



reflection

Spelling Fever Grips French-Speakers

by Claudine Canetti

THE French championships soon became world championships, gathering together more and more competitors, who were ever younger and increasingly brilliant, and came from further afield. These championships, whose final takes place in prestigious locations beneath the eyes of millions of television-viewers who also do the famous dictation, has become an unavoidable social event. They have, moreover, greatly contributed to the cause of spreading the French language in the world, as they have brought together up to 250,000 participants representing 123 countries which may be French-speaking or not.

It all began in 1985, when the most famous comper of book programmes on television, Bernard Pivot, announced in the monthly magazine "Lire", which he created ten years earlier, that he was launching a French championship of spelling. He had hesitated about going into such a venture, for a long time, as, he says today, "Dictations had a very bad reputation in France. They were considered as a use-

less exercise, obsolete teaching, the work of a scribe or even as an instrument of torture". He himself, however, had kept "rather pleasant memories" of these school exercises. Why should his nostalgia not be "that of a few tens of thousands" of his compatriots? At the time, he was far from imagining the millions of television-viewers who, armed with a pen, would develop a passion for these "useless exercises" to the point of making them the subject of heated discussions every year, even in the Metro.

In fact, it was an immediate success, with more than 50,000 participants for the first qualifying tests published in the magazine "Lire". After the semi-finals, 70 competitors met up for the final.

The following year, France's French-speaking neighbours from Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland and Monaco joined in and Pivot already found a spectacular venue for the final: the Great Hall at the City of Science at La Vilette in Paris. He also divided the competitors up into juniors and amateur seniors and professional seniors, to which he would later add a "Youngsters" category for the under 15s. Each



The final of the spelling contest is underway in Paris

category would have its winners with a first, second and third prize.

In 1988, the competition went worldwide and a version for schools was created. The number of competitors and participating countries keeps increasing from year to year and the French soon saw foreigners, who brilliantly defend the French language all over the world, going up on the winners'

platform beside them, and it certainly is not an easy language!

They all enthusiastically juggle with the difficulties that the creators of the dictation heap up unrestrainedly and which is read with delectation by Bernard Pivot. With rare and sometimes completely unknown words, subtle plurals of compound words (whether they are invariable or not), inopportune

hyphens (which only count as half a mistake) and accents, everything conspires to trapping the most skilful.

Personalities from the world of arts, literature, entertainment and politics have a lot of fun entering the spirit of the game and taking part in the finals (but not in the real competition: that would be too risky!). They often come out of it red-faced with shame confessing to a very large number of mistakes, a long way from the triumphant but fairly rare "no mistakes" of the big winners.

Moving from one prestigious place to another for the finals (the Sorbonne, the Senate, the French National Library and UNESCO), Bernard Pivot succeeded a master-stroke in 1992 by simply invading the United Nations in New-York for a "world super-final" bringing together 108 countries. It was the first time that a French language competition took place at UNO, in the general assembly room where 40 French champions and 220 from French-language or non French-language countries were gathered together.

After this coup, a change had to be brought about so as not to sink into routine. In 1993, the Spelling champi-

onships became the "Dicos d'Or", a formula which called for general knowledge, with, in addition to the dictation, questions on the meaning and history of words. "Dico" is a familiar abbreviation for dictionary in French, but this word itself appears in the dictionary. The Futuroscope theme park in Poitiers and the National Assembly hosted the semi-finalists and the finalists respectively that year. The following year, the places chosen were the Council of Europe in Strasbourg and the brand new National French Library, which opened its doors ajar (while empty) well before its official inauguration by President Francois Mitterrand in March 1995.

For 1995, the tenth anniversary of the Spelling championships, the semi-finals take place on 2nd October in the Opera in Lyons, which has been newly renovated by the architect Jean Nouvel, and the final will be held on 2nd December in Paris.

Spelling fever certainly does not seem to be abating. But, to help it, a girl from Quebec, who won the world championships, at the age of 16, in the junior category, has just published a method to learn how to spell.

