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Opening Extract from...

Better Than Great

A Plentitudinous Compendium of
Wallopingly Fresh Superlatives

Written by Arthur Plotnik

Published by Souvenir Press Ltd

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Advance Praise for *Better Than Great*

“One of today’s most distinguished writers on language and writing style—a freaking genius-god in the writing world.”

—Jessica Page Morrell, Powell’s Books Blog

“Have you used the word ‘great’ or ‘fantastic’ or ‘awesome’ in the last week? Ha! I thought so. Everyone has. And it’s getting really really tiresome. In your hands lies a new way of life. Word-adroit Art Plotnik has compiled a collection of hundreds of juicy alternatives to your three favorite superlatives. A feloniously fun bedtime browsing treat, *Better Than Great* is also an unimpeachably useful daytime reference work. I can’t believe I ever got published without it. It is, in a word, ripsniptious! (P.S. Never lend this book to anyone. You will not get it back. That happened to me.)”

—Rosalie Maggio, author of *How to Say It*

“For those who find themselves at a loss for praise-worthy words, feel there’s a paucity of acclamatory expressions, or believe we are numbed by the plethora of platitudes that pass for superlatives, Arthur Plotnik’s new book is

better than great; it is iridescently indispensable, a bare-knuckled barrel of berserkley fun words.”

—Phil Cousineau, author of *Wordcatcher: An Odyssey into the World of Weird and Wonderful Words*

“Plotnik’s ‘acclamatory hoard’ is every bit as entertaining as it is useful. And (to lift one phrase) that ain’t exactly chopped herring, considering it gives this critic some 6,000 substitutes for feeble old ‘amazing’ and its ilk.”

—Bruce Ingram, film and entertainment critic
at Sun-Times Media/Pioneer Press

“Arthur Plotnik’s *Better Than Great* is a bouquet of perfection, a feel-good, all-purpose A-list Angel Cake of big-league tips on how to turn your complimentary powers into blue chip, berserkely good, yowzwers of social and professional opportunity.”

—Alan Kaufman, author of *Jew Boy*, a memoir,
and editor of *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry*

**BETTER
THAN
GREAT**

**A PLENITUDINOUS
COMPENDIUM
of WALLOPINGLY
FRESH SUPERLATIVES**

ARTHUR PLOTNIK

Souvenir Press

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To these superlative women:
Mary, Julia, Katya,
Sondra, Tara, Annabelle, Barbara

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INTRODUCTION

PRAISE CAN BE GREATER THAN AMAZING

Not every human trait is a cause for celebration, but one of them cheers me mightily: our zest for praising and acclaiming things we consider worthy. We love to do it. In the course of civilization, we have praised and acclaimed our divinities, heroes, beauties, works of art, and just about every other source of wonder or delight.

Praise challenges us to reveal our passions and powers of expression. Deft praise encourages others to feel as we do, to share our enthusiasms. It rewards deserving objects of admiration. It persuades people to take certain actions. It sells things.

And so each day we try to express acclaim for exceptional things: a new sushi joint, vacation spot, comedy, sports hero, love interest. But the terms we use for emphasis—terms repeated over the centuries and replicated virally in this one—are now anything but exceptional.

Our words and phrases of acclaim are worn out, all but impotent. Even so, we find ourselves defaulting to such habitual choices as *good*, *great*, and *terrific*, or substituting the weary synonyms that tumble out of a thesaurus—*superb*, *marvelous*, *outstanding*, and the like.

Sensing that such terms fall short, we pile on the usual intensifiers: So great. Really nice. Totally cool. We draw from such stock figures of speech as “Not too shabby,” or “Good as gold.” We call on intonation—“It was soooo—[two-beat pause]—awesome”—and nonverbal signals like jacked thumbs. In writing, we inject steroidal italics, uppercase letters, and exclamation marks: “She looked *spectacular*.” “That was GREAT!!!”

But for all these options, how convincing are we? We’d like to be stimulating in our acclaim, go beyond the clichés that hype everything from soft drinks to arthritis drugs. We want to call attention to the special or superior quality of Entity X and convey our enthusiasm for it. Yet we rarely communicate that X was more than yawningly great, rarely evoke more than a nod or a “huh!,” rarely persuade someone to share our conviction and even act on it.

