

## The Random House dictionary tradition

A conversation between Charles M. Levine and Enid Pearsons

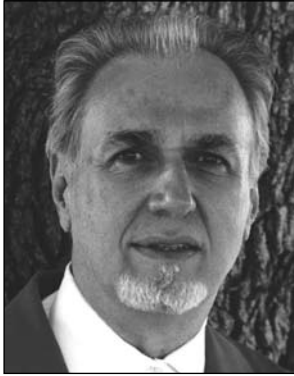


photo: Charmaine Delmatier

**Charles M. Levine** has over thirty-years' experience as publisher and editor, specializing in both general consumer and reference products including dictionaries. He has published major bestsellers under the brands of Insight Guides, New York Public Library, J.K. Lasser, and Random House Webster's. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Columbia College, majoring in physics, and received a master's degree in the history and philosophy of science from Indiana University. He has worked as publishing executive for a number of major publishers, including Simon & Schuster, John Wiley, and Random House, where he was vice-president and publisher of Random House Reference. He currently is a contributing editor of the professional newsletter *Copyediting*, writing a bi-monthly column called "Technically Speaking." During 2006-08 he was the editor of an international journal on publishing, LOGOS ([www.logos-journal.org](http://www.logos-journal.org)) and in 2002 he co-authored *Meshuggenary: Celebrating the World of Yiddish*, which recently debuted on the Kindle. [charlev@att.net](mailto:charlev@att.net)

**Levine:** I find it quite gratifying that K Dictionaries has purchased the digital rights to the *Random House Webster's College Dictionary* (RHWCD) and plans to undertake annual updates of the entries. I am sure you must feel the same—sad that Random House decided to close its dictionary editorial department after more than five decades establishing a distinguished lexicographic tradition—yet comforted that the dictionary that we worked on for so many years (and you for many more years than I) lives on.

I remember rather vividly when I traveled to mainland China in 1997 to attend the launch by Commercial Press of Beijing of the Chinese edition of the College dictionary. I believe they worked on the Chinese translation for more than a decade. I was treated at the launch ceremony like a visiting dignitary, so much so, I was told, that an attending cultural attaché from our own American embassy wondered aloud who I was and why I was considered so important. This little American status dance highlighted for me the general lack of understanding, as I perceived it, of the importance of dictionaries in our own culture. What were words worth, really? Could you get rich compiling and publishing dictionaries? If not, then why bother?

And, by the way, later that same year, Commercial Press informed Random House that then Chinese President, Jiang Zemin, on his first state visit to Washington, D.C., brought a copy of the Chinese edition of the RHWCD as a gift to President Clinton. It seems that dictionaries did and do matter to some people.

I have a copy at hand of *At Random* [Random House, 1977], the delightful reminiscences of Random House co-founder Bennett Cerf, who soon after World War II "arrived at the office one day and cheerily announced, 'Let's do a dictionary!'" [231] Cerf admits that at first he had little idea of what goes into compiling a dictionary—he first thought that two bright editors on staff could manage to create one in their spare time. But he quickly realized he needed an expert, and so hired Clarence Barnhart, "who was considered one of the best lexicographers in the United States, [and] had just finished the Thorndike-Barnhart dictionary, and luckily was available." [231]

When the first Random House college dictionary, called the *American College Dictionary*, was published in 1947, however,

as Cerf notes, Random House was in debt to the banks: "One wonderful thing about dictionaries, though, is that a good one always makes money. Once it's completed, it's the publisher's property, and if it starts selling in quantity, the costs are recovered rather quickly because there is no royalty to pay. The *American College Dictionary* won great critical acclaim and was a huge success. It was the first brand-new dictionary in a long time. Once again the old Cerf luck prevailed; and we soon got out of that [debt] pickle." [232]

**Pearsons:** Yes. Indeed. It was absolutely devastating to think that all those years of careful lexicographic work would be lost. I am thrilled that the dictionary lives on, in capable hands.

And what memories, very personal ones, you bring back! It is no exaggeration to say that getting a job at Random House in the early 1960s, right after acquiring a bachelor's degree at Queens College (now part of the City University of New York), was a dream come true. Unhappy with prospects of a teaching job I had been offered, I scoured the *New York Sunday Times* employment pages for something else—anything else! To my astonishment, I came upon an ad for a pronunciation editor for a revision of the *American College Dictionary* (ACD), which turned out to be the first edition of *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged Edition*. Since phonetics, taught by Professor Arthur J. Bronstein, had been far and away my favorite class at Queens, I was ecstatic at the possibility of doing something I loved and getting paid for it! The job interview with Larry Urdang, then managing editor, was so full of puns and other arch linguistic exchanges that I felt at home immediately. I had found a career. And Arthur Bronstein, my professor, who had worked on the ACD in the 1940s, was on the dictionary's editorial board as the consultant for pronunciation. I was to be the in-house editor in charge of checking the pronunciations of all the words already in the dictionary and entering pronunciations for the new ones. I couldn't have been happier.

Early on, I learned a charming bit of dictionary history relevant to my work. The ACD, published in 1947, had been the first commercial dictionary to acknowledge a fact about spoken English that was either little known or understandably ignored by the general public. That is, English is replete

with occurrences of a neutral, unstressed vowel, which can be spelled with an *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, or *u*, as in *sofa*, *paper*, *animal*, *random*, and *supply*; or even with some combination of vowels, as in the last syllable of...well, *combination*. In other words, different spellings for the same sound.

Realizing this, the 1940s ACD editors bravely introduced the schwa (ə) to American lexicography. A single pronunciation symbol would thus represent that single sound that other dictionaries still represented with multiple confusing symbols.

Apparently, although the dictionary itself was a great success, not everyone was immediately receptive to the little (ə) that just said “uh.” I think it was Jess Stein himself, then editor-in-chief, who told me that somewhere, hidden away, there was an entire file cabinet filled with letters from irate early buyers of the ACD, all saying, in effect, “I bought this dictionary for my daughter/son/nephew/granddaughter, but unfortunately, I must return it. Your e’s are upside-down!” Lexicographic urban legend? Perhaps. But I chose to believe it. And despite that early resistance, the schwa was an innovation destined to spread to all the other major American English dictionaries—and beyond.

**Levine:** In his memoirs, Bennett Cerf goes on to note that after the ACD was published, he hired Jess Stein, “who had studied under Sir William Craigie, the great editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.” [232] Stein “became the head of our reference department and later of our whole college textbook department, which made him one of the most important people at Random House.”

In 1961, Cerf, who always had a keen eye for the marketplace and competition, saw that their main rival, Merriam-Webster, had issued an unabridged dictionary, which “was received with hostility by many critics....So we figured the field was wide open. Of course, this was a tremendous undertaking. For the unabridged *Random House Dictionary of the English Language* [RHDEL], we had at one time almost four hundred people working on it, top authorities in every field.” [234] Cerf estimates that the first edition of the Unabridged cost three to four US million dollars to complete, over four years. Actually that was a remarkable feat that would be hard to beat today, even using computer-enabled lexicography.

You entered the Random House dictionary picture around then. What was it like working on Random House dictionaries in those pioneering days?

**Pearsons:** The unabridged RHDEL was

exactly the project that was already in full swing when I first arrived. The staff seemed enormous to me, and the editor/consultant relationship that I had with Arthur Bronstein was mirrored throughout the reference department. The in-house staff was filled with specialists whose academic and professional backgrounds had prepared them to handle the vocabulary of various related fields, however esoteric. One editor, for example, handled building trades, furniture, and medieval armor, among other arcane subjects. Others worked on medicine, botany, biology, ichthyology, radio and TV, slang, literature.... I could go on for pages, just listing the varied fields of interest that were covered. The editors in turn all had consultants from the academic world who would vet their work and to whom they could turn when they needed to pin down an exact meaning. Sometimes a consultant would send in dictionary entries to which the in-house editor would apply lexicographic polish, and sometimes the work flowed in reverse. The terms in the common vocabulary of English were handled by other staff writers, some of whom were remarkably eloquent: Robert Costello comes to mind (he later became acting chief of Random House dictionaries, after by-then legendary Jess Stein and his successor, Stuart Flexner, had retired). Costello could write dictionary definitions that were not only on target in explicating meanings but were little lyrical gems. I was in awe of what my colleagues could do. My job in contrast seemed comparatively simple: transcribe the sounds of each term using a dictionary diacritical system that I had been able to modify to my satisfaction.

This was the 1960s. There were no desktop computers; nor were there typewriters at the editors’ desks. New entries were created the old-fashioned way, hand-printed on pink 8 1/2 by 11 “add-forms,” which had multiple, multicolored carbon copies. But Larry Urdang and Jess Stein were prescient pioneers. Urdang in particular was an eccentric computer enthusiast well before the breed existed. He had arranged to have the add-form entries typed up on a flexowriter, an early 20th-century precursor of word processing, which encoded the text by punching holes onto paper tape. The tapes were then used to produce enormous computer printouts that were then bound in large, heavy ledgers, separate ledgers for each field of interest—literature, linguistics, botany, fish, birds, French furniture, American history, and on and on. Another member of the staff had previously coded each add-form entry numerically, by eye and hand, so that all the entries from the various ledgers, once edited, could ultimately be



**Enid Pearsons** graduated from Queens College, City University of New York, in 1961, with a Bachelor of Science in speech, and immediately began her lexicographic career as pronunciation editor for first edition of *Random House Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged Edition*. Later she went back to school to earn her Master’s degree and do post-Master’s work in linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. She returned to Random House in the late 1970s as Senior Editor in charge of pronunciation and style for their line of dictionaries, and also was in-house editor for specialized dictionaries in fields as diverse as computers, law, medicine, and sign language, and was part of the Random House Mavens’ team, writing word-of-the-day essays on grammar, usage, idioms, and pronunciation to be posted on the Web. Since her pseudoretirement in 2001, she has served as consultant on reference projects for various publishing houses.  
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**Random House announced the closure of its dictionary department in late 2000.**

The following comment was made by **Sidney Landau** in a posting to the DSNA discussion group on November 4, 2001 and was reprinted in the DSNA Newsletter, 25.2, Fall 2001:

‘This is another step in the long decline of editorial power in publishing houses generally. Corporate sponsors of books may become a growing phenomenon—these are preeminently market-driven, after all. Dictionary editors have always been hired hands, but they had at least some variable degree of impact on their product because of the traditional belief, or supposition, that books were intellectual products that really had to be created by someone, and that therefore their creators deserved some consideration. One of the results of the computer revolution, I think, has been further to marginalize authorship, and to make “content” even more thoroughly a vehicle for sales. Most commercial publishers have really been discontinuing editorially-oriented initiatives for a long time, and I fear the trend can only get worse. The high up-front cost of dictionaries makes them peculiarly vulnerable. Lost in all this is the human hurt to lexicographers who have devoted years and years to producing good dictionaries. At times like this one remembers what an uncertain and bitter business lexicography can be.’

sorted—by computer, of course—into a single alphabetical order. Then off to the compositor they went, little by little, A through Z.

My ledger, in which I was to syllabify, stress, inflect, and pronounce the entries—because it contained the new headwords, which we called “main entries”—was called the Main Ledger. So I put a large sign up over my desk reading *LEGERDEMAIN*. Larry Urdang, passing by, casually asked if that meant I would never do any work on the ‘ledger’ until ‘tomorrow’. I knew just enough French to reinforce my sense that I had found the right job.

**Levine:** Indeed, I believe that we all felt we had found the right home at Random House compiling and publishing dictionaries! May this great dictionary tradition live on. Like many of us, you left and then returned to Random House for a second time.

**Pearsons:** Yes, I returned to Random House in 1979, having taken some time after the first RHDEL was published in 1966 to start a family and to go to graduate school. Oddly, after all that, I went back to what was essentially the same job I had left. Happily, it soon became much broader in scope and grew to include stylistic minutiae and even defining.

