

SHELL SHOCKED

Rimy and Smalto Are Not Household Words

By Art Stevens

So you think you're pretty smart. You go to cocktail parties and you throw out four-syllable words to demonstrate your powerful vocabulary which you've spent years cultivating.

Your conversation might typically go something like this: "It's amazing to me how churrigueresque developments can often be the basis for eleemosynary ramifications that are riddled with arcane rachmanism."

Yes, you may have people scratching their heads in amazement because they've never heard most of those words before. With your smug look and the three olives floating arrogantly in your martini you dazzle them with new and almost never before heard words. But do they know what you're talking about? Indeed do you know what you're talking about?

The words I used above as examples are real words. But who's to really know unless you look them up in a dictionary? I could just as easily have made them up. Would you really know if I did or not?

I get a daily email called "Wordsmith." Every day a brand new word is presented to me that I'm supposed to add to my vocabulary and toss around like an old baseball. These new words are supposed to make me appear smarter and better educated because they are often so obscure that the mere vocalizing of them in public is supposed to put me into a higher category of sophistication.

But if no one knows what I'm talking about what is the point?

I have always subscribed to the school of less is more. To me long, obscure and tedious words are better used in parlor games than in daily language. Why should I say "smalto" when I can say colored glass? Or "rimy" instead of covered with frost? Or "agnosia" when I'm referring to the loss of the ability to recognize objects and people? Or "chouse" instead of to cheat or trick?

These words are only used during typical Senior Scrabble World Series or the annual International Crossword Puzzle Festival. If you don't participate in either of them then there may be no need for you to learn new obscure words.

If you open the dictionary to any page you will continue to be amazed by the number of words you've never seen before or heard of. I'm all for building a better vocabulary but to me that includes words that many people already know or should know. It's not much fun to read a book and have to turn to a dictionary every two minutes to look up a word the author uses that is clearly not in the public domain.

My family used to play a game called "Dictionary" which used to be reserved for rainy days. One person would pick out an obscure word from the dictionary that no one had heard before. The person who chose the word had to write down the actual definition. All the other participants had to make up a definition that they thought best characterized the word.

After everyone wrote their definitions down each person chose what he thought was the actual definition. More often than not, most participants chose the incorrect definition. What it demonstrated is how obscure off the beaten path words could be and the extent to which no one knew what they meant let alone used them in daily

conversation. The more obscure a word is the less likely it would be used in conversation or writing.

Yes, there are words that we should know, like efficacious, obstreperous, clandestine, etc. But would you ever use words like grig, purlicue, cobber, rimy or smalto? Not unless you're trying to show how smart you are at someone else's expense. I suspect that if you use such words in public all they will produce are giggles and rolling eyes.

If you're the show off I'm describing then try this. Sprinkle a sentence with words like churriгуeresque and then go around the room and ask everyone what they think that word means. You will find that pretty much everyone will have nary a clue unless you're at a convention of lexicographers. If you were then I can just imagine a typical sentence being spoken out loud over a glass of veritinna. (Did I make this word up? Look it up.)

“Like yin and yang, feng shui is a new western import that mackles the axenic strains of intercalary and bissextile menologies.”

Lexicographers would exult in such sentences. The rest of us may just want to excuse ourselves and go watch “Desperate Housewives” instead.