

It was a dark
and stormy night.



... that lasted 25 years

ENGLISH TEACHERS DON'T USUALLY ask for bad writing, so there's something deliciously naughty about having fun with language. That is what the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest is all about. It challenges entrants to come up with the worst opening sentence to the most wretched novel ever written.

Now in its 25th year, the contest is named for Victorian novelist Edward George Earl Bulwer-Lytton, who began his novel *Paul Clifford* (1830) with the words that "Peanuts" beagle Snoopy plagiarized for years, "It was a dark and stormy night."

Scott Rice, SJSU professor of English and mastermind of the contest, was so scarred by Bulwer-Lytton's clunky syntax during graduate school that he decided to honor (or is that dishonor?) him and expose bad writing once and for all. What he discovered is that bad writing not only gets people laughing, it gets them excited about reading and writing.

Detective Bart Lasiter was in his office studying the light from his one small window

falling on his super burrito when the door swung open to reveal a woman whose body said you've had your

Writing a wrong

According to Reading at Risk, a survey of national trends in literary reading from the National Endowment for the Arts, less than half of American adults read literature—and at the current rate, “literary reading as a leisure activity will virtually disappear in half a century.” So how do you get people to reach for literature instead of their iPods? Make it hilariously clever—and make it short.

Bulwer-Lytton is a “hands-on, user-friendly literary contest for people with short-winded muses. It’s something that people can wrap their minds around,” said Rice. There is no real pressure because you only have to write a single sentence, not a novel, and sentences longer than 50 words are discouraged. But you do need to be a good writer. The best entries are from great writers pretending to be bad ones (not bad writers pretending to be good writers pretending to be bad ones).

Fraught with literary references and witty puns, many of the winners are clearly avid readers. Take, for example, the 2006 winning entry for historical fiction from Christopher Backeberg (KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa):

While Hector and the heroes of Troy trembled behind the ramparts as cowboys below the walls raced up and down the beach, six-guns blazing and cries of “yee-hah!” filling the air, other cowboys across the sea were laboring gamely but in vain to throw a palisade around Wichita, Kansas, thereby adding veracity to the old homily of history that it is easier to cow a fortified city than to fortify a cow city.

“The contest encourages people to read because that’s where they get inspiration for their sentences. And they have to read the winning entries closely because a lot of times if they’re not careful, they miss what’s happening,” Rice said.

International appeal

The media certainly read Bulwer-Lytton closely. Major networks—ABC, NBC, CBS—have covered the contest at some point, and the BBC routinely announces the winners.

Radio stations in Australia, New Zealand and Austria have also interviewed Rice. “I’m always surprised at the number of people who are mindful of the contest,” he said. “They think San José State must be a great place to do something like this.”

Media interest and the thousands of annual entries are testaments to the contest’s international popularity. Long before the Internet, it reached pun-loving people around the world, fostering good will and offering a delightful how-not-to guide to writing.

Why is bad writing so intriguing? Bulwer-Lytton is a reminder that reading, writing and learning can be a knee-slapping good time. “There are some who think that if something involves humor, it is somehow trivial. If you look back to the ancient Greeks and Romans—or to Mark Twain—they wrote about very serious things but used humor, which can be disarming,” said Rice.

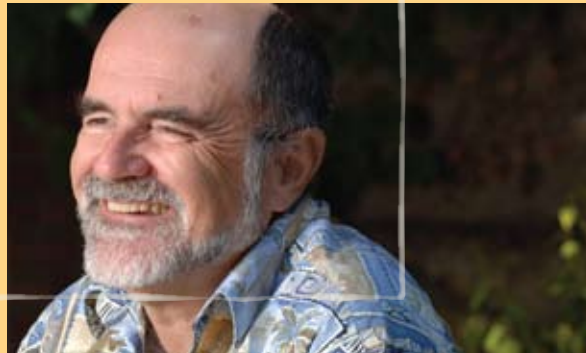
With more than a small dose of humor, the Bulwer-Lytton contest charms and disarms, and gives us something to read on dark and stormy nights.

For more on the contest and to read the side-splitting winning entries, visit www.bulwer-lytton.com. □

—Jody Ulate, '05

SOURCE: READING AT RISK:
A SURVEY OF LITERARY READING
IN AMERICA (JUNE 2004)

April 15 is the submission deadline for entries to the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest, “a date that Americans associate with painful submissions and making up bad stories,” according to the official Web site. Created by Professor Scott Rice (right) 25 years ago, the contest invites writers to “inflict their entries” and, says Rice, “they will receive the treatment they deserve.”



SHARON HALL

last burrito for a while, whose face said angels did exist, and whose eyes said she could make you dig your own grave and lick the shovel clean.

— Jim Guigli, Carmichael, CA
2006 winner