



JOHN RENTOUL

LISTELLANY

A Miscellany of Very British

■  **TOP TENS**  ■



FROM

POLITICS TO POP

LISTELLANY

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A miscellany of very British top tens, from politics to pop

John Rentoul



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TOP TEN REASONS TO READ THIS BOOK (OR 'THE INTRODUCTION')

1. Lists are the future of journalism, the internet and therefore the world.
2. Lists are also the past. Ten-item lists in particular have a history that goes back to even before the word 'listicle' was coined. Moses's top ten dos and don'ts was a handy way of summarising the rules for an entire society.
3. The lists in this book are totally fascinating. Did you know that 'male' and 'female' are not related to each other (deriving from Latin *masculus* and *femella*), while 'man' and 'woman' (man and wife-man in Old English) are? If you are not completely entranced by this, you will like something else here. Genuine shop names including Melon Cauli and Napoleon Boiler Parts? Go on.
4. The lists in this book will make you cleverer. Worried about the distractability of the internet? Looking up from the screen after 17 minutes wondering, yet again, what it was you meant to look up in the first place? Here is highly educational material presented in concentrated form, and anyone can pay attention for just ten points.
5. But let us not be purely utilitarian. One of the purposes of education is the joy of learning for its own sake. Herein is distilled the joy of language, music and politics.
6. Also quite a bit of pedantry (tautologies, misquotations), Britishness (the most English remarks of all time, best British place names), literature (best first and last lines) and films (turkeys that are actually quite good).
7. Curiosity is good for you. My friend Ian Leslie has written a whole book about it (*Curious: The Desire to Know and Why Your Future Depends on It*). I have compiled a whole book of things for you to be curious about.
8. You may have missed one or two of these lists when they first appeared in the *New Review*, the *Independent on Sunday* magazine, since May 2013, or you may, having had your appetite whetted, want to see all the things that didn't make the top ten in each category but that are nevertheless brilliant. A bit like how, in the old days, I disdained music that was 'too popular' and preferred my favourite singles to peak in the lower reaches of the Top Forty.
9. There are top tens here that have never before appeared in print: world exclusives listing upbeat songs that tell a sad story, translated tautologies (Sahara means desert, and what not), words that lost or gained an 'n' (such as a norange or an ewt), surnames that have died out and everyday lies (such as 'It won't take a minute').
10. You want to know about stupid car names, don't you? There really is a car called the Mazda Bongo Friendee.

For more top tens and debates, visit www.listellany.com

UNDERRATED FAMILY FILMS

When I watched *The Emperor's New Groove* again after several years I could not believe what a great film it is. Fine plot, great characters, quick and clever dialogue, uses pre-computer-generated imagery (CGI) brilliantly – and yet it is almost forgotten.

1. ***The Emperor's New Groove***, Disney, 2000. Incan emperor is turned into a llama and taught a lesson: majestic.
2. ***Basil The Great Mouse Detective***, Disney, 1986. 'Big Ben fight scene, robot mouse Queen Victoria and a peg-legged bat. What's not to like?' It was the first film Mark Wallace saw.
3. ***Megamind***, DreamWorks, 2010. Unoriginal? I thought it was great, and morally subtle.
4. ***Monster in Paris***, English version released 2012. Surprisingly affecting dub of the French original.
5. ***Jumanji***, 1995. Supernatural board game in which wild animals come to life? Sounds dire but it was Tom Doran's childhood favourite.
6. ***Small Soldiers***, DreamWorks, 1998. 'Toy Story with heavier firepower,' says Gaz W.
7. ***Robin Hood***, Disney, 1973. Unfairly overlooked, overshadowed by predecessors *The Jungle Book* and *Aristocats*.
8. ***Atlantis: The Lost Empire***, Disney, 2001. Another cartoon classic overshadowed by computer-generated imagery blockbusters to come.
9. ***Flushed Away***, Aardman/DreamWorks, 2006. Terrible title; outstanding plot, characters and CGI.
10. ***Lion King II: Simba's Pride***, Disney, 1998. Surprisingly high-quality, straight-to-video sequel.

