

Tales from Webster's:

The Verminous Resuscitator and
The Monsignor in the Zoot Suit

John Shea

abecedarian — abiding

A Note to the Readers of This Book

Welcome, friends, to this bold

a•be•ce•dar•i•an

undertaking. I've worked long and hard on it, night after cruel night, wrestling with a slippery muse, while you, no doubt, were

a•bed

or relaxing with a gin and tonic somewhere near a soothing oceanfront or a grove of whispering pines. I, on the other hand, have suffered the fiery torments of

A•bed•ne•go

, and I'm still waiting for a savior like Daniel to deliver me. I speak, please note, metaphorically. But I've gone

a•beg•ging

for a wise and intrepid audience. Is there an

A•bel

among you, perhaps, who will read and treasure my work? But maybe Abel was not the best choice – slain by his own brother. Well, then, is there a broad-minded philosopher like, say,

Ab•é•lard

who will find my tales to be delightful and . . . wait! He lived a troubled life, lost his lover, became a hermit, was charged with heresy. Forget him. Let me rest under the shade of this fine



a•bele while I think. I don't want to give you the wrong impression, that reading the Tales from Webster's will lead to great woes. Not at all! But I admit you won't find anything about

A•bel•i•an groups in these pages, because, Lord knows, I've forgotten just about all I knew – or half-knew – about math. And the Tales may not bring you up to date on the hot tourist spots of

Ab•er•deen , either. But let's face it, even an

Ab•er•deen An•gus should find plenty of aesthetic excitement in these pages. And if you are not entertained, enlightened, and quickened, perhaps it's because of an

ab•er•rant gene, some tiny difference in the six billion nucleotides in your body. Gee, I hope that's not the case. I may be on shaky ground here, but you might be able to minimize the results of the

ab•er•ra•tion by reading the complete Tales two or three times through. Your consciousness might be expanded. It might even help to buy copies and send them to friends and relatives. Far be it from me to

a•bet any kind of uncertain scheme, but I can assure you that if you bought several copies of the Tales from Webster's, I, for one, would be very happy. But let's hold that idea in

a•bey•ance for the present. Like you, I tend to



ab•hor

solicitations, pleas for money, aggressive marketing. I suspect, too, that you and I also share an

ab•hor•rence

for violent computer games, dishonest politicians, and flip flops worn anywhere but at the beach, where they belong. . . . Oh, you're not sure that you find the frightening rise of flip flops

ab•hor•rent

? Very well. Just don't expect any positive treatment of flip flops in this collection. In the meantime, I, the author, will

a•bide

, waiting for the readers that I know are out there. Handsome ones, elegant ones, with a twinkle of wit in their eyes. Eager to search out the new and unusual. Ready to laugh and marvel. My faith is

a•bid•ing

. And now excuse me while I go check on the proper pronunciation of Abednego.

puppy love — purebred

The last thing Harry wanted was to bring disgrace to his father, the Empire, and the princely state of India in which he was living. But Sir Giles was wrong – it was not a case of

puppy love that could be forgotten after some gin or even a night with a discreet courtesan as arranged by his father. No, Anju was much more than that to him. So Harry told Sir Giles he'd sleep in the

pup tent that night, away from the huge house, because he was “in no state to be around people.” That was true enough; but Harry had more on his mind. Almost every

pu•ra•na Anju had read to him was filled with heroes who defied convention. Why should he shrink from his destiny? As the night dwindled, Harry crept out of the tent. He was nearly

pur•blind with excitement and, it must be said, his father's port. He thought of the famous lovers of the past – Romeo and Juliet, Abélard and Heloise, the sad tale of Dido and Aeneas that had inspired

Pur•cell to his finest music. As the moon persisted in blinking and wavering, Harry made his way stealthily to the rajah's palace. He'd come with some items in case he met a guard and had to

pur•chase

his way onto the grounds, including the gold watch Sir Giles had given him for finishing at Harrow. More moonlight that would not behave properly. All at once, he saw that Anju had defied

pur•dah

and was waiting for him in the shadows of the palace's eastern wall! Then he saw who was with her: her father the rajah. As guards seized him, he heard her cry, "I told him our love was

pure

!" The next day, hunched on the deck of the steamship as it left port, he recalled the rajah's words: "Count yourself blessed that my daughter's plea softened my heart. I'd have had eight

pure•bred

stallions of my cavalry tear you apart." But as Harry bowed his head, he could not imagine a feeling worse than what racked him now.

Amon-Re — amort

Some people worship Christ, some

A•mon-Re , but to be frank I prefer

a•mon•til•la•do . Call me

a•mor•al , then. I shan't dispute you. But I will follow that damn

am•o•ret•to , Eros, anywhere. Yes, I own to the title of

am•o•rist , with no shame when passion enflames me. I'd follow my object of desire to the desert of the Hottentot, the frozen wastes of the Lapp, or the dreaded home of the

Am•o•rite , if such there still be in the world. And she, no doubt, my Helen, my Dido, would be as

am•o•rous as I. We would disport, frolic, with no other cares. . . . What's that? You ask about honor, or

a•mor pat•ri•ae , or the greater good? Fie! The universe has no place for such

a•mor•phous abstractions. Self-deceptions, that's all. Life is brief. Forces conspire to frustrate us. Revel now before you are all

a•mort , my dear fellow.

strabismus — straightaway

At the doorway he pauses, his tall figure now more stooped as he prepares to make his retirement remarks, a touch of

stra•bis•mus

as he blinks while the flashes go off. Not that he's not used to being the center of attention. For decades, his students have admired his allusions to that old Greek historian,

Strabo

, or chuckled while he retold a few irreverent tales from Lytton

Strachey

, those too risqué to be in the Victorian book. She sees he's clutching the violin case, as usual. Now he enters, as well-wishers wish him well. All well and good. But is "the Old

Strad

," as he oh-so-casually referred to it, actually in the case? That time she had the tutorial, he had some other things inside. Unguents. Opium. Pills. Devices. But first he tried to

strad•dle

her. Oh, she fought him off, scratching his shocked face. Why else had she come, after all, but to please him? What would Signor

Stradivari

have thought? His instrument used as a prop, a lure, by an artist, professor, . . . and predator. If his damn

Strad•i•var•i•us

had been there, she would have taken a hammer to it. Not that she carried one in her purse, but she'd have made do with something else. Later, she wished she could

strafe

him, cut him down to size, force him to listen to all he had done to her. And to how many other young women? And force the dean, Dr.

Straf•ford

, to listen as well. No doubt the dean had tried to downplay "what they thought had happened" when a student would

strag•gle

into his office and tearfully explain. "Are you sure? Could you have misinterpreted what he said?" Or did? And some later time, another, with a similar story, her eyes moist, her hair

strag•gly

? Psychosis? Or a spurned lover's revenge? Today, years later, she is determined to look him

straight

in the eye. No doubt he will not remember – or pretend not to. Just as he probably pretended to play a violin while planning his next volume of lapidary prose. But another woman, approaching at a

straight angle

, confronts him first. She appears to be a professor of the college. Well dressed. No sign of fear or anger. But calmly she slams him in the face,

straight-arm

, knocking him back. He reels. The violin case drops. There is a sudden silence

in the crowded room. She moves toward the door, and a line opens

straight•a•way

for her to pass. Someone begins to clap. Then another. Then more. A woman professor tears off her school pin and flings it in his direction. After all this time, a gesture. And perhaps more.

Garland — garni

Old Miss Turner closed the ledger. “Well, that’s tonight’s tally, Mary. Off you go, but be careful! These horrible events . . .” Mary

Gar•land waved her off. “I’ll be fine, Miss Turner. I’m just going ’round the corner.” “But it’s already pitch black. Do me this one favor, then, and wear the

gar•lic wreath around your neck.” “Oh, Miss Turner! I’ll stink to high heaven!” “Better than filling a fresh grave, don’t you think, Mary?” Wrapping her worn

gar•ment about her, Mary hurried outside into the heavy fog. Another evening’s work, long and hard, but she was determined to

gar•ner the funds she needed to move herself and her ailing father to the countryside. Sighing, she walked down the street, away from the light. In the darkness, a man with

gar•net lips fell into step a few yards behind her. His tread was almost silent. But not quite. Mary slowed her pace, tilting her head to listen. Nervously, she touched the crucifix with the

gar•net stone, a gift of her dead mother. Oh, for a revolver instead! she thought, quickening her pace again. “Yes, she is right to worry,” murmured Sebastian