadcasters and presenters who have a lingual malfunction have to suffer their blushes in front of an audience that may be in the millions.

Their humiliation may be compounded if their blooper is then posted on a video-sharing website such as YouTube. How many heard Nicky Campbell drop a humdinger of a spoonerism on BBC Radio 5 Live when he had to introduce the master of the Kent Hunt? How many more caught it on YouTube? As a courtesy to cybersurfers, where a blooper is available to hear or see on the net, it will be indicated by the letters 'YT' in the credit line. Just do a simple word-search to find the clip and savour the fluff in its full aural glory.

Whilst verbal errors are understandable - we're only human, after all - you might think that technological advances would have all but wiped out the written error, given that most of us now use computers equipped with spellcheck and autocorrect facilities. Not a chance. Technology, far from eradicating mistakes, is actually *adding* to the error quotient. IT expert Sandy Reed has even coined a new word, 'technopropism', to describe those

mistakes that occur 'when language and the tools of technology collide'. A prime example involved a journalist on an American newspaper who autocorrected the word 'black' to 'African-American' in an article, then forgot to re-check the final copy. The published article included a description of a dog with 'African-American spots'.

Sometimes you don't know whether the blame lies with the computer or the person operating it. A while ago, I was on the phone to an American acquaintance and happened to mention that I'd been given a box set of *Carry On* films. The other day I received an email from him in which he asked if I've watched any of my 'carrion movies'. Now, I'm hoping this is a technopropism because, if not, it means he actually believes I am a fan of some weird film genre dedicated to the decaying flesh of dead animals. Ooh, Matron.

When Boris Johnson was made editor of the *Sextator*, I mean the *Spectator*, one wag said it was 'like putting a mentally defective monkey in charge of a Ming vase'. The former editor and present mayor has a starring role in this *sottisier*; indeed, he is the poster boy, so be prepared for the sound of much shattering of porcelain - oops, there goes another priceless pot!

Boris, 'the thinking man's idiot', heads a glittering cast of Densa members that includes reality TV stars, sports commentators, high court judges as well as unsung idiots plucked from villages the world over. Together they cover the full speculum of stupidity - from the dippiness of Alice Tinker (she had a Teletubbies-themed wedding) to full-blown Jade Goody 'fick' ('Men want to take her home and shag her brains in,' as Jonathan Ross so delicately put it).

Figures from real life rub shoulders with figures from fiction. On a single page, you may find Keith Richards from The Rolling Stones batting a line to Ali G who, in turn, volleys it to Tallulah Bankhead who then smashes it to Saffy from *Absolutely Fabulous*. Now there's a mixed doubles you

never thought you'd ever see. Diverse as these characters are, they all occupy the same virtual space in our heads, so they sit comfortably beside each other - worryingly so, in certain cases. Take George W. Bush and Homer Simpson. Talk about bosom boobies. Cover their credit lines and you'd be hard pressed to tell whose line is whose: 'I'm a commander guy ... We'll continue to enhance protection at ... our nuclear power pants.' Are these the words of the dumbest dunderhead in America - or Homer Simpson?

Stupid remarks both intended and unintended are given equal billing. This won't please purist purveyors of bloomerology whose strict code requires that all slips be 'accidental'. It's a daft requirement, though, not only because it rules out some of the funniest lines but also because it's impossible to police. Even when the foolish remarks are made by real people you can't be one hundred per cent sure they were made unwittingly. And unless you were there to hear it or the event was recorded, you can't even be sure a line was uttered by the person credited.

A case in point is Samuel Goldwyn. He was the Polish immigrant who won fame as the producer of such unforgettable Hollywood movies as *Wuthering Heights*, *Stella Dallas* and *The Best Years of Our Lives* (for which he won an Oscar), but these days he's equally famous for his word-manglings known, imaginatively, as 'Goldwynisms'. What you may not know is that many of the best Goldwynisms were dreamt up by his press agents, most notably Ben Sonnenberg. Ironically, Sonnenberg was originally hired in order to keep a lid on the mogul's verbal goofs, which Goldwyn feared were making him a laughing stock in Tinseltown. What Sonnenberg discovered was that far from tarnishing his image, these eccentric turns of phrase were actually enhancing it. The wily publicist promptly performed a U-turn and went into production manufacturing new ones.