PLURALS THAT HAVE BECOME SINGULAR

It is a little old-fashioned to use data, dice, graffiti, panini, media and politics as plural nouns these days, and I know only one person who treats news as a plural, but we are dimly aware that these words were not always as singular as they are now. However, Rich Greenhill, virtuoso of language curios, came up with many other words that were once – unknown to me – plurals. Here are the best...

1. **Quince** Middle English plural of Old French *cooin*, from Latin for apple of Cydonia, now Chania, Crete.
2. **Stamina** Latin plural of *stamen*, thread or essential element, before it was applied by analogy to flower parts.
3. **Chintz** Plural of chint, a stained or painted calico cloth imported from India, from Hindi *chimt*, spattering, stain.
4. **Pox** Plural of pock, as in pock-marked.
5. **Truce** Plural of true, Middle English, in the sense of belief, trust.
6. **Invoice** Plural of obsolete invoy, from French *envoy*, *envoyer*, to send.
7. **Broccoli** Italian, plural of *broccolo*, cabbage sprout, head, diminutive of *brocco*, shoot.
8. **Dismal** Originally a noun, for the two days in each month which were believed to be unlucky, from Anglo-Norman French *dis mal*, and medieval Latin *dies mali*, evil days.
9. **Sweden** Originally a plural of Swede, a Swedish person.
10. **Bodice** Originally bodies.

Greenhill also pointed out that MMR – measles, mumps and rubella – are all plurals:

11. Measles. Middle English maseles, probably from Middle Dutch *masel*, pustule. The spelling change was due to association with Middle English *mesel*, leprous, leprosy.
12. Mumps. Late 16th century: from obsolete mump, meaning grimace, have a miserable expression.
13. Rubella. Modern Latin neuter plural of *rubellus*, reddish.

Just to show off, he said – again, I had no idea – that the words primate and termite arose from mistaking the three-syllable Latin plurals *primates* and *termites* (the singulars being *primas* and *termes*) for two-syllable words. The *Oxford Dictionary* doesn't specifically support this, but it seems plausible.

14. Chess. Middle English: from Old French *eschés*, plural of *eschec*, check, which in the sense of holding back or verifying comes from the game of chess. I did not know that.
15. Delicatessen
16. Lasagne
17. Agenda. Latin: 'things to be done'.
18. Candelabra
19. WAG: stands for wives and girlfriends (mostly of famous footballers) but is often used as a singular, 'a WAG'.

FOOTNOTES

This list arose after I praised the wonder of the footnotes in John Campbell's biography of Roy Jenkins, a fabulous old-fashioned book, with starred footnotes at the bottom of the page plus numbered endnotes, including endnotes in footnotes.

1. **'It [is] wearisome to add "except the Italians" to every generalisation. Henceforth it may be assumed.'** A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918*.
2. **'Strengthened, I should have thought spoiled, by whisky.'** Roy Jenkins, in *Gladstone* on Queen Victoria's preference for claret.
3. **'Trees didn't burst into flame ... A better simile would be "not like molten gold".'** A footnote to: 'Sunlight poured like molten gold across the ... landscape.' Terry Pratchett *The Light Fantastic*.
4. **'...his trousers were creased at the sides not front and back.'** A.J.P. Taylor on King George V, in *English History 1914–45*.
5. **'Despite Orwell's expressed wishes, the ... Uniform Edition includes three semi-colons.'** A footnote to: 'Coming Up for Air hasn't got a semi-colon in it.' Peter Davison, editor, *George Orwell: A Life in Letters*.
6. **"'You're fired" were the exact words as I remember them.'** A footnote to: 'My first job ended when the editor said something to me that made it impossible to go on working for him.' Christopher Hitchens, *Hitch-22*.
7. **'This is the only reference in the canon to Holmes's eyebrows.'** Leslie S. Klinger, editor, *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*.
8. **'It is one of the mysteries of existence that what is called red tape is in fact pink.'** Profs George Gretton and Kenneth Reid, on a quirk of title deeds, in *Conveyancing (2nd Edition)*.
9. **'Haemophilia is, like the enlargement of the prostate, an exclusively male disorder. But not in this work.'** Samuel Beckett, *Watt*.
10. **'They discovered a problem ... with the [website]: investorsexchange.com'** A footnote to: 'The Investors Exchange, which wound up being shortened to IEX.' Michael Lewis, *Flash Boys*.