The lexicographic staff for the second unabridged was considerably smaller than the one I had left in 1966. We all knew, however, that we were responsible for revising and enhancing a large, unabridged dictionary and that a smaller college dictionary was to follow. And this time, more thorough computerization, not only of dictionary production and composition, but of the actual editing process, was a tantalizing promise—so close, but not yet in reach. At last and at least, we editors had desktop computers. But they were merely used for word processing to produce neatly typed equivalents of an earlier generation’s hand-printed entries. Everything was stored on floppy disks. (Remember floppies?) Stuart Flexner, our editor-in-chief, was determined to extend Larry Urdang’s vision of dictionary computerization, and a small committee was formed to see if we could find a suitable vendor with appropriate editorial software for our purposes. We traveled, searching—to Baltimore, Chicago, Toronto, and more. We went to conferences sponsored by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), whose programmers at the University of Waterloo in Canada had been encouraged by the OED to share what they had learned and developed about computerized editing.

Their foray into SGML as an appropriate language for lexicography would eventually benefit us all, and the simpler XML is now a reference-book standard.

But back then, nothing was quite ready for our needs. We were visited and courted by a slew of companies with a range of software programs and specialized computers, some companies very promising, others not even literate—linguistically or technically. One company had a keyboard so large and complicated it could have accommodated Chinese ideograms. Another listed “Miriam Webster” as a hoped-for client. I remember all too vividly seeing one dedicated editing computer that would have driven us mad. To delete a single letter, an editor had to go through the following exchange:

Editor: Hit the Delete key.

Computer (on screen): “What do you want to delete—character, word, sentence, paragraph, page, document?”

Editor: Select “character”

Computer: “Are you sure?”

Editor: “% ^ \$ @ # ! \* & ^”

In the end, our staff programmer, Paul Hayslett, created and customized an editorial system for us. It came to life too late for the second unabridged, alas, but in time for its college offspring and for later revisions of the unabridged. Paul somehow knew what we needed editorially before we did! “Genius” does not begin to describe him. He and his coding prowess eventually joined with Steve Perkins to create PubMan at Dataformat.com (now a part of IDM), and they have been producing beautiful reference works ever since.

But it was not just the fun of plunging into the world of computers that made my second tour at Random House memorable. First, there was the staff—bright, generous colleagues and wonderful friends. Then, there was an underlying philosophy that focused in many ways on the needs of dictionary users. Notably, one facet of this concern was editorial receptivity to the new words that spring suddenly into the general lexicon. Mind you, we understood the wisdom exhibited in more traditional dictionaries. Their editors waited, sometimes for a decade or more, until a word became well established in written citational evidence before formally entering it into their reference works, thereby acknowledging that it was genuinely part of the English language.

We believed, however, that aside from those nonce words that seem to disappear almost as soon as they arrive, new words are exactly the ones people need to look up! We wanted to make sure that we supplied

accurate information about new terms when dictionary users really needed it, when a word still sounded strange to the ear, and its meaning was still clouded in mystery—not when it had become so familiar that there was no longer a need to check it in a dictionary. And electronic media make it

so easy to accommodate the volatility of language. Words can now come out as easily as they go in.

The slogan that exemplified that philosophy was your invention, Charles: “Newer words faster!” Once again, I knew I was in the right place.

**chi-me-ra** or **chi-mae-ra** /kɪˈmɪər ə, kɑɪ-/ *n.*, *pl.* **-ras**.

- (*often cap.*) a monster of classical myth, commonly represented with a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail. □ **quimera**
- any horrible or grotesque imaginary creature. □ **quimera**
- a fancy or dream. □ **quimera fantasia**
- an organism composed of two or more genetically distinct tissues. □ **quimera** [1350–1400; ME < L *chimaera* < Gk *chímaira* she-goat; akin to ON *gymlr*; E *gimmer* ewe-lamb one year (i.e., one winter) old, L *hiems* winter (see HIEMAL )]

**chi-mere** /tʃɪˈmɪər, ʃɪ-/ also **chim-er** /tʃɪm ər, ʃɪm-/ *n.* a loose sleeveless upper robe, as of a bishop. □ **vestes corais murça** [1325–75; ME *chemer*, *chymere* < AL *chīmēra*, of uncert. orig.]

**chi-mer-i-cal** /kɪˈmɛr ɪ kəl, -ˈmɪər-, kɑɪ-/ also **chi-mer'ic**, *adj.*

- imaginary. □ **quimérico, quimérica imaginário, imaginária**
- highly unrealistic. □ **quimérico, quimérica irreal fantástico, fantástica** [1630–40]

— **chi-mer'i-cal-ly**, *adv.* □ **quiméricamente**

**chi-mi-chan-ga** /tʃɪm iˈtʃɑŋ gəl *n.*, *pl.* **-gas**. a deep-fried flour tortilla rolled around a filling, as of meat, and served with guacamole, salsa, cheese, etc. □ **chimichanga** [*<* MexSp, trinket, trifle]

**Chim-kent** /tʃɪmˈkɛnt/ *n.* a city in S Kazakhstan. 397,600. □ **Chimkent**

**chim-ney** /tʃɪm ni/ *n.*, *pl.* **-neys**.

- a structure, usu. vertical, containing a passage or flue by which the smoke, gases, etc., of a fire or furnace are carried off. □ **chaminé**
- the part of such a structure that rises above a roof. □ **chaminé**
- the smokestack or funnel of a locomotive, steamship, etc. □ **chaminé**
- a tube, usu. of glass, surrounding the flame of a lamp. □ **lamparina**
- Dial.* FIREPLACE. □ **lareira** [1300–50; ME *chimenai* < MF *cheminee* < L (*camera*) *camīnāta* (room) having a fireplace = *camīn(us)* (< Gk *kāmīnos* furnace) + *-āta* -ATE <sup>1</sup>]

— **chim'ney-like**, *adj.* □ **semelhante a chaminé**

**chim'ney piece**, *n.* MANTEL.

- **abóbada sobre a lareira** [1605–15]

**chim'ney pot**, *n.* an earthenware or metal pipe atop a chimney, esp. to increase the draft and disperse smoke. □ **cano da chaminé**

[1820–30]

**chim'ney sweep** (or **sweep'er**), *n.*

a person whose work it is to clean the soot from the insides of chimneys. □ **limpador de chaminé, limpadora de chaminé** [1605–15]

**chimp** /tʃɪmp/ *n.* a chimpanzee. □ **chimpanzé** [1875–80; by shortening]

**chim-pan-zee** /tʃɪm pænˈzi, tʃɪmˈpæn zi/ *n.* a large anthropoid ape, *Pan troglodytes*, of equatorial Africa, having a dark coat and a relatively bare face. □ **chimpanzé** [1730–40; presumably < a Bantu language]

**chin** /tʃɪn/ *n.*, *v.* **chinned, chin-ning.**

— *n.*

- the lower extremity of the face, below the mouth. □ **queixo**
- the prominence of the lower jaw. □ **queixo**

— *vt.*

- to grasp an overhead bar and pull (oneself) upward until the chin is above or level with the bar: done as an exercise.

□ **fazer barra**

- to raise or hold to the chin, as a violin.

□ **segurar com o queixo**

— *vi.*

**5. Slang.** to chatter. □ **tagarelar conversar**

— *Idiom.*

- keep one's chin up**, to maintain one's courage and optimism during a period of adversity. □ **manter a esperança manter o otimismo**

**7. take it on the chin**, *Informal.*

**a.** to be defeated thoroughly.

**b.** to endure punishment stoically.

□ **tomar na cara ser derrotado, ser derrotada sofrer punição**

[bef. 1000; ME; OE *cin(n)*, c. OSkinni, OHG *chinni*, ON *kinn*, Go *kinnus* cheek; akin to L *gena*, Gk *génus* chin, *gnáthos* jaw, Skt *hánus* jaw]

— **chin'less**, *adj.* □ **sem queixo medroso, medrosa hesitante**

**Ch'in** or **Qin** /tʃɪn/ *n.* a dynasty in ancient China, 221–206 B.C., marked by the emergence of a unified empire and the construction of much of the Great Wall of China. □ **Chin**

**Chin.** or **Chin,**

- China. □ **China**

Sample entries of *Random House Webster's College Dictionary* with Brazilian Portuguese semi-bilingual translations—work in progress.

Brazilian Portuguese translation team led by Christiane Jost.