The devices we call upon are played out. Our superlatives—terms indicating high or utmost degree—have lost their power to alert or entice; to amuse, distinguish, or

sell. Like most words that become the rage, they soon suffer from overuse and devaluation. Terms expected to describe miracles, epiphanies, and colossal wonderments are exhausted on assignments like these:

Try our *amazing* onion rings.

That my beer? *Awesome*.

It's a *fantastic* mattress. I had a *fabulous* sleep.

At a loss for words with clout, we turn to negative modifiers—terms saying what something is not. A number of such modifiers have maintained their force. *Ineffable*, for example, carries a sense of “unspeakably sacred” or of speech being silenced by emotion. But the overused *unbelievable*, *not to be believed*, and *incredible* have become black holes, threatening to swallow the universe of English modifiers. *Unbelievable*, which might have been reserved to describe talking cows or a century of peace, has been picked clean in the service of everyday, believable phenomena. *Incredible* hot dogs. *Unbelievable* sheets.

If anything escapes the pull of these terms, it gets gobbled up by *indescribable*—a word so quickly invoked as to signal easy surrender, expressing nothing. “The moon was indescribable” projects the same picture in my mind as “the moon was whatever.”

Struggling to animate these forceless words, speakers

deliver them with giddy theatrics. “It was just—I mean really. Just. Absolutely. Incredible,” we say, jaw slack and head wagging like a string puppet’s. And I’m not mocking anyone—it’s our natural behavior. I’ve head-wagged a lifetime, yearning for more effective expression.

Continued on page xvi.



AMAZING: THE “IT” WORD

“‘R. Kelly keeps doing amazing things,’ he said, blowing out the ‘amazing’ as if it were a party horn.”

—Dave Itzkoff,
New York Times, June 4, 2010

Oh, that word *amazing*—enforced by dropping one’s mandible on the second syllable and stretching out the MAYYY sound until a listener seems convinced. “I just ate the most aMAYYYzing cupcake.”

Perhaps because the word is so easily brayed, *amazing* became the It utterance of the millennium’s first decade. Never were so many so amazed at so much that amounts to so little. If something didn’t suck it was amazing. Businesses from home siding to nail salons took on the name, each pedestrian use pushing the word further from its Middle English association with mazes, those bewildering, labyrinthine paths and passages. “To amaze” then meant to bewilder, perplex, and confuse, and in later times to overwhelm with surprise or sudden wonder, to astonish greatly. A bit much to ask of a cupcake.

BOLSTERING THE VOCABULARY

What now? Must we abandon *great*, *amazing*, and other beloved but worn-out superlatives? I doubt if we could, so habitually do such standbys leap to the tongue. Besides, in our everyday yakking they serve well enough to mean “a cut above.” But short of being belted out from a soundstage, these terms can no longer seize attention and persuade an audience that something differently great has arrived.

A better choice than shouting old superlatives would be to add fresh, engaging terms to our acclamatory hoard: our vocabulary of praise, approval, and acclaim. But doing so isn't easy. By and large, thesauruses turn up equally worn alternatives under each worn superlative. Arcane options (like *Dhaulagirian*, after a soaring Nepalese mountain) have interesting but limited uses. Popular slang gets old in a wink, though it often enjoys a retro vogue.

One way to build a supply of uncommon superlatives would be to pore through several lexicons—hundreds of thousands of words and expressions—for new, under-used, recyclable, intensifiable, and tweakable candidates. And then do the recycling, intensifying, and tweaking to come up with a body of suggestions. Only a word-wonk would leap at such a task.

And, ahem, here I am. At your service.

Motivated partly by my ongoing interests in expres-

siveness and partly to ease my own addiction to *amazing* and its ilk, I have winnowed and shaped some 6,000 suggested alternatives to stale superlatives. I offer you not only a plug-and-play source of words and phrases, but models that will trigger your own brainstorming, your own inventions and usages. (See “Make Your Own Spumesciently Brilliant Superlatives,” in the following section, How to Use This Book.)

YOU

In addressing “you,” I am picturing someone who takes language seriously, even when using it to evoke giggles and gasps. You are a novelist or a reporter reaching for an emphatic way of saying *beautiful* or *big*. You are a critic enchanted by a new work, but last week you used *enchanted*, *haunting*, and *mesmerizing* for the hundredth times. You cover sports, and that last-second touchdown was too special to lump with the thousands you’ve called *unbelievable* or *huge*. You are a copywriter, a marketer, groping for a term to vault your product above all other *fabulous*, *fantastic*, *groundbreaking*, and *ultimate* ones. You are an impassioned blogger/texter, tweeter, skilled at punchy put-downs but stuck at a level of *supercool* and *mind-boggling* when it comes to brief acclaim. You are everyperson, wishing to excite others about the things

exciting you, or looking to energize such everyday civilities as “Have a _____ trip.”

All such serious language users will find ways to recharge their acclamatory powers in this compilation, although they won’t all find apt terms in the same groupings. My suggestions range from the literary (*aureate*, *ascendant*, *numinous*) to the funky (*trill*, *mind-foozling*, *butt-puckering*). Some, like *I’ve-fallen-and-I-can’t-get-up gorgeous*, are flat-out farcical, more suited to blogs than graveside eulogies. Other offerings might sound alien to one’s personal style but natural in the mouths of created characters:

“You are an ebullition of joy!” Lady Bertram told her bubbly young visitor.

“I’ve seen plenty of lookers in my racket,” said Malone, “but this kid was armor-piercingly beautiful.”

The appropriateness of any term will be up to its user, factoring in context, audience, and personal tastes. But among my suggestions are plenty of conservative as well as far-out alternatives to worn-out terms. I ask only indulgence as you scan past suggestions that seem too far-fetched or silly for your purposes. Someone else might find them cold-cockingly cool.

MYSELF

In a career that has included magazine and book editing, journalism, reviewing, copy writing, public relations, and authorship of eight books, I've long wrestled with about every type of expressiveness worth the effort. And much of that effort has been trying to extol, acclaim, or hype something in an expressive way. Earlier books of mine, such as *The Elements of Expression* and *Spunk & Bite: A Writer's Guide to Bold, Contemporary Style*, prompted writers to be more exciting, more engaging when putting any thoughts into words. But one of the toughest notions to get across in fresh language is how extraordinarily good or great something is.

Does it say anything about the human condition that terms for the extraordinarily negative (counting slang terms) are staggeringly more abundant and powerful than those of positive acclaim? So much so that we borrow such terms as ironic modifiers of the good: "She is *wicked* fine." "That new car is *bad*." "The *illest* movie around." (See "Wicked Cool" category.)

Let it be known that I relish the language of defamation, insult, and condemnation as much as I do any lively expression (unless of course the maledictions are directed at me). After all, I live in Chicago, where knocking politicians, rival cities, and cross-towners is an art form. But

there are also scores of good things to celebrate here, as in your home town. With this compilation I've attempted to even the score somewhat and expand, with gusto, the ways you and I might say "super!"

Arthur Plotnik



HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

TIPS FROM THE AUTHOR

Need a fresh superlative in a hurry? Allergic to instructions? Then simply dip into the most likely categories (see Table of Contents or Index) to find a term you like. Tweak any suggested term to your own style or purpose. Look up unfamiliar words before springing them on judgmental audiences. That's it. Enjoy.

But for word-adventurers who favor an overview to enrich a journey, or who like to know the rationale, options, possibilities, and limitations of a new language tool, I offer the following mini-manual.

ARRANGEMENT AND FEATURES

Categories of acclaim tend to be vague and overlapping. Does a term fall under “Great” or “Fabulous?” “Amazing” or “Awesome?” In organizing this book I might have started with several dozen such common

terms and listed approximate synonyms under each. But the lists would have been arbitrary and repetitive. Instead I sorted out 15 categories proving workably distinct from one another:

- * Great
- * Sublime
- * Physically Affecting
- * Mentally, Emotionally, or Spiritually Affecting
- * Beautiful
- * Joy-Giving
- * Large
- * Exceptional
- * Intense
- * Delicious
- * Trendy
- * Cool
- * Wicked Cool
- * Forceful
- * Challenging Belief or Expression

Under each I indicated major related areas to help guide users. (See the head of each category or Index).

When terms defied a single category, I repeated them under two or three of the most suitable ones. *Olympian*,

for example, I placed under the headings “Great,” “Large,” and “Sublime.” The majority of suggested terms, however, can be used beyond their given categories by means of phrase-tweaking or deft application to a particular context. I list *high-voltage* under “Forceful,” but its force could be applied within “Delicious” (high-voltage peppers), “Beautiful” (high-voltage sunset), “Trendy” (high-voltage hot pants), and other categories.

I’ve offered a few thoughts at the head of each category, and within some categories you’ll find special “sidebar” features and lists. For example, under “Exceptional” there’s a listing of “Rare Gems to Dangle as Metaphors,” as in “She’s a *Neelanjali Ruby* among garnets.” Under “Delicious” you’ll find a list of some 75 positive wine qualities. In several categories, the heading “Vintage Gold” offers a selection of still-punchy superlatives from yesteryear.

The appendices include the list “Previously Owned but Still Running,” featuring some 100 selected entertainment and literary terms from recent promotional copy. Here writers might find “good-enough” choices for a routine job. Also in the appendices: 50 acclamatory terms in textese; 26 eponymous superlatives and how to make more; using alliteration in acclaim; and a starter set of superlatives to help break old habits.

Here and there I’ve placed examples of inspired

acclaim quoted from literature, journalism, and other sources. May you find all these features, along with the lists, to be both-barrels mind-blasting as you rev up your powers of praise.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT SUPERLATIVES

Superlatives are—or should be—powerful terms, proclaiming superiority with persuasive force. As with all things potent, their mishandling can blow up in one's face, so to speak. How can a term of praise, approval, and acclaim misfire? In several ways, including inappropriateness, overkill, insincerity, and downright impotence.

In order to grab attention in a world of sensory overload, most terms of acclaim are exaggerations. A pile of french fries hardly makes us tremble in awe, yet we call it *awesome*, exaggerating for the sake of persuasion. But because *awesome* is so worn out, the exaggeration doesn't register; it needs an element of novelty to help it do so. Novelty gets attention. "The fries were *industrial-strength awesome*." "The ride was *shiver-me-timbers awesome*."

With novelty, however, one invites attention to how something was said, which brings its own hazards. Not only is the object of your praise judged, but your manner of praising it.

We judge exaggeration kindly in commercial hype, even welcome it. *Set-off-the-fireworks fabulous! Double gulp-worthy!* I offer cartloads of such playful suggestions. But other situations are more delicate, calling for exaggeration that is inventive, tasteful, and infrequent. Too many clever superlatives at once can make one too clever by half, as they say.

Choosing among terms in any thesaurus-type work requires one to consider scores of choices—some personally repellent, some seductive—until hitting on one with the best meaning, nuance, tone, and sound for the occasion. And again as with other thesauruses, choice will be guided by whether the term is to be spoken or written, used formally or informally, and targeted to a general or particular audience. Readers of a term have a chance to savor its wordplay, images, nuances, and other delights, whereas conversation favors brief, vivid expression. More complicated locutions can seem strained and affected or just fly over the heads of listeners. *Keel-over cool* might work for me in conversation, but a term like *Mausoleum-of-King-Mausolas magnificent?* I might use it in a blog, but I wouldn't try to mouth it.

I've tried to anticipate the widest variety of uses for my suggested terms, so if you don't find your apt term right away, keep looking. Look under different

categories, use the Index to Subcategories, or tweak a near-appropriate suggestion to suit your own purpose and style. (See “Make Your Own,” below.)

Finally, be cautious in using unfamiliar terms, especially in writing. I’ve provided mini-definitions for terms I consider generally unfamiliar or misunderstood, but I could hardly offer notes on their usage here. “Beneath her veil was a *juggernaut* of beauty” suggests an overwhelming force of beauty, but also a cruel and destructive one. Take care; look up meanings when it matters, and pronunciation if you plan to speak the term.

MAKE YOUR OWN SPUMESCENTLY BRILLIANT SUPERLATIVES

In creating this compilation of acclamatory terms or superlatives, I’ve combed through thesauruses, lexicons, and glossaries for two types of prizes: first, strong existing terms that are not yet worn out (e.g., *supernal*, *empty-real*); and second, words and phrases I might configure into fresh acclamatory formations (*amen-astonishing*, *a cut above perfect*).

Lexicon searching yields only so many single-word synonyms (*outstanding*, *stupendous*, etc.) of the common superlatives. To create more alternatives, one must use additional words to intensify the common superlatives

in fresh ways. For example, *concussively* great intensifies “great” not only by adding a modifier, but by using a fresh and vivid one (unlike, say, the limp *really*).

Every such suggested construction offers an opportunity to make creative substitutions. Don’t like *concussively*? Then substitute *berserkly* or *clamorously*, or whatever best fits your context.

To find fresh modifiers of degree or manner for almost any purpose, simply pick out strong terms listed under one of my headings and apply them as appropriate. For example, my *breath-abating* (under “Great”) can become your *breath-abatingly suspenseful*. My *clangorously real* can become your *clangorously new*, and so on.

Although negative evaluation was outside my scope, it need not be outside yours in making use of this book. The same tweaking of my suggestions, as described above, can amplify or refresh your vocabulary of negative appraisal, as in *breath-abatingly stupid*.

Many of my inventions are sparked by common rhetorical devices (figures of speech). For example, I’ve used the adverb *criminally* to energize the worn adjective *beautiful* because of *criminal*’s paradoxical-yet-meaningful sense in this context, a rhetorical effect called oxymoron. A writer can think of dozens of other contrary adverbs that would animate *beautiful* or its synonyms: *heinously*

beautiful; laceratingly gorgeous; actionably handsome, and so on. Under “Great,” I offer a list of such oxymoronic adverbs as a springboard.

Below are examples of some of the devices I’ve used. They can serve as models for writers creating their own fresh terms of acclaim. Knowing the name of a rhetorical figure is less important than picking up its pattern, which can then be used in creating terms for particular contexts.

Hyperbole: *mind-incinerating; it puts your atoms in orbit*

Personification: *eats great for breakfast; reality on a toot; what great aspires to*

Litotes (understatement): *not exactly nothing; hardly insignificant*

Germanism: *lock-me-up-and-throw-away-the-key gorgeous; trim-sail-and-batten-down-the-hatches mind-blowing*

Metaphor: *a tarantella on the tongue; a fun house; mastodonic; Eldorado*

Enallage (shifting a word’s normal grammatical role): *great served hot; an eruption of fabulous; a hangarful of happy*

Oxymoron: *damnably good; distressingly handsome*

Alliteration: *pillar-to-post perfect; card-carrying cool* (See Appendix 4, All-Out Applause for Acclamatory Alliterations.)

Irony (opposite meaning): *the illest; way sick; the baddest*

A NOTE ON PARTS OF SPEECH

Sometimes freshness and novelty call for extreme measures. Taking advantage of English-language flexibility, I have recruited, stretched, mixed, and matched various parts of speech to create this body of acclamatory terms. I have employed nouns and noun phrases, like *a Queen Elizabeth at full steam*, describing what something is or can be compared to. I have used textured adjectives such as *iridescent* and *mellifluous*. And I have certainly used adverbs—words or phrases that modify adjectives, verbs, and other parts of speech.

I use tons of adverbs, and to those who still believe the old saw that all adverbs are bad, I say, heed the enlightened language experts: Adverbs are bad when they serve no purpose, when they add nothing but excess baggage to what they would modify. Otherwise, they serve to specify the degree or manner of the named quality, yielding information that is interesting, intensifying, and sometimes fun.

I have tried to use adverbs that energize and sharpen otherwise feeble terms of acclaim. If some of them seem over the top, it is because acclaim often needs to be so to stand out. Consider these examples culled from recent journalism and literature (adverbs in italics).

kneebucklingly sweet

blissfully deranged

captivatingly strange

devastatingly reasonable

wittily intricate

lashingly funny

searingly gifted

blamelessly beautiful

And so, Acclaimers, love your adverbs. Love any part of speech, any figure of speech, any language device that blasts a *walk-off homer** to be cheered by thousands.

* See under “Great.”