MALAPROPISMS

This one was Nick Thornsby's idea. As Mrs Malaprop says in Sheridan's play *The Rivals*, 'If reprehend anything in this world it is the use of my oracular tongue, and a nice derangement of epitaphs.'

1. **'She's as headstrong as an allegory on the banks of the Nile.'** Mrs Malaprop.
2. **'It's great to be back on terra cotta.'** John Prescott after a stormy flight, 1999.*
3. **'I am a person who recognises the fallacy of humans.'** George W. Bush to Oprah Winfrey.
4. **'The world is your lobster, my son.'** Arthur Daley, *Minder*.
5. **'I'm as happy as a sandbag.'** A friend of Alistair Gray's. 'She has an unconscious gift. She also said something was "a bit of a damp squid".'
6. **'Cow-towing to the Americans.'** *Daily Telegraph* report of criticism of New Labour by Ian Davidson, Labour MP. Did this involve pulling cattle behind a boat?
7. **'He eludes confidence.'** William Bratton, Los Angeles police chief, of Barack Obama's second inaugural speech, 2009.
8. **'It's not rocket fuel.'** Henry McLeish, former Scottish First Minister, to John Swinney, SNP leader.
9. **'If I don't want to serve someone, that is my provocative.'** Landlord to Lloyd Bracey who worked in a pub as a student.
10. **'Chocolate peripherals'** Hugh Kellett's great aunt's dessert order.

Also nominated:

11. Deferring payments would 'only be playing smokes and daggers'. Bertie Ahern, former Irish prime minister. A top ten of malapropisms by Ahern alone could have been compiled, including 'hindsight is 50/50 vision' and the not-yet-authenticated 'upsetting the apple tart'.
12. 'When I find the allegator concerned.' American general rejecting damaging anonymous claims. Allegedly.
13. 'I've got a head like a sore bear.'
14. 'It's not the sanity of picket lines that bothers me, it's the sanity of human life.' John Prescott, 2002.
15. 'I'll see you at the Duke of Windsor at 6 o'clock, then.' 'Right, we'll sympathise watches.'

Two men exiting a pub after what may well have been a long drinking session, overheard by Roger Stevenson.

16. 'Councillor, come up here and rest your papers on the rectum.' Chairman of Stevenage district council, according to former councillor Peter Metcalfe.
17. 'He's as honest as the day is blue.'

* Lord Prescott says he never said it: this one should be in the Top 10 Misquotations.

SIGNS WITH DOUBLE MEANINGS

Mike Graham said, 'I refuse to go in here,' when he posted a picture of a door in New York with the sign, 'Refuse Room'. As Tom Freeman pointed out, 'That was the policy of the Bethlehem innkeeper.' Here are ten more signs with unintended messages.

