

JON CARROLL

A Fun New Game For Fall

THE MISSION OF this column is to save the world, to bring a twinkle to the eye of a lonely child, to stop the spread of roundworm, to preserve and promote the playing of the banjo, to end war on the Asian subcontinent, to offer an effective decay-preventing dentifrice, to dance like a mad fool on the crazy spinning carousel of life, and to provide a new parlor game every so often.

Longtime readers of this space will remember Opposites Attract, Han Shin Wu, the Virginia Variant, Deprivation and the immensely popular Uttar Pradesh. Recent fans of this column can get complete rules to any of these games by attaching a stamped, self-addressed envelope to a brand-new microwave oven and mailing it to me in care of the Mutual Broadcast Network.

And now, another game.

There is in the Bay Area a local chapter of the National Puzzlers League, and it has Equinox parties every six months or so (joke!) at which puzzlers introduce new games and everyone tries to play them.

Some of the games are so hard that mere civilians such as this space have trouble understanding the rules, but some are within the reach of ordinary mortals. One played last spring was extraordinarily diverting.

*After
'petnaping,'
there was
'pet peeve'
and
'Petrarchan
sonnet'*

It sounds both dorky and hard when described; I know because I heard it described and remarked to a companion, "That sounds impossible and not worth it." But it's neither; it's a cool new word game for people who like cool new word games. It's called Dictum and it was invented by Charles Goldstein.

ONE PERSON selects a word from the dictionary and announces it. The other players (using pencil and paper) attempt to guess the word that follows it directly in the dictionary. Indeed, the game got its name because "dictum" follows "dictionary" in Charles Goldstein's dictionary.

(In my huge Random House, "Dictograph" follows "dictionary," and Dictograph might be an even better name for the game, but it's not the real name. The real name is Dictum.)

In Goldstein's example, he selected the word "petit-maitre," which means a dandy or fop. Directly after "petit-maitre" in the dictionary is "petit mal," which therefore scores one point. After "petit mal" is "petit point," which scores two. After "petit point" is "petnaping," the act of stealing a pet, which scores three points, and so on.

Anything more than 10 words away scores the maximum 10 points; the object of the game is to get the lowest possible score.

PLEASE NOTE: It is not necessary to know the meaning of the key word to play the game; it is likewise not necessary to know the meaning of your answer. You can even make up a word; take a chance.

In the game I played, one of the words was "English yew"; I was stumped and put down "English zoo," which did not exist in the dictionary but scored the same 10 points as some less amusing guesses. (The word after "English yew" is the ever popular "englut," by the way).

It sounds harder than it is; all it really requires is a good vocabulary and a working knowledge of the alphabet. I scored one point for "lecithin" (just one word away from "lechery") and six points for "foot" (six words away from "foolishness") and "mania" (six words away from "man-gy").

Fifteen words per round, then the winner gets to choose the words for the next round. Surprising answers and combinations are frequent; yelling and groaning are commonplace.