

SPELLING BEE: REVENGE OF THE WORDS

By James Finn Garner

If you ever competed in a spelling bee in grade school, I have a question I'm sure you'll know the answer to:

What was the word that tripped you up?

Mine was "handkerchief". This word sank so many Sacred Heart fourth graders standing in line ahead of me that I was confident I had a lock on it. The process of elimination surely gave me an edge. How many different ways, after all, can you misspell the word "handkerchief"? Me-Plus-One, it turns out.

Spelling bees, along with mall walking and the Electoral College, are a singularly bizarre made-in-America activity, and darned if we don't love them. Recent books, documentaries, and even stage musicals have depicted their esoteric operations. Some of these purport to show unhealthy pressures and raw competition among the "I before E" crowd. But the spelling bee I recently attended was more an indictment of our ridiculous language than anything else.

The bee was held for all city private and parochial schools, to determine who moved on to the city-wide final. My fifth grade son, champion of his school, was moving up to the semi-final big time. He sailed through the first four rounds, and even got a laugh from the audience with his theatrical sigh after spelling the word "gentry".

Four rounds thinned the contestant field from 56 to 12. The tension in the room was terrible; and some of the kids were a little on edge, too. Careful not to

add to the pressure, I tried to stifle my reactions, but I was getting too excited. I wanted every kid to win. There was such an array of personalities on that stage, almost every one of them became a favorite of mine: The peppy sparkplug, the gangly preteen, the nerd, the cool kid, the sloucher, the soldier-in-training, the wall flower, the apple polisher, the overachiever and the Goth with the “Nightmare Before Christmas” sweatshirt. After the bee started, I was pulling for them all, and bit my knuckle when a girl put one too many Ls in “casualty”, thus becoming one herself.

The most striking aspect of spelling bees is the grossly unfair word selection. A two- syllable softball like “mesa” could be followed by a split-finger fastball like “electromechanical” or “dysentery”. Some words were a breeze for city kids, like “precinct” and “captain”, but other contestants were ambushed by exoticisms like “barnacle”, “semantics” and “philharmonic”. The word that had the strongest Chicago tang was “babushka”, but it was too Old World to be familiar.

After surviving “gentry”, “buffalo”, “pacification” and “infiltration”, my son was finally eliminated in the fifth round by the word “interim”. His cool exterior cracked with disbelief, but it only lasted until he got off the stage and sat down with us. None of the kids took it too seriously, certainly not as much as their parents. To the contestants, the spelling bee was a small price to pay for getting out of regular morning classes. I wish they could’ve seen the spelling bee from their parents’ proud perspective. The adults there gave a heartfelt round of

applause to each and every kid in that school basement, perhaps realizing that times in the spotlight can be few and far between.

And I didn't lose it when my son was eliminated. I lost it inside when any of my favorites slipped up on the arbitrary arrangements and rules-be-damned assembly of these freaky contrivances we call words. Before it was over, the competition almost became too much for me. At one point, I teared up and found myself needing a handkerchief.

H. A. N. D. K. E. R. C. H. I. E. F.

“Handkerchief”.

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