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In Bob We Trust

There's a well-known anecdote used in editing circles to illustrate the importance of a good copy editor. A man on a business trip in an exotic setting sends his wife a telegram. "Having a wonderful time. Wish you were her."

Thank goodness we have Bob* to clean up such messes.

Bob, in addition to being a fun guy to have around, is the arbiter of style for the magazine. That is not to say he is a fancy dresser. What it means is that Bob is The Law when determining, for example, whether a book title is italicized if only a portion of its name is used. We actually have policies on this kind of thing. A lot of them.

There is a kind of beauty to Bob's work. He insists that the language remain pure and unblemished; he holds it up to the light and checks for flaws, then polishes away until it shines. It does not surprise me that Bob loves mystery novels because he, like a good private investigator, restores order to chaos.

It's tough, though, being an editor in an unedited world. For example, we're driving along Main Street one day when Bob spots a sign at a supermarket advertising potato chips. The sign says "Potato Chip's" with an apostrophe. Bob shakes his head in disbelief. "They made potato chip possessive," he says ruefully, to nobody in particular. Bob is not a curmudgeon, really, he just adores the language and he wants it to be respected as one might respect, say, a masterful painting. To Bob, putting an apostrophe in potato chips is like drawing a moustache on the Mona Lisa.

Bob has a particular distaste for the "verbing" (like this) of American English. Perfectly good nouns are being molded into verbs to compensate for the stunted vocabularies of the people who do it, he says. It's like a cancer Bob can't stop, so he must endure people "car-pooling" to work and businesses "partnering" with each other.

What's ironic is that after Bob works on a story, we say that story has been "Bobbed." Occasionally we scribble margin notes on the copy to tell others its current state of Bobness. "Bobbed June 25." "Bobbed again July 3."

There's a lot of Bobbing that goes on. (If Bob could get his hands on this column he would point out that the previous sentence ends with a preposition and sounds all goofed up. There, see, I did it again.)

A typical Bobbing occurs in his office on the third floor of Eustis, where he can be found peering over the top of his glasses at a piece of copy, surrounded by stacks of the Unbobbed, and wearing a stern expression that suggests the paper in his hand has committed some offense. Much of the time Bob actually appears to be looking *through* the paper, like a doctor peering at an x-ray, as if attempting to locate the origin of the symptom.

This issue, which includes the 1994-95 President's Report, was Bobbed several times. Two things happened as a result. One, Bob was virtually blind for several days, and, two, I was able to sleep at night. A lot of the mistakes you don't see aren't there because Bob found them. If you know what I mean.

Bob could probably say it better.

*Robert Gillespie, a member of Colby's English Department, serves as college editor.