The upshot is, 70-odd years on, it's virtually impossible to tell a genuine Goldwynism from a fake. That said, I do believe my own personal favourite is 24-carat Goldwyn because screenwriter Jean Negulesco swears he was there at the time. The story goes, the two were strolling in Negulesco's garden when Goldwyn spotted something. 'Ah, that's my new sundial,' says Jean. 'Every day the sun casts a shadow from the piece of metal at the top. Since the shadow changes all through the day, you can tell what time it is.' Goldwyn throws up his hands in astonishment. 'My God!' he cries. 'What will they think of next?'

Ah, bless. 'It is so pleasant to come across people more stupid than ourselves. We love them at once for being so,' as Jerome K. Jerome wrote. Somebody else's blunder may give us a reassuring feeling of superiority, or an unnerving feeling of 'There but for the grace of God go I,' but, either way, it endears the blunderer to us by making them seem more human.

Politicians, always keen to seem more human, have cottoned on to this and the roll call of those accused of trying to wheedle their way into our affections by 'dumbing down' includes Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern, the Irish Taoiseach and, of course, Boris Johnson, our own Mayor of London. The latter plays on his clown's image to keep us guessing: 'Beneath the elaborately constructed veneer of the bumbling buffoon,' he jests, 'there may well be a bumbling buffoon.' As a former journalist, he is fully aware of the useful publicity such tomfoolery generates, but could it also be a skilful ruse to deflect attention away from unpopular policies and the sometimes shady shenanigans of his personal life? Certainly there are those, like Jeremy Hardy, who sense darker forces at work beneath the greasepaint grin: 'Boris Johnson may seem like a lovable buffoon but you know he wouldn't hesitate to line you all up against a wall and have you shot.'

There are those who would say the same thing about George W. Bush. 'The widespread suspicion he may be a dim bulb really lets Bush off too easily,' argues Michael Kinsley. 'It's not that he is incapable of thinking through the apparent contradictions in his own alleged core philosophy. It's that he can't be bothered.' Jay Leno suspects a double bluff: 'Bush is smart. I don't think that Bush will ever be impeached, because unlike Clinton, Reagan or even his father, George W. is immune from scandal. Because, if George W. testifies that he had no idea what was going on, wouldn't you believe him?' Having spent many hours sifting the words of the President, my own feeling is that Ann Richards, herself a former Texas governor, comes closest to the truth: 'Poor George, he can't help it - he was born with a silver foot in his mouth.'

'There's no rehab for stupidity,' as Chris Rock observes. Until such time as medical science can offer 'brain jobs' or 'grey matter enhancements', no amount of moolah can buy your way out of the idiocracy. Paris Hilton is heiress to the fortune of a famous hotel chain whose name escapes me (I'll check my towels when I get home). She has had the best education money can buy ('Use your spark of genius to build a better world,' goes the motto of the private school she attended in New York, whose alumni include writer Truman Capote and artist Roy Lichtenstein). Yet despite enjoying the best blessings of existence, she will never escape her heirhead image. Whilst her detractors assure us she really is as brainless as she behaves ('Like the state of Kansas, flat, white and easy to enter,' quips Conan O'Brien), she and her supporters argue that it's all part of her 'dumb blonde' schtick: 'It's not how I am, it's the character I play.'

Having spent many hours sifting the celebutante's words, what's struck me is just how *little* she says. The common perception is that she is constantly putting her perfectly pedicured foot in her perfectly lipglossed mouth

but, actually, she's extremely guarded. Her 'conversation' is, for the most part, innocuous and non-committal, limited to a series of inane catchphrases, simpering squeals and grating giggles: 'That's hot ... ewwww ... soooo gross ... ha-ha hee-hee ... whatever.' What the heck does that mean? Well, it means whatever you want it to mean. And that's the beauty of it as far as she is concerned. She is a blank slate onto which we can project our own meaning, and that, crucially, makes her ideal for marketing purposes.

Paris Hilton's intelligence may be just a notch above that of Tinkerbell (her pet Chihuahua, not Peter Pan's fairy friend who is *wayyyyy* smarter), but when it comes to marketing, the gal is nothing short of a genius. Guided by the best business brains money can buy, she has built a multi-million dollar brand with perfume, fashion and jewellery lines, book deals, nightclub franchises, reality TV series and even a starring role in a Hollywood movie - a remake of Ingmar Bergman's *Cries and Whispers*. Just kidding. It's a romantic comedy called *The Hottie and the Nottie*, described by one discerning critic as, 'about as funny as anal rape'. 'I'm laughing all the way to the bank,' says Paris and I'm guessing she doesn't mean Northern Rock.

Paris Hilton is frequently held up as the epitome of our dumbed-down society, which worships vapid and vacuous celebs and makes them into role models for the young. Endless surveys tell us that kids today think Hitler's first name was 'Heil' and B.C. means 'Before Cable'. But The Stupid have always been with us. Two hundred years ago an equivalent survey would have found that kids thought Nelson's first name was Half and Pompeii was destroyed by an overflow of larva.

The question is, has idiocy become the *dominant* force in today's society? Have we made a cult of stupidity? In the past there was a stigma attached to stupidity but there is no longer any shame in admitting that you've never read a

book or finished school. Stupidity is now worn like a badge of honour. It's all the rage. 'Stupidity is the new black!' screams the style section of *The Sunday Times* like it was the latest must-have accessory. Slogans on T-shirts that used to boast 'I'm with Stupid' now boast 'I am Stupid'. In *The Simpsons*, Lisa catalogues the cultural and intellectual decline: 'We are a town of lowbrows, no-brows, and ignorami. We have eight malls, but no symphony; thirty-two bars but no alternative theatre; thirteen stores that begin with Le Sex ...'

And now bookshops pedalling books glorifying stupidity! Without condoning what William Gaddis calls 'the deliberate cultivation of ignorance', perhaps there *is* something to be said for stupidity. Oscar Wilde certainly thought so:

There is more to be said for stupidity than people imagine.

Personally I have a great admiration for stupidity.

It is a sort of fellow-feeling ...

It's true; there is a kinship. For all her fame and money, it's easier to identify with the no-talent that is Paris Hilton than, say, the über-talented ice queen Gwyneth Paltrow whose 'blonde moments' are limited to two things: child-naming and choice of diet. Similarly, Princess Diana was a privileged, pampered princess, yet millions related to her because she was, as she herself put it, 'as thick as two short planks'. She left school without any qualifications except an award for Best Kept Hamster. And across the pond, many preferred Dubya for his stumbling, 'homespun' speeches to 'automatons' like Al Gore who delivered slick and polished performances.

Stupidity is not only bonding, it's also essential to progress. Stupid people are, by definition, those with less sense and ability to reason. But their irrationality and

illogicality may be the very qualities that make them more imaginative and creative. The ability to look at the world differently, to think outside the box, is crucial to innovation. Even brainboxes acknowledge this. Albert Einstein said: 'I never came upon any of my discoveries through the process of rational thinking.' And another egghead, Ludwig Wittgenstein, observed: 'If people did not sometimes do silly things, nothing intelligent would ever get done.'

The kind of stupidity celebrated in this collection is not rank ignorance; rather, it is 'nonsense' in the tradition of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. It shares the same spirit of illogical logic, the same silly flights of fancy and the same playful delight in the quirks and quiddities of language *per se*. Sections like 'Mangled Metaphors' and 'New Proverbs' are delirious romps through Looking Glass territory where you can revel in the verbal pyrotechnics of the English language in all its whizz-bang vibrancy and versatility. Read it forwards or backwards, there's not a cliché in sight. Perhaps a more appropriate subtitle for this treasury would have been 'Adventures in Blunderland'.

