

Give Us A Bee!
Cool kids reckon spelling rools OK.
The Sunday Magazine.
February 18, 2007

War of the words
Kate Browne

Meredith Cheng has just been crowned a champion. She beams as she stands in front of hundreds of applauding spectators, the media, family and friends. A huge silver cup is thrust into her hands, dwarfing the tiny eight-year-old as she struggles to hold it above her head. Is she a new swimming champ? Has she "won an AFI Award? Completed a concerto on the violin? No, Meredith has just dodged the perils of words such as "personification", made it around the curly bend of "deciduous" and hurdled to victory with the word "irresistible" to clean up in the Juniors final of the NSW Premier's Spelling Bee. With the kind of adoration generally reserved for sporting achievements, it seems Australia has a love affair with good old-fashioned spelling. It all started in 2003 with the release of the US documentary *Spellbound*, which covered the nail-biting journey of eight American school kids to the finals of the National Scripps Spelling Bee. Then came the bestselling novel *Bee Season* (which was made into a film starring Richard Gere), and last year's film *Akheela and the Bee*. There's even a musical - the Broadway hit *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* (described as "Survivor for nerds") was staged by the Melbourne Theatre Company in 2006 and will hit the stage in Sydney in June this year. Even reality TV got in on the act in late 2005 when the Seven Network hosted *The Great Celebrity Spelling Bee*.

The Premier's Spelling Bee, which kicked off in 2004, is open to all primary-age children from state, central and community schools across NSW. Last year, more than 1900 schoolchildren stepped up to the mark to test their spelling skills. In Victoria, the privately run **Spellmasters** holds a similar bee and, with rumblings of interest from the other states, it seems bee fever is definitely in the air.

The Premier's Spelling Bee is a serious business. On finals day, 60 children, who have travelled from far and wide, pit their word skills against each other in front of a large audience at the ABC Centre in Sydney. Eight-to-12-year-olds grapple with complicated words as they stand in front of a microphone with no notes, pen or paper. Some furrow their brows, staring at the ceiling as if willing the consonants to come out of thin air, while others rattle them off like a machine gun. The words, taken from the *Macquarie Dictionary*, are a mix of the commonly misspelt, long and fiendishly difficult.

After the morning session for the juniors, the children congregate and commiserate out in a back room with their proud parents. Although there are a few tears during the heat of the competition, most are philosophical about how they have performed. "It's a lottery," says one boy. "It's just the luck of the draw and the words you get." Little Jayden Leonard tells me he loves to read and his favourite word to spell is "ambidextrous". Another boy tells me his favourite is "antidisestablishmentarianism" and then laughs. He's eight years old.

Later the same day, we reach the pointy end of the competition with the senior finals. Words such as "deuce", "surveillance", "isosceles" and "denunciation" are negotiated with no problems, but later, many falter over more difficult words such as "lineage", "caricature" and "ornithology", leaving the competition clear for winner Elena Heran, who romps home spelling the word "agapanthus". Her mother jokes afterwards that she tries to spell along in her head with Elena but "I usually get knocked out in the first or second round". In fact, many of the adults attending the bee say they don't know some of the words their children have spelt correctly.

But beyond the fun of a competition like this, is spelling really that important? In this age of computers, spellcheck and text messages, has the 'ability to spell become redundant? Who cares if you can't spell "laughing out loud" when you can text LOL to your mate's mobile; and why worry about complicated words of affection when you can just send someone a heart or a smiley? Why dust off the dictionary, when close enough is good enough?

It's not, says Sue Butler, publisher of *Macquarie Dictionary*. "The idea of freedom from spelling rules is just an illusion." Butler says that, instead of discarding the rules of spelling and language, there should be more emphasis on getting things right. "Thanks to email, people are writing more these days. Everyone has to be a writer of some sort with email. At first, people thought email would be this free-and-easy shorthand way of communicating, but you still need to be able to communicate well. Email can get you into a lot of trouble and people will judge you on the quality of the communications you send."

Does she foresee a time when it will be considered standard practice to "abrv8"? "I really don't think the way people text message will affect anything. It's just a code, a handy code that reflects spoken language. It's fashionable at the moment but it's economically driven. It's really just used because it's cheap."

Les Posen, who, along with schoolteacher Lili Hampel, runs Victoria's Spellmasters Australia, is delighted that spelling is back on the agenda. "The importance of spelling waxes and wanes in education over the years but, at the moment, we are swinging back to a focus. I think it's because people are actually writing more. Even when people wrote letters, they might write one and then it would take six weeks to arrive. These days the amount of emails and text messages flying back and forth each day is immense. Often, email is the first contact you can have with someone, even an employer. And let's face it, spellcheck doesn't solve everything; it certainly doesn't pick up homonyms such as 'their' and 'there'."

Bad spelling can create all kinds of wrong impressions in the workplace, says Kate Southam, editor of jobs website www.careerone.com.au. "Can you blame a manager who's looking for a great new person to join the team for being turned off by bad spelling and grammar?" she asks. "If you can't use the computer-based spellcheck system, what else can't you do? If you care so little that you send off a cover letter and resume without asking someone to proof-read it for you, then how are you going to convince an employer that you are going to care enough about your job to do it well? When job-hunting, you're marketing yourself with every phone call and email, whether you're talking to a receptionist, a recruitment consultant or your potential future boss. All communication needs to be as impressive as possible."

While the more spelling-challenged among us can fall back on the limited abilities of spellcheck and the help of a good proof-reader, some argue that none of this would be an issue if we reassessed the English language in the first place. Jack Bovill, chairman of UK group the Simplified Spelling Society (SS3), believes that the English language is unnecessarily complicated and can create problems for people who are not naturally gifted with the ability to spell. He says the main goal for the SSS would be "no more spelling lessons".

The SSS lists 3500 commonly used English words that are spelt unpredictably and cause problems with all spellers. They compare this with other languages such as German, which only has 800 unpredictable words, and Italian, which has fewer than 400. Bovill says he would like to see our language reformed and spelling to be based on a simpler, more phonetic basis. He argues that too many words in English sound one way when spoken but are spelt completely differently. While the society hasn't come up with a definitive scheme for simplified spelling, suggestions have included the "Gut Spelling" scheme, which would change words such as head to hed, leopard to lepard and friend to frend.

While it seems that such dramatic change is unlikely, *Macquarie Dictionary's* Sue Butler does agree that English is a particularly difficult language for spelling. "One reason English words are more complicated to spell than in some other languages is that English borrows words from other languages, and often leaves a little bit of that language behind in the word. Psychology, for example: psy is from the Greek but we pronounce it as an s. There are words with double consonants and words that may be pronounced with only two syllables but are spelt with three, like family. Then there are fiendish words - the ones you just can't explain - like eczema and diarrhoea. Words like that, you just have to learn."

For children at the Premier's Spelling Bee, learning those fiendish words is half the fun. After the competition has finished for the day, they rush to talk about the latest word they've learnt and how they plan to learn more. Alison Sheedy, who came second in the senior comp, says, "I just love words." Her parents joke that she's the "family spellchecker". But they add that the most important part of the competition is that it's tapped into their daughter's passion to learn. Says proud dad Brian, "The best thing is that when Alison comes across a word she doesn't know or can't spell; she doesn't just use spellcheck, she'll go and look it up. She's always learning something new, and I think that's great." ■