1. **This door is alarmed** But the sign doesn't say what is bothering it.
2. **Disabled toilet** Whenever Andrew Denny sees it, he thinks, 'Well, why doesn't someone fix it, then?'
3. **'Women'** Sign on ladies' loo, with alarming quotation marks.
4. **Dogs must be carried** On London Underground escalators: an obscure grammatical trap, suggesting that no one without a dog in their arms or in a bag is permitted.
5. **We don't fly in our chickens. They're 100% British** In unidentified supermarket.
6. **Eggs buzz at gate** Seen outside a farmhouse in Hadlow Down, East Sussex.
7. **Slow Children Playing** Faster children, of course, can get out of the way in time.
8. **Children: Please Drive Slowly** Boy and girl racers alert.
9. **Train drivers must not be disturbed** At London Bridge station.
10. **If this lift is found to be out of order please use an alternative lift** Manchester Piccadilly station. The second meaning being, 'Get lost.'

There were many good entries, so here are the next ten:

11. **Humped zebra crossing.** Worth waiting for this camel hybrid.
12. **To avoid suffocation keep away from children. They use up all the oxygen.**
13. **Self Storage.** 'Who wants to do this?' asked Jenifer Jeffery.
14. **Heavy plant crossing.** Look out for triffids.
15. **Quiet birds have ears.** Sign outside a hide at the London Wetland Centre bird reserve.
16. **No Parking Cars Will Be Clamped.** On the walls of the car park next to Bristol Museum.
17. **Agent has no money.** 'At each kiosk service window in our regional subway, Bay Area Rapid Transit.' Fred Walker, who thought this may be an invitation to charity.
18. **Fire Fighting Lift.** 'Sign above a lift in my office. The idea of the lift fighting the fire has tickled me ever since I noticed it,' says Peter Shearman.
19. **Baggage trolleys must not be taken onto the platform for safety reasons.** Heathrow

Terminal 4 (Piccadilly Line), and at Gatwick Airport (National Rail). Taking them onto the platform for other reasons is, of course, fine.

20. Post No Bills. 'I always thought the sign was a request to postmen meaning the rest of the post could be delivered, but not the bills.' Simon Cox.

SURPRISINGLY UNRELATED PAIRS OF WORDS

My favourite list in the whole book. I did not believe that there were as many as ten examples of surprisingly unrelated words, thinking 'female/male' and 'island/isle' quite enough excitement for one language. Many thanks to Rich Greenhill, whose numbers four and seven proved me wrong.

1. **Female, not related to male** Female is from the Latin *femella*, a diminutive of *femina*, a woman; while male is from the Old French *masle*, from the Latin *masculus*.
2. **Island, isle** Old English *iegland*, *ieg*, from a base meaning watery, according to the *Oxford Dictionary*. The 's' came by association with isle, from the Latin *insula* via Old French.
3. **Outrage, rage** From Old French *ou(l)trage*, based on Latin *ultra*, beyond.
4. **Uproar, roar** Middle Dutch *oproer*, from *op*, meaning up, and *roer*, meaning confusion.
5. **Bridegroom, groom** Old English *brydguma*, from *bryd*, bride, and *guma*, man. The change in the second syllable influenced by groom.
6. **Pickaxe, axe** Middle English *pikoys*, from Old French *picois*, related to pike. The change in the ending was influenced by axe.
7. **Gingerbread, bread** Gingerbread originally meant preserved ginger used to make the biscuit, from Old French *gingembrat*, from medieval Latin *gingibratum*, from *gingiber*, ginger.
8. **Belfry, bell** Belfry was originally a watchtower, from French *berfrei*, but because it had bells, it acquired an 'l'.
9. **Muskrat, musk** The animal does produce a musky smell, but the word is actually from Algonquin for 'red'.
10. **Crayfish, fish** From Old French *crevice*, related to German *Krebs*, crab. The ending altered by association with fish in about the 16th century.

And one more:

11. 'Jubilee' and 'jubilation' come from different sources. The first comes via Latin from the Hebrew *yōome*, which means trumpet blast, with which the year of emancipation and restoration in Judaism is proclaimed every fifty years. The second comes from Latin *jubilat-*, 'called out', used by Christian writers to mean 'shouted for joy', from *jubilare*.