'Stupidity has its sublime as well as genius, and he who carries that quality to absurdity has reached it,' wrote Christoph Martin Wieland. So, who achieves the 'sublimity of stupidity'? Certainly Groucho Marx and Woody Allen, Steven Wright and, of course, Spike Milligan. These comic philosophers can say something that sounds just plain stupid but, on further contemplation, is seen to contain a deep existential truth. Such artful artlessness is a fiendishly difficult trick to pull off, a fine balancing act where the words are tottering on a tightrope between the profound and the ridiculous.

It's a helluva lot easier when it comes naturally - as with Lawrence 'Yogi' Berra. He's a national treasure in America, fêted for his brilliance both as a baseball player for the New York Yankees and a phrase-maker. As his friend and fellow ballplayer, Joe Garagiola explains: 'Yogi puts words

together in ways nobody else would ever do. You may laugh and shake your head when Yogi says something strange like, "It ain't over 'til it's over," but soon you realise what he actually said makes perfect sense. And you find yourself using his words yourself because they are, after all, the perfect way to express a particular idea.'

We all ought to keep some corner of our mind that is forever stupid. What better insulation against the woes of the world? There's a Peanuts cartoon in which Snoopy, the beagle, is performing one of his madcap dances whilst misery-merchant Lucy looks on disapprovingly. 'You wouldn't be so happy if you knew about all the troubles in this world,' she snipes. But the beagle is impervious to her doom-mongering. 'Don't tell me!' he counters, skipping blithely on. 'I don't want to know!' And then, ears pert and grinning widely: 'I'm outrageously happy in my stupidity.'

That's the smartest thing I've heard all day.

FOOTNOTE: If you're wondering about the correct words to Mrs M's malapropisms, they are: pinnacle; alligator; contiguous; hysterics. If you guessed them all correctly, you're either fibbing or did the play for A level.

STOP PRESS! Just got home and checked the towels in my airing cupboard, so I can now reliably inform you that the name of that famous hotel chain whose fortune Paris Hilton is heir to is ... M&S.

THE WORD

NAMES

I hate ridiculous names.

*Peaches Honeyblossom Michelle Charlotte Angel
Vanessa Geldof*

WELL, NOW THAT you're here, we may as well get to know each other. My name is Peabody. I suppose you know yours.

Mr Peabody, *The Bullwinkle Show*

My name's Norman Lovett. That's my real name, and if I had a pound for every time someone's said, 'Lovett? I bet you do!' I'd have about six or seven pounds by now.

Norman Lovett

My name is Les Dawson. That's a stage name, actually. I was christened 'Friday Dawson' because when my father saw me he said to my mother, 'I think we'd better call it a day.'

Les Dawson

Are you called Cat because you bury your own poo?

Frank Skinner, to Cat Deeley

—Could I have your name?

—Well, you could, but it would be an incredible coincidence.

Police officer and Kip Wilson, *Bosom Buddies*

I love my name. Paris is my favourite city. And Paris without the P is 'heiress,' isn't it?

Paris Hilton, *Confessions of an Heiress*

Most people call their dogs Fergie. I'm kind of proud. You hear it in the park, 'Fergie, come here!'

Sarah Ferguson, *The Duchess of York*

—Surely you can't be serious?

—I am serious ... and don't call me Shirley.

Ted Striker and Dr Rumack, *Airplane!*

What's your name, Kate?

Simon Bates, *BBC Radio 1*

Well, I was born Mary Patterson, but then I married and naturally took my husband's name, so now I'm Neil Patterson.

Stephen Fry, *A Bit of Fry and Laurie*

—What do you call a Frenchman wearing sandals?

—Felipe Felop.

Anon

I'll phone up [the Hilton hotel, Paris] and say, 'Hi, it's Paris Hilton,' and they'll say, 'Yes, this is the Paris Hilton.' So I'm like, 'Yes, I know, I'm Paris Hilton.' It can go on for hours like some bad comedy film.

Paris Hilton

What if the 1972 Democratic National Committee headquarters had been located [not in the Watergate Hotel but] in the Mayflower Hotel? Journalists would think it exceedingly clever to add the word 'flower' to the end of any scandal: Iranflower, Whitewaterflower, Monicaflower, Flowersflower.

Jerry Pannullo