L'ACTUALITE EN FRANCE (Anglais)

The Origins of Impressionism : How to Start a Revolution

by Pascale Teinac

THE ANSWER IS IN THE MAGNIFICENT exhibition which, under the title of "Impressionism: its origins (1859-1869)", dazzled Paris and will be presented, in autumn, at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, which co-organised the exhibition with the Reunion des Musees Nationaux Francais (French Museums Group) and the Orsay Museum.

A striking fact is that when the decade of precursors, who paved the revolution in painting, came to an end, Manet had already twice caused an enormous scandal, in 1863 with "Dejeuner sur l'herbe" (Picnic on the Grass) which was, at the time, called "Le Bain" and, in 1865, with "Olympia," but the word "Impressionism" had not yet come into being.

It was only in 1874 that an art critic was to coin it, referring to a painting by Monet, "Impression, Sunrise," presented for the first independent exhibi-

tion by the group of iconoclastic, non-academic young painters which included Monet, Renoir, Degas, Cezanne, Sisley and Pissarro, in the photographer Nadar's studio. "They are impressionist," he was to say, "in the sense that they do not reproduce the landscape but the sensation produced by the landscape."

This is already reducing the Impressionists to painters of only landscapes, a simplification that the organisers of the exhibition wanted to put right, for, although it is true that the quality of the light was a religion for Manet, Degas, Renoir and Monet, they were also portrait painters and chroniclers of everyday life.

180 paintings loaned by 80 museums and private collectors from 20 countries in the world trace the origin of the development of this painting, from realism to impressionism. The decade chosen is the one in which all these young

painters, none of whom was yet 30 in 1859, reached maturity. The exhibition begins with a evocation of the 1859 Salon, the last one that Beaudelaire reported on, noting that there was "no explosion and no unknown genius." In fact, no fewer than 3,894 works by 1,700 artists had been shown, but the jury had been severe by refusing works sent in by many other painters, including Manet and Millet.

Another critic had, at that time, written these premonitory words, "Could you believe, on considering this decadence, that it would take ten years, at the most, with the help of some intelligent support, to organise the most beautiful period in art?". This is indeed what the future "Impressionists" were going to achieve, but with what material and moral difficulties!

— battles over picnics and parrots —
The protests caused by the excessive severity of the official jury made

Napoleon III decide, in 1863, to organise the famous "Salon of refused artists" so that the public could judge the works rejected by the haughty censors. In this new Salon, one could see paintings by Fantin-Latour, Jongkind, Pissarro, Whistler, and, of course, Manet with his "Bain." The public and the critics were immediately shocked by this rustic nude of a woman of easy virtue sitting between two clothed men.

Monet, who, although he revered Manet just as he admired the illustrious master of all of them, Courbet, reproached Manet for painting his picture in his studio when the future Impressionists had started putting up their easels outdoors. Monet painted his magnificent "Dejeuner sur l'herbe" (Picnic on the grass) right in the country, in 1865, and, suddenly, in 1867, Manet changed the title of his "Bain" to mark the fact that his "Dejeuner sur l'herbe" had been painted before Mon-

et's.

Another of Manet's nudes (also painted in 1863 but presented in 1965) also caused a scandal, "Olympia," the painting of a nonchalant courtesan which bears some resemblance to Titien's "Venus of Urbino" and Goya's "Maja Desnuda," makes the error of symbolising venal love and not aristocratic passion.

Courbet did not like "Olympia" either and, in order to show Manet how one should present a nude, in 1866, he painted his "Woman with a parrot," reclining with the bird on her hand. Manet, in turn, answered Courbet back ironically by taking up the idea of the parrot but this time the "Young Lady" of 1866 ("Woman with a parrot") wears a long dress buttoned from the feet to the neck. As a further dig, Manet added one of those half-peeled lemons, that one finds scattered about in several of his paintings, at the feet of the young

woman.