FIRST SENTENCES OF NOVELS

Jonny Geller, the boss of the literary agency Curtis Brown, said, 'This is the saddest story I have ever heard,' from *The Good Soldier* by Ford Madox Ford, is 'perhaps my favourite opening sentence in fiction.' Here are ten more I like.

1. **'There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.'** C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.
2. **'Marley was dead: to begin with.'** Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*. Also contains the finest use of a colon in literature.
3. **'The scent, smoke and sweat of a casino are nauseating at three in the morning.'** Ian Fleming, *Casino Royale*.
4. **'There were four of us.'** Jerome K. Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*.
5. **'It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York.'** Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*. I do like the inversion of the first part of the sentence, which makes it seem as if the strange weather were more important than the Rosenbergs' execution, followed by the deadpan twist of the second part.
6. **'All this happened, more or less.'** Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*.
7. **'It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.'** George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.
8. **'It was the day my grandmother exploded.'** Iain Banks, *The Crow Road*.
9. **'Cities at night, I feel, contain men who cry in their sleep and then say Nothing.'** Martin Amis, *The Information*.
10. **'It was a dark, blustery afternoon in spring, and the city of London was chasing a small mining town across the dried-out bed of the old North Sea.'** Philip Reeve, *Mortal Engines*. A cliché in the opening phrase brilliantly subverted by the shock of a city pursuing a small town.

This was a popular list – although the 140-character limit winnowed entries somewhat. Even so, I received many representations on behalf of books that people thought should have been in the list.

Lots of people thought Anthony Burgess ought to have been in it. You know, the silly one about the archbishop and the catamite. No.

There were also many nominations for the sonorous but meaningless first sentence of *Tale of Two Cities*. Worst of sentences, certainly.

Janan Ganesh tried to sneak this past me: 'The world is what it is; men who are nothing who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it.' V.S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*.

River. Definitely not. Even if it meant anything, it has a semi-colon in it. Inexcusable.

Others had more promising suggestions. Owen Bennett liked this, saying it ‘sets up inverted emotions’: ‘People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles.’ Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero*. Yes, it has something. Not sure about the inverted emotions, but it is a good first sentence that makes you think and want to read the next.

Daniel Hannan said he was ‘shocked – shocked – not to see’: ‘In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.’ I know what he means. I share his admiration for Tolkien, although in my case it is mixed with two things. One is the reaction identified by Terry Pratchett: ‘Put in one lousy dragon and they call you a fantasy writer.’ The other is that it is, when it comes to it, a children’s book.

Adrian Hilton said he was disappointed not to see: ‘The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.’ L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*. That is a good one. It even contains a fine colon, although not as special as that in the first sentence of *A Christmas Carol*. I may have reacted against it because it has become almost as clichéd as blokes with fortunes being in want of wives or the heterogeneity of unhappy families.

Matthew Hoffman’s favourite first sentence is: ‘The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.’ Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*. On rediscovering it, I was surprised to come across the second ‘the’, which diminishes it slightly. But yes, it is a contender.

Clive Davis and David Paxton offered first drafts of first sentences. Davis noted that the opening of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was originally: ‘It was a cold, blowy day in early April and a million radios were striking thirteen.’ While Paxton pointed out that Ian Fleming’s first attempt at the start of *Casino Royale* was: ‘Scent and smoke and sweat hit the taste buds with an acid thwack at three o’clock in the morning.’ Both examples illustrate the virtue of rewriting.

Finally, John McTernan pointed out that I had failed to include this: ‘If I am out of my mind, it’s all right with me, thought Moses Herzog.’ Saul Bellow, *Herzog*. Best ever. Don’t know how I missed that one.

LAST SENTENCES OF NOVELS

Guy Keleny, my colleague, had no suggestions for opening lines, but said that he rather liked the last sentence of *The Lord of the Rings*. Single, complete sentences with a 140-character limit turned out to be quite restrictive, but, with the usual warning about spoilers, here we go ...

