BEST COLUMN WRITING

An enjoyable category to judge: 20 entries, 60 columns in all. Humorous, serious and special interest, including an environmental columnist entered by three different newspapers and a smartly-written cooking column (I saved one of the recipes). I read columns by storytellers who transported me to a different time or place. I read columns by passionate advocates for correcting injustice in their communities. Any of five entries could have taken first place, with a sixth close behind. In the end, I chose those entries with the best writing, writing that was consistently good in all three columns.

TIM BELFORD

The Record

Funny, funny, laugh-out-loud funny!

ROSS MURRAY

The Record

Very entertaining. Readers of this newspaper are lucky to have two columnists of this quality.

DANIEL WOLGELERENTER

The Canadian Jewish News

Excellent writing. Well-structured. Intelligent. Well-researched. Sound conclusions.

Honourable Mention:

MELANIE SCOTT

The Low Down to Hull & Back News

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Page 6 Thursday, January 15, 2015 newsroom@sherbrookerecord.com The Record

I was under the impression that driving in your allocated lane was part of the basic skill set that got you the driver's licence in the first place.

I'd walk a mile for a cheap car

Tim Belford

Do you know what I'd like from modern technology? Not a wallet-sized box that can hold twelve thousand of my favourite songs. Not an app that will locate the nearest Mongolian barbecue restaurant. Not even a computer-linked system that allows me to regulate the thermostat in my house while I'm sunning myself on a Cuban beach.

What I'd like is a good $10,000 car.

Now, admittedly that $10,000 number is arbitrary. It's based on the price of the first house I bought in the Townships, which set me back $12,500. It was a two-bedroom bungalow with a detached garage and two acres of land. Ever since then I have been loath to pay more for a car unless I can sleep in it and have a small garden in the trunk.

It's not that I'm asking too much. In fact I'm pretty sure it's doable. All a car manufacturer would have to do is eliminate the modern frills and put a little more emphasis on the essentials.

This brilliant idea hit me the other day as I was watching an automobile commercial touting the latest must-have accessory: the "keep lane assist." I'm not sure how much it costs but I bet it's not cheap.

The idea is that the car's computer system tells you when you stray out of your lane. I presume it emits some sort of warning signal but I missed part of the ad so I can't swear to it. What strikes me as odd, is that I was under the impression that driving in your allocated lane was part of the basic skill set that got you the driver's licence in the first place.

Equally odd, at least to me but then again I'm old, is the "forward collision warning" system. This is designed to let you know if you're in danger of rear-ending the vehicle in front of you while you are otherwise preoccupied, reaching for your coffee, texting the office, or finishing off your Tim's breakfast egg-and-sausage muffin.

Once again, I'm pretty sure this was covered in the Driver's Ed course. I'm also pretty sure it would reduce the cost of the car if it was removed and more emphasis placed on paying attention to what you're doing.

Then, of course, there's the latest in vehicle accessories: the car that parks itself. No longer do you have to actually estimate the size of a space nor have the requisite skills to back you car into it, just press a button, fold your arms and voila! One more item to strike off the driver's test.

Another item that could probably be junked is the irritating dashboard "tire pressure light." This replaces the arduous task of having to occasionally look at your tires to see if they're flat or not. In the past some extra cautious drivers have actually tested the tires on a regular basis by applying a pressure gauge to the tire itself. Of course when you put on your winter tires you have to pay extra to have them adapted to the system or, as do many, leave the light blinking all winter.

The dashboard of today's car looks much like the flight deck of a Boeing 747. The radio/CD player alone has insert, eject, seek, save, set, volume, karaoke and hum buttons.

You can tell the temperature outside your car, in case it has changed drastically since you got in. You know if your seat belt is buckled up, thus eliminating the irritating necessity of looking all the way down at your chest. You can heat your seat, control the kids' video screen, adjust the rear view mirrors and take hands-free telephone calls.

Frankly, I could do without most of these technological wonders. Real innovation would be a car that never got a recall notice, started better in a Canadian winter and had self-cleaning, ice-proof windshields. Oh yes, and also cost $10,000.

Ebola crossing

Ross Murray

Question from a border agent as I returned from the U.S.: "About the Ebola virus, anything changed for you, Mr. Murray?"

Well, really, it depends on your definition of "change." Change is constant, and in terms of Ebola, it's all a question of whether those changes elevate or reduce my risk of being a carrier.

Have I been to Guinea, Liberia or Sierra Leone? I have not. Have I associated with anyone who's been to Guinea, Liberia or Sierra Leone? No, I haven't. Could I locate Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone on a map? That's not particularly relevant.

Yes, I have left the country. That's why I'm here at this border crossing, returning from the United States of America, which, unlike Canada, has not barred visitors from Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone (which are in West Africa somewhere, and that's all I'm saying about that).

The World Health Organization pleaded with countries not to bar visitors because it would only compel them to find non-official routes into the country, unmonitored, and next thing you know we have body parts falling off in the streets and only Brad Pitt can save us.

But Canada has turned away nearly 180 people so far and is not the compassionate country I grew up in, your polite approach to border security notwithstanding, Mr. Customs Officer.

Yes, I have left the country in the past three months, but I've only been as far as the Dollar Tree in Derby, Vermont, where they sell really cheap Mike & Ikes, which, to be honest, probably pose a greater risk to my health than Ebola.

And that's what it's all about: risk. The other day, I shared a big bag of Humpty Dumpty Party Mix with a five-year-old and a three-year-old. At one point, I reached my hand in and the side of the foil bag was all wet. I had to weigh the risk-benefit of continuing to eat the snacks. Risk: contracting contaminating cooties that would have me lurching lava-like. Benefit: the five-year-old was picking out all the gross pretzels for herself. So of course I kept eating the snacks, though I did take a hard look at my eating habits, not to mention my choice of friends.

I survived, obviously. Consider this, though: perhaps it was mere chance that I avoided the one chip loaded with cheesy goodness and e coli.

Consider this as well, officer: maybe I am that chip.

Think about it. Since I've been Ebola-free for the past three months, don't the odds increase daily that I'll get Ebola?

Imagine someone who drives a lot. Statistically, the more that person drives, the greater his chances of having a car accident. That's why when I see companies with signs that read "447 Days Without An Accident," I head the other way because I know they're due – probably that guy who drives a lot smashing right into their loading dock.

So, sure, right now I've had no exposure to Ebola, only exposure to too many Mike & Ikes and sticky children, but statistically the odds of exposure increase the longer I'm out in public, just like the odds of honking increase the longer I sit here holding up border traffic.

Not to mention that we've let our guard down, now that it appears that the Ebola outbreak is confined to unimportant African countries where an unprecedented 8,000 people have so far died of the virus. (And something about Procol Harum? Sorry, forget it...)

Here in the west, most people have moved on to new outrages, like the barbaric attack on Charlie Hebdo. I mean, I don't see anyone showing their solidarity with African countries by tweeting #JeSuisEbola, because, let's face it: ewww!

Freedom of the press is the new Ebola because they're both simple: freedom of the press is good just like Ebola is bad, although satirizing Muslims in a country that's notoriously hostile towards the Muslim minority, maybe that's not so good.

It's easy to defend freedom of satire when you're not likely to be the subject of that satire. If terrorists had attacked the publishers of How to Kill White People and Puppies, that would be a tough rally to attend.

So, no, Officer, I'm not an Ebola carrier but I am a satirist, and things have changed in that regard; since everyone's all for press freedom right now, satirists can say the most outrageous things and get away with it. Except that I know that, like Ebola panic, it won't last.

Oh, and also, I bought gas.

RECORD

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Page 6 Thursday, February 12, 2015 newsroom@sherbrookerecord.com The Record

Regional health facilities will have less control over their daily operations and will have to take orders from someone with a bigger acronym.

CIUSSS Estrie-CHUS? Gesundheit!

Tim Belford

Well it's off and running. The CIUSSS Estrie-CHUS, with perhaps the longest acronym in the world, has taken over health care responsibilities from the existing boards of governors of 15 different establishments in the good old ET. Gone are the boards of nine different CSSS's, four *Centre de's*, one *Agence* and the old CHUS.

All of this we are told, by the Minister of Health, who doubles for the Pillsbury Dough Boy when the Assembly is not sitting, is to save money and cut the red tape.

Personally I don't think it will matter much. Centralization, we have found from experience, rarely saves money after the first couple of years. Heck just putting the new name – CIUSSS Estrie-CHUS – on the letterhead will cost a fortune.

(Just a side note here. The French-language press is already running ads from the Ministry of Health looking for "*Président-Directrice Generale, President-Directeur General, Presidente-Directrice Generale Adjointe* and *President-Directeur General Adjoint*" for all the regions. I'm just guessing they're not minimum wage spots.)

I think I'm a little more laid back about the big change since I never ever did figure out what CSSS stood for in the first place. At least with the CHUS though, you could pronounce the acronym. Mind you, even then there was a debate whether it was "Shoo" or "Shus." As the old saying goes, I guess it depended on what "School" or "Shool" you went to.

The Ministry of Health went out of its way during the announcement to assure citizens that the changes to the system won't affect anyone immediately, at least not until everyone manages to figure out how to put CIUSSS-Estrie CHUS on their speed dial.

Of course this attempt by the PLQ government to cut bureaucracy and save cash has its alphabetical detractors. Politically the PQ and the CAQ say Bill 10 will cause more problems than it solves and QS says whatever is done will only benefit the rich. On the medical side, the AMQ and the QMA agree for a change in condemning the law and AMUQ supports the CMQ in its call for the ministry to go slower. Even the QCGN isn't happy.

In fact, there's hardly an acronym in the province that supports the change except, of course, the members of the CIUSSS-Estrie CHUS themselves who all stand to get new desks, nice salaries and bigger business cards to accommodate the new name.

Anyway it's a fait accompli and we'll just have to accept the fact that regional health facilities will have less control over their daily operations and will have to take orders from someone with a bigger acronym. Which leaves us with one problem. How do you pronounce CIUSSS Estrie-CHUS?

There's no getting around it, CIUSSS Estrie-CHUS just doesn't roll off the tongue. It's fine for print journalists who only have to add a couple or three more keystrokes but what about the television and radio types who actually have to talk about the new board every newscast?

My first impulse is to go the old route where the CRSSS quickly became the CR *trois'ess*. The only thing is, CIU *trois'ess* Estrie CHUS isn't much better. Maybe CIU trois'Estrie CHUS? Or what about CIU trois'Estchus. Mind you, that last one sounds like the person sneezed half way through saying the name.

Anyway, we've all been living in the land of the atrocious acronym for a long time. We'll figure it out.

13 questions from men about 50-You-Know-What

Ross Murray

For many men, Valentine's Day can be a bit of a tightrope, and this year it threatens to be even more so because of, well, tight ropes.

This weekend will see the premiere of that movie about that book that's not about drab paint chips but whose name I can't bring myself to write because it's been so over-discussed and over-troped as to provide it more publicity than it deserves, and yet here I am.

When that book not about the variant veneers of U.S. naval ships first became a publishing sensation, most men were mystified by the appeal of poorly written, low-grade S&M erotica, but, you know, it was a harmless book, and by "harmless" I mean harmless to the men because thankfully they didn't have to read it.

If their girlfriends and wives wanted to cuddle up with a little bondage-lit lite, hey, whatever floats your libidinous boat, baby.

But now that the thing is a movie, there's something very, very bad afoot, namely all those women who quietly read the book to themselves are going to want to see the movie. And they're going to want them to take them.

And they're going to want to go on Valentine's Day.

And the men will have no choice but to take them, because it's Valentine's Day, the one day of the year when men absolutely must be submissive to their women, which is pretty ironic given the context.

So, ladies (if I may call you ladies), I want to speak to you on behalf of all the men who are about to unwillingly have thrust upon them this film adaptation of that book not about hair dye for people who prefer the natural hues of those eligible for Senior Discounts. I want to let you know that the men in your life are going to be uncomfortable. They are going to have questions. And they are going to be uncomfortable about asking those questions.

Uncomfortable they may be, but faced with a potentially cringe-inducing film that, please God, let it be this generation's Showgirls because it is exactly what this generation deserves, it's important to be able to have a normal conversation about abnormal sex.

So (as the dominatrix said hook up the generator) let's get this started. Here are some of the questions your menfolk may be too squirmy to ask:

1. Is this something you want to try? Because I remember you dragged Julie & Julia because you said you always dreamed of learning French and, by the way, but we also watched all the Twilight movies and you never once said you wished you dated a vampire, so a little clarification on where we stand regarding restraints would be helpful.

2. Or is it that you want to try it with that guy?

3. Are you waiting for me to suggest we try it? Or would that be as bad as that time I bought you sexy Valentine's Day lingerie? (Though, let's be honest, it was sexy thrift shop Valentine's Day lingerie.)

4. If we do try this, can I pick the safe word? I'm thinking "BB King! BB King!"

5. On second thought, wouldn't the most practical safe word be simply "ouch"?

6. Or plain old awkward giggling?

7. If we're going to try this, can we incorporate some kind of cinematic soundtrack and professional lighting? Otherwise, ugh!

8. Can we get popcorn, or is that a mood killer? What if I get it with extra butter? (And, to be clear, I'm talking about during the movie.)

9. How do we deal with it if, right there in the theatre, the movie piques my interest, if you know what I mean?

10. That whole notion about women preferring literary erotica because they are aroused through imagination whereas men prefer visual stimulation, where do we stand with that now?

11. And does this mean you're interested in watching, you know, "other" movies in this genre and, if so, do I no longer have to clear my browser history?

12. Is it okay to be confused about feminism after watching this? I mean, more than usual?

13. I know it's Valentine's Day and all, but couldn't we go see something more traditionally romantic, like American Sniper?

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Hillel MTL

Invites you to our Annual General Meeting

Including the presentation of the financial statements

Wednesday, September 30, 2015
At 7:15 PM
Cocktails at 6:30 PM under the Sukkah

Jack Reitman Hillel House - Maison Hillel Jack Reitman
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Vous invite à notre Assemblée Générale Annuelle

Incluant la présentation des états financiers

Mecredi le 30 septembre 2015
à 19h15
Cocktail à 18h30
dans la Sukkah

ADULT MARCH OF THE LIVING

On May 1 - 15, 2016 * join thousands of Jewish teens and adults from around the world in Poland and Israel

Information Evening:
Wednesday, September 30 | 7:30 pm
Tamari Family Hall, Lipa Green Centre
Sherman Campus, 4600 Bathurst Street
RSVP: srotstein@ujafed.org

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CANADA ISRAEL ADVENTURES | United Jewish Appeal

Minimum gift to your local UJA/CJA campaign required. The March of the Living is a program funded by Jewish Federations of Canada-UIA and by local UJA and CJA federations.

*Dates subject to change by one day

CAMPAIGN NOTEBOOK

Refugees: a Jewish issue comes to the fore

Daniel Wolgelerenter

A quintessentially Jewish issue has dominated the news and become a prominent election issue ever since the picture of three-year-old Alan Kurdi lying dead in the Mediterranean surf generated headlines worldwide earlier this month.

For many, the painful image has crystallized the ongoing question of what the world ought to be doing about the human fallout from Syria's bloody civil war, which so far has killed 250,000 people and created a staggering four million refugees.

It may be the Conservatives' misfortune the photo has galvanized Canadians in the midst of an election campaign, and they've been caught flatfooted on terrain that's traditionally been friendlier to their rivals. Both the Liberals and the NDP have called for Canada to quickly admit thousands more refugees, despite criticism that this won't solve the problem and comes with security risks if they can't be properly vetted.

This story is almost as central to the Canadians psyche as it is to the Jewish one, since many of us have come here fleeing persecution, poverty or both.

We Jews feel the issue in our bones. We were born a nation of refugees, as the Passover Exodus story attests, and our history is one of both wandering and exile. Whether it's been at the hands of Babylonian soldiers, Roman centurions, Spanish Inquisitors or Nazi storm troopers, we know what it means to be uprooted.

Many Canadian Jews have an intensely personal connection to the issue, being Holocaust survivors or children of survivors, or having lost family members in the Shoah less than 75 years ago. We also have a collective memory of Canada's "none is too many" Jewish immigration policy of the time, and of the MS St. Louis being turned away from our shores, only to return to Europe, where more than a quarter of its 937 Jewish passengers perished in the Holocaust.

It's therefore no surprise synagogues are doing their part in response to the Syrian crisis.

Even before the issue became daily news, Congregation Darchei Noam in Toronto pledged to sponsor a Kurdish Syrian family's immigration to Canada. And since the problem took on greater urgency, the City Shul and Beth Tikvah Synagogue in Toronto have decided to do the same, while Shaarei-Beth El Congregation in Oakville, Ont., has publicized its efforts – begun last April in partnership with a local mosque and a church – to sponsor a Syrian family.

On the policy front, the Jewish Refugee Action Network (JRAN), established in 2013, has been critical of the government's changes to refugee law, which it says, "place [them] at risk and disrupt Canada's humanitarian values and traditions." Founder Arthur Bielfeld, rabbi emeritus of Toronto's Temple Emanu-El, says JRAN is "rooted in... the ancient [Jewish] summons to welcome the stranger."

The group made some initial waves when it decried new federal measures that limit refugees' access to free health care and designate certain jurisdictions as "safe countries," which, by definition, don't generate refugees, a move that particularly affected Roma being persecuted in Hungary.

Until now, JRAN's efforts have, unfortunately, had limited traction, even in the Jewish community. Its narrative has taken a back seat with mainstream Jewish groups, whose advocacy in recent years has become increasingly (and often understandably) focused on Israel, to the detriment of other priorities.

The image of one dead toddler, however, seems to be changing the landscape.

Is there an easy answer to the problem? One has to agree with Prime Minister Stephen Harper when he says there isn't, and making partisan hay of a human tragedy is distasteful, to be sure.

But Harper's initial choked-up reaction to Alan Kurdi's death, and subsequent reassertion of his government's anti-terror bona fides isn't the kind of leadership many Canadians are seeking. A Postmedia poll released last week found roughly half disapprove of his approach and want to see a dramatic increase in refugee resettlement.

After stabilizing in the polls and despite inroads they've made with immigrant communities, the Conservatives are losing the thread of this story and appear to be suffering for it. If they don't find the narrative soon, the issue – along with a faltering economy, the Duffy scandal and 10 years in power – could irreversibly solidify an appetite for change among voters, Jews and non-Jews alike. ■

Judge: Gary Sosniecki, Retired Publisher/Regional Sales Manager, TownNews.com, Lebanon, MO • Number of entries in the Best Column Writing category: 20