The exhibition presents many other confrontations of this kind between painters, whether it is in portraits, seascapes, nudes, still lifes or scenes from contemporary life (race-courses, streets, theatre, opera, seaside, etc.). It ends with three paintings inspired by the Grenouillere, a famous open-air restaurant and dance-hall on the banks of the Seine, where people went to swim, to go boating and to dance.

In addition to this great exhibition, which has produced a veritable wave of "impressionitis" in France, with books, walks in the footsteps of the painters, and cookery recipes, the Fine Arts museum in Rouen, has managed to bring together, for the first time, 17 of the 30 versions of the famous Rouen Cathedral, painted by Monet in 1894. Here it is no longer the origins, but Impressionism in its most miraculous form.

L'Actualite En France

profile

George Orwell : An Extraordinary Writer with a Pseudonym

by A S M Nurunnabi

IN the world of his creation, Eric Blair vanished and his writer-friends never thought of him except as that recreated being, George Orwell. Orwell cultivated throughout his career, by way of adopting a pseudonym, the act of self-distancing which seemed to be his tool for achieving objectivity that became an obsession with him. Orwell thus developed an unparalleled ability to project his own experiences outside himself and describe them with the vivid eye of an observer.

Orwell sought a way of writing — a "prose like a window pane" — in which the mannerisms of the writer would not in any way come between the reader and the reported events. Thus, in trying to eliminate any self-conscious style, Orwell became one of the great English stylists of his time.

Orwell believed that no writer could fail to be to some degree politically mo-

tivated, and his own convictions from the anti-imperialism of *Burmese Days* to the anti-totalitarianism of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* became elements in his novels. Orwell found himself with certain ideas to express, with certain areas of experience which he could best deal, and he tended to create characters who will carry these ideas and experiences as his mouthpiece.

We may here take a look at some of the basic characters of some of well-known books of Orwell. Flory, the melancholic timber merchant who is the leading character in *Burmese Days*, not only projects Orwell's antagonism to imperialism; but also lives through Orwell's own fascination with the Burmese and his failure to stand out firmly against the injustices he saw around him while he was still a police officer. Dorothy in *A Clergyman's Daughter* is a vehicle to work out Or-

well's loss of religious faith. Comstock in *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* and Bowling in *Coming up for Air* speak with Orwell's voice when they attack the power of money and the destructiveness of capitalist society, and when they are not being vehement about such matters they seem rather ineffectual as human beings.

It is significant that the most successful of Orwell's works of fiction was the fable *Animal Farm*, in which he did not feel the need to present well-rounded characters or to become concerned with personal human predicament. The very simplicity of *Animal Farm* is its great virtue. Most directly *Animal Farm* is an allegory of Stalinism growing out of the Russian Revolution of 1917. It is cast as a beast fable, thus giving the reader some distance from the specific political events.

Orwell sets his fable in the familiar events of current history. Old Major, a venerable pig on the Jones farm, is re-

garded as the wisest patriarch by the other animals. Old Major uses a Hobbesian figure when he declares: "Let us face it, our lives are miserable, laborious, and short." And he also speaks in Marxist terms when he declares that man is the problem. "Only get rid of Man, and the produce of our labour would be our own. Almost overnight we could be rich and free. What then must we do? Why, work night and day, body and soul, for the overthrow of the human race! That is my message to you, comrades. Rebellion!"

In the novel, some specific events are put together as parallels in the course of the Russian Revolution. First, the work of organising for the rebellion fell to three pigs who took over leadership. These three elaborated Old Major's teaching into a complete system of thought: Animalism. Very soon, under the leadership of one of the pigs, the techniques and hypocrisies of tyranny begin to appear. Next came a regular

emphasis on ceremony and ritual. There is also the paralleling of the conflict in Russia between Trotsky and Stalin with the winner when one of the co-leader pigs who is the idealist finds itself at loggerheads with another co-leader pig, the pragmatist. In this battle, the technique of the "big lie" and contrived evidence is used resulting in the expulsion of the 'idealist' pig from the farm. Other techniques used include the show trials, the abject confessions, the summary executions creation of a Mystique of the Leader.

At the end of the novel the common animals realise what they have never been able to understand: the pigs are the same as their human masters were. Instead of gaining freedom they have only exchanged one set of masters for another. Orwell's fable illuminates his satirical theme: man's vulnerability to man's greed for power.

The other notable novel *Ninety*

Eighty-four has been regarded a futuristic novel prophesying the takeover of the world by a merciless totalitarian tyranny, and also as a tract against communism. Its intent was admonitory, it was a warning against negative tendencies in our society.

Ninety Eighty-four is both realistic and satirical. The verisimilitude of the background of London in 1948 transferred to London in 1984 is compelling, yet at the same time it is a representation of the world of the future, with its built-in Utopian tendencies, and as such it is often extreme to the point of caricature.

Orwell's intentions in *Ninety Eighty-four* were not entirely satirical; he also wanted to issue a warning about the future, and it is hard to be satirical about the future. One is tempted to be either optimistic or pessimistic, the first carries the danger of romanticism, the second of melodrama, and both are prominent in the novel.

impression

Why....?

by T I Alam

I walked down my street, my eyes covering all directions of the road in hope of finding a rickshaw to take me where I wanted to go. It wasn't far, I could just as easily have walked. But this morning I felt extra lazy and decided to take the easy way.

The streets were wide open, not a rickshaw in sight. I walked a bit further and saw, to my delight, a three-wheeler parked under a tree. With a sigh of relief I made my way towards it. As I approached, I realised that the driver was

not where he usually should be, and I assumed that he must be somewhere else. As I stepped up to the seat, it dawned on me why I hadn't seen the rickshaw-puller before. In the place of a tall, healthy man to whom I usually am accustomed to see pulling a rickshaw was a little boy, barely half my size. For a second I thought it was a little street urchin taking a breather on the comfy seat, but it wasn't long before the little kid piped up and asked me where I wished to go. I hesitated. I did not think he would be able to take my weight, but he had enough spirit in his eyes and hastily asked me to take a seat. Reluc-

tantly, I did.

With great effort the boy jumped onto his seat. I looked down. The poor kid had to bend to each side to be able to reach the pedals and get the rickshaw moving. I watched as he slowly started to pick up speed. Every muscle in his body contracted and relaxed as we turned the corner. I looked ahead to see where we were going. And for the first time, I did not need to bend my head to see what was ahead, I merely looked straight and the boy's head was far below my eye sight. I knew that the money I would give him for my ride will help him, but I could not help but feel that I

was torturing him.

As the rickshaw came to a stop, I stepped down and looked at the boy carefully. Barely 12 years old, I reached for my wallet and pulled out a sum worth twice the fare I should have given him. Out came a pouch from his torn shirt from which he immediately started looking for change. I stopped him and asked him to keep the extra money. He didn't smile. I looked at his eyes. From where I should have seen happiness and joy lay nothing but unhappiness and despair. Putting on a concerned but stern voice, I asked him why he was

pulling a rickshaw at such a young age. He did not answer and proceeded to stare at the ground, hoping that I would leave. I asked again. Again, he did not look at me. But this time he answered. He summed his answer up in as few words as possible. "I have no father...", he replied, "... and I am trying to help my mother support the family." I asked him if he had any brothers or sisters. Three younger sisters. I wanted to say something. I wanted to do something to help him. But what could I do? What could I say to make him feel better? I turned around and started walking, hoping that the extra money I gave him

will help. I shook my head in disbelief. At his age I did nothing but play, never having to worry about anything; no responsibilities, nothing. So why must he suffer? Why must he worry about maintaining his family when it is time for him to be in school? I feel disgusted to see the leaders of this nation fighting with each other over power and personal squabbles while kids like these have to live such a dreadful life. Many of us don't know how lucky we really are. It's a shame. If this country sits by and watches poverty take over lives of 12-year-old kids, what kind of a nation are we?