1. **'Well, I'm back.'** *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien.
2. **'It could be that the sort of sentence one wants right here is the kind that runs, and laughs, and slides, and stops right on a dime.'** *Speedboat* by Renata Adler. A lovely line that even discusses what sort of sentence it is and that imitates itself, gently mocking.
3. **'After all, tomorrow is another day.'** *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell.
4. **'Ever drifting down the stream—/ Linger in the golden gleam—/ Life, what is it but a dream?'** *Through the Looking-Glass* by Lewis Carroll.
5. **'He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men.'** *The Secret Agent* by Joseph Conrad.
6. **'So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.'** *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald.
7. **'Just watch me.'** *The Woman Upstairs* by Claire Messud.
8. **'There was a point to this story, but it has temporarily escaped the chronicler's mind.'** *So Long and Thanks for All the Fish* by Douglas Adams.
9. **'She was seventy-five and she was going to make some changes in her life.'** *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen.
10. **'You could see a long way – but not as far as Velma had gone.'** *Farewell, My Lovely* by Raymond Chandler.

My insistence on single, complete sentences ruled out some promising entries:

'Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody.' J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*.

'Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?' Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*. The whole book is Portnoy's monologue to his psychiatrist. This is the only thing the psychiatrist says.

The 140-character limit also cut off some popular nominations including George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. It also ruled out of order that James Joyce one that ends **yes I said yes I will Yes**, which is not bad as a last line, although as a last

sentence goes on a bit.

Of those that made the final cut, *The Great Gatsby* was subject to late appeals, including from my friend Matt Hoffman, a former colleague at the *Independent* and literary editor of *Time Out* in the 1970s: 'Isn't this metaphor, literally, backwards? The past is the source of the river, the future is where it's going.' These objections were overruled. I always thought it referred to a tidal estuary. The direction doesn't matter: the point is the struggle to prevent the current carrying you where you don't want to go. Anyway, it's poetic licence, isn't it?

So to those that didn't make it:

'Happiness is but an occasional episode in a general drama of pain.' Thomas Hardy, *Mayor of Casterbridge*. A good encapsulation of Hardy's cheerful approach to life rather than the great last sentence of its own.

'Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?' David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*. Ho hum.

'The song died away; they heard the river, bearing down the snows of winter into the Mediterranean.' E.M. Forster, *A Room with a View*. Pleasant but inconsequential.

'We shall sit with lighter bosoms on the hearth, to see the ashes of our fires turn gray and cold.' Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*. Don't like it.

'The knife came down, missing him by inches, and he took off.' Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*. Nominated by John Blake. One of my favourite books, but the sentence itself means little without all that goes before.

'It was the devious cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children only found another orphan.' Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*. Not my kind of thing.

'Somebody threw a dead dog after him down the ravine.' Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano*. All right in an absurdist way.

'After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain.' Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*. Brian Millar said this is a fabulous piece of underwriting, and that Hemingway wrote forty-seven variations. Well, it is certainly underwritten.

'And that's that.' J.B. Priestley, *Angel Pavement*. Good, but too short and obvious.

'It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.' Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*. Lots of nomination. Not in a million years.

WORDS THAT USED TO MEAN THE OPPOSITE

Balustrade and banister both come from the same root: *balaustion*, Greek for wild pomegranate flower, because of pillars that resemble its curving calyx tube. Which has nothing to do with anything, but is a curiosity that I like. Sometimes, though, words come so far from their origins that they end up meaning the opposite of when they started.

1. **Respect** As in, 'With respect'.
2. **Humbled** The late Simon Hoggart noted its modern use in thank-you speeches.
3. **Nice** Meant 'stupid' in Middle English (from *nescius*, Latin for ignorant). Shifted through 'coy, reserved', via 'scrupulous' to 'subtle' and now, as Neil Fitzgerald put it, 'sort of awright'.
4. **Silly** Not quite opposite, but close. Used to mean 'happy', then 'innocent, feeble' and now 'foolish'.
5. **Awful** Originally, inspiring awe.
6. **Egregious** Means outstandingly bad and used to mean outstandingly good. From Latin, 'standing out from the flock'.
7. **Wicked** Now a rather tame street-slang inversion.
8. **Fulsome** Still means cloying, insincere, for many of us, but often now used as a strong form of 'full', especially of praise.
9. **Bad** With thanks, or otherwise, to Michael Jackson.
10. **Presently** 'Used to mean right this minute and now means later because of the human tendency to put things off.' Della Mirandola.

A special bonus one, nominated by my friend Francis Wheen, who wrote to me as follows:

Wheen. You may not be familiar with it, but many of your readers in Scotland and Northern Ireland are. A Scottish (and Ulster) noun derived from the Old English *hwæne* ('in some degree, somewhat, a little'), *when* began life meaning 'few, small amount', mostly in the phrase 'a when of...'

As the *OED* notes, however: 'A when (of), a few: in recent use = a 'good few', a fair number.' So when you hear a customer ask a fishmonger for 'a when of herring' (as I did in my Glaswegian childhood), he could mean either a few or a lot.

These days it's more likely to be the latter. See, for example, this tweet from the Scottish MEP Alyn Smith on 23 October 2013: 'Jings what a day! A when of votes, now legging it to Brussels and home ready to help out @theSNP campaign for Dunfermline MSP poll tomorrow.' Or this, from Ian Rankin, blogging on 12 November 2011: 'Signed a when of new books at No Alibis...' In most recent examples I can find

in Scottish newspapers it clearly means 'a large number'.

Confusingly, however, dictionaries still lead with the old meaning. Here's the latest edition of *Chambers*, the greatest Scottish dictionary: 'a when 1. A few; 2: A good many.'

WORDS WITH OPPOSITE MEANINGS

Which brings us neatly to the next list, of words that have retained opposite meanings contemporary English. Thanks to Stryker McGuire.

1. **Sanction** To approve or to disapprove.
2. **Oversight** To have responsibility for or to forget.
3. **Buckle** To do up or to collapse.
4. **Arguable** Can mean something that can be asserted or contradicted.
5. **Cleave** To split or to stick to. Apparently from different Old English roots.
6. **Dust** Can mean to remove dust or to apply it.
7. **Fast** Moving fast or stuck fast.
8. **Quite** Not much or absolutely.
9. **Qualified** Falling short or meeting requirements.
10. **Interesting** Meaning either an interesting or a stupid idea.

Finally, as Stewart Wood, Ed Miliband's shadow Cabinet adviser, said, 'Downhill from now on' can mean that the worst is over or still to come.

FICTIONAL VILLAINS

I caught up with the television series *Sherlock* only recently, and was struck by how unconvincing and un-sinister the character of Moriarty seemed. From my dim memory of the books, there wasn't much to him in Arthur Conan Doyle's original either. Here are some proper baddies ...

1. **Charles Augustus Milverton** Martin Hoscik said the blackmailer in another Sherlock Holmes story, 'The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton', is more interesting than Moriarty.
2. **Count Olaf** *A Series of Unfortunate Events* by Lemony Snicket.
3. **Francis Urquhart** *House of Cards* by Michael Dobbs.
4. **Count Dracula** *Dracula* by Bram Stoker.
5. **Satan** From *Paradise Lost*, John Milton. John Blake nominated God in the same poem, but I rejected that as being too clever.
6. **Humbert Humbert** *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov.
7. **Long John Silver** *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson. 'Them as dies'll be the luckiest ones.'
8. **HAL** *2001: A Space Odyssey* written by Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke.
9. **Phyllis Dietrichson** *Double Indemnity*, directed by Billy Wilder. She is called Phyllis Nirdlinger in the original novella by James M. Cain.
10. **Mrs Danvers** *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier.

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