

How Best to Avoid Dying  
*stories*

Owen Egerton



A U S T I N , T E X A S

Dalton Publishing  
P.O. Box 242  
Austin, Texas 78767  
*www.daltonpublishing.com*

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Printed in the United States of America

Edited by Ric Williams  
Cover Design and Interior Images by Jason Hranicky  
Interior Design and Typesetting by Deltina Hay  
Photographs by Jodi Egerton

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Egerton, Owen.  
How best to avoid dying : stories / Owen Egerton.  
p. cm.  
ISBN-13: 978-0-9740703-7-7  
ISBN-10: 0-9740703-7-8  
I. Title.  
PS3605.G47H69 2007  
813'.6--dc22

2007011676

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# Spelling



## "Your word is *ambrosial*."

"*Ambrosial*?"

"*Ambrosial*."

"Can you use it in a sentence?"

"The talented chef prepared an *ambrosial* dessert for the party."

"A-M-B-R...O-S...I-A...L"

"That is correct."

"Yippie!"

The crowd cheers. Sally always says, "Yippie." She says it's her "calling card." Pretty crappy calling card, if you ask me. She's also big into building the drama. Pausing, sweating a little. Like *ambrosial*. Easy word. She knew it straight away, but she has to add some tension, as if the Pit weren't enough. She's only eight, a year younger than me, and already a showman. You grow up fast in the Bee.

Only five of us left. Sally, Peter, Wilma, Shaka, and me. Always more girls than boys near the end. We're just better.

No one has missed in a while, which means the words will get harder. They like to have a miss every five people or so, so even if this is only round four, they'll add some round five words just to spice things up.

Peter stands up, walks to the Spot. He's got nice dark hair and green eyes. He can be really funny, too. He peers out into the darkness, knowing there are thousands watching in the arena, more on television. He swallows. And from the darkness comes the voice.

"Your word is *pulchritudinous*."

"*Pulchritudinous*?"

"*Pulchritudinous*."

Peter coughs.

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“P-U-L...C-H...R.” He pauses. This isn’t for show. That’s not Peter’s style. He’s in trouble, so he’s taking his time. Once you say a wrong letter, you can’t go back “I-T...U-D...” Oh, man. He’s sweating up a storm. Oh, man, oh man. “I-N-O-S.”

“Bing!” The wrong bell.

“No. P-U-L-C-H-R-I-T-U-D-I-N-O-U-S.”

The audience gasps. Peter looks sad for just a moment, then he smiles at the hidden crowd, does a cute little shrug and an exaggerated bow. He told me he’d do this when he goes out. Wants to be remembered. The crowd laughs at his spunk and gives him a round of applause. Then the Pit opens beneath him and he falls. God, the smell is awful. Like rot and poop. We spellers can’t see inside the Pit, but we can hear him land with a kind of splat and then the crunching starts. Slow. The audience can see. There’s a wide window below the stage with a perfect view into the Pit. They always gasp and ooo and ahh. Surprised each time. Peter screams for a little longer than most. Then the Pit closes and they call for the next speller.

I’ll miss Peter. I liked him. Not in a boyfriend kind of way. Just a friend. No time for boyfriends. Too much studying. I want to be the world’s best speller. America needs me. Ever since we lost Hawaii to Korea in the Spelling Bee of the Pacifics, we’ve been the laughing stock on the world.

Wilma is wearing a pink flowery dress. She’s the prettiest girl in the Bee, especially since Sue went out in round two. But, like Coach says, “Looks don’t spell.”

“Your word is *Polywomack*.”

“*Polywomack*?”

“*Polywomack*.”

“Can you use it in a sentence?”

“No.”

“Origin, please?”

“American Council of Nu-Words.”

They usually don’t bring in Nu-Words until round six. Poor Wilma. I hate Nu-Words.

“Could you repeat the word?”

“*Polywomack*.”

## Spelