

**W**. C. Fields's best-remembered saying is, "Any man who hates dogs and children can't be all bad." But Fields didn't say it. These words were said *about* Fields by Leo Rosten, a young writer, as he paid tribute to the comedian at a Hollywood banquet in 1939—except that Rosten said "babies" instead of "children."

Later Rosten's line was picked up by the national press. Few people had heard of Leo Rosten. So, before long, a version of his words was put in Fields's mouth and has stayed there ever since.

But Rosten deserves credit for the line, right? Well, not exactly. In November 1937, more than a year before the banquet, *Harper's Monthly* ran a column quoting

a New York *Times* reporter as saying, "No man who hates dogs and children can be all bad."

So reference books should attribute the quote to this *Times* reporter named Byron Darnton. Byron who? That's the point. Few remember his name, and most of us have heard of W. C. Fields. The better-known name gets the credit.

Such cases are surprisingly common. Many of history's best-known quotes have been inaccurately recorded, attributed to the wrong person or both. For instance:

## The Greatest Quotes Never Said

Setting the record straight on famous misquotations

Condensed from  
"NICE GUYS FINISH SEVENTH"  
RALPH KEYES



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- "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing" was the slogan of Vanderbilt University football coach Red Sanders long before it was attributed to Vince Lombardi.

- "The opera ain't over till the fat lady sings" is popularly associated with basketball coach Dick Motta. He credits sportscaster and writer Dan Cook. Actually, it was probably adapted from an older saying: "Church ain't out till the fat lady sings."



- "Elementary, my dear Watson" does not appear in any of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes books.

- Leo Durocher never said, "Nice guys finish last." What the Brooklyn Dodgers' manager said, before a 1946 game with the New York Giants, was: "The nice guys are over there—in seventh place."

It is a rare quote that can't be improved. As pressure mounted for him to become a Presidential candidate in 1884, William Tecumseh

Sherman wrote, "I will not accept if nominated and will not serve if elected." That response was pithy. But history's rewriters made the Civil War hero's statement even pithier: "If nominated, I will not run. If elected, I will not serve."

This is a recurring process. Quotations that start out too long or too clumsy end up shorter, more graceful and rhythmic. One of the most quoted lines of modern times is Pogo's "We have met the enemy, and he is us." The original expression of this thought, in Walt Kelly's 1953 introduction to his book *The Pogo Papers*, was, "Resolve then that on this very ground, with small flags waving and tinny blasts on tiny trumpets, we shall meet the enemy, and not only may he be ours, he may be us."

In 1916, a year before America's entry into World War I, a Chicago *Tribune* reporter pressed Henry Ford for the historical context of his pro-disarmament views. "What do we care what they did 500 or 1000 years ago? ... History is more or less bunk," Ford replied. "It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present, and the only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history we make today."

Copy desks and the public mind telescoped the crusty automaker's remark into one that was terser, less equivocal, more like what we imagined Henry Ford would say: "History is bunk."

That single colorful word "bunk" proved to be a powerful hook that

fastened this sentence in our collective memory.

Sometimes the changing of a single word can make a big difference. Upon stepping to the surface of the Moon on July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong uttered the immortal phrase, "That's one small step for *a* man, one giant leap for mankind." At least that's what Armstrong *meant* to say. But he forgot the "a," and it came out "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." This didn't make much sense. NASA quickly explained that transmission problems clipped the "a" from the astronaut's words. Balderdash! Armstrong blew his line, pure and simple.

What was the press to do—report his actual words or those he meant to say? Among 30 newspaper articles citing the line 20 years after Armstrong's stroll, 27 quoted him as saying simply "man," and three included both versions of the quotation.

Another case of an added "a" involved writer Gertrude Stein, whose most famous line is "A rose is a rose is a rose." What she actually wrote, in her poem "Sacred Emily," was, "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose." Was she referring to a flower or to someone named Rose? To make the words more coherent, we added an "a" to the beginning and pruned a blossom from the end. Eventually, the poet herself seems to have adopted the popular version of her line.

Most people have heard Willie Sutton's explanation of why he robbed banks: "Because that's where the

money is." But in his autobiography Sutton denied ever saying the words. "The credit belongs to some enterprising reporter who apparently felt a need to fill out his copy," Sutton explained. "I can't even remember when I first read it. It just seemed to appear one day, and then it was everywhere."



Some quotations benefit from a little syntax straightening. While managing the inept New York Mets, an exasperated Casey Stengel once said, "Can't *anybody* play this here game?" After reporters cleaned up his grammar, "Can't anybody here play this game?" became one of Stengel's most famous lines.

Sometimes famous quotes have perfectly good grammar. They just need famous mouths. An often repeated adage is, "No one on his deathbed ever said, 'I wish I had spent more time on my business.'" The comment was widely quoted after former U.S. Sen. Paul Tsongas

included it in a 1984 book, crediting his friend Arnold Zack.

Still, these words are hardly ever attributed to Zack, because most people don't know who he is. Mostly the aphorism just floats around like a dandelion seed waiting for a famous name to land on. Tsongas himself sometimes gets credit for the quote.

In 1851 former Indiana Congressman Richard Thompson dropped in on John Babson Lane Soule, the young editor of the *Terre Haute Express*. Thompson had just returned from a trip to Kansas and was impressed with prospects west of the Mississippi. He suggested that the editor write an editorial recommending that readers go west and grow up with the country—a sentiment being pushed by *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley.

Soon Soule wrote an editorial declaring that Horace Greeley himself could not give a young man better advice than to "Go West, young man." Before long this admonition was credited to Greeley.

Though he agreed with the sentiment, Greeley spent years disavowing authorship of the line. Eventually he gave up, realizing no one was interested. The quote demanded a marquee name. Greeley's was it.

In some cases, who you think said something may depend on where you live. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., is famous for saying, "Oh to be 70

again," when he saw a comely woman on his 90th birthday in 1931. A British quote collection credits French Premier Georges Clemenceau with saying the same thing on his 80th birthday in 1921. And Prussian Field Marshal Count Friedrich Heinrich Ernst von Wrangel is remembered in Germany for saying in his 90s, "If only one were 80!"

Even within a country, the credit for familiar quotations can vary depending on whom you ask. In the world of sports, Yogi Berra gets credit for saying, "If people don't want to come to the ballpark, how are you gonna stop them?" In theater circles, producer Sol Hurok was renowned for observing, "If people don't want to come, nothing will stop them."

Rep. Nicholas Longworth, Speaker of the House from 1925 to 1931, was known for his bald head and ready wit. A colleague was said to have run his hand over Longworth's smooth scalp and remarked, "It feels just like my wife's behind." Longworth reached back, rubbed his own head and murmured, "Why, so it does." But in New York City literary circles, the same devastating squelch features bald playwright Marc Connelly, a regular at the Algonquin Round Table.

With so many streams of miswording and misattribution out there, we can only be sure of one thing: As long as there are quotes, there will be misquotes. And you can quote me on that.

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*Huh?* In the Carroll County, Md., *Times*: "DENTIST RECEIVES PLAQUE."