

Strictly Speaking (2013)

Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner, WLRH Radio Huntsville, AL USA

I love this language! I love the unique collection of sounds each of us uses to communicate, this cantankerous, contrary, convoluted creation called English. I've been trying to learn it for over eighty years now, and I understand it less than when I started. I keep making mistakes with it; the first one I remember was when I was three, and was with my mother on a Gulf of Mexico cruise from Galveston to Miami Beach. I kept telling people we were going to "my mother's Ami Beach." That's what she told me!

I still don't understand how English works. Why does it sound fine to ask for a big, red apple, but sounds weird if you ask for a red, big apple? Why is "yellow brick road" mellifluous, but "brick yellow road" sounds like nowhere?

I'm really taken by idioms, those connected unconnected words we tie together, and use and overuse ... until they're all dried up. "Bookmark" we hear all the time, but never "page mark," which is really more accurate. Why is it a "turnpike," and not a "straightpike?" That's how we build them. For a really heavy rainstorm we can call it a down-pour or in West Texas a frog-strangler, or maybe a gully-washer -- but not an arroyo-scrubber...nor a ditch-flusher, or a trench-drencher. I kinda like trench-drencher, and think I'll start saying that a lot.

If you really stop to think about what you're saying it will drive you nuts. Or maybe it will drive you bananas ... or drive you berries, or eggplants, or even kumquats -- or it might even make you a better speaker.

Houston Hodges speaks sometimes at the Big Cove Presbyterian Church, out in the Hampton Cove area, and sometimes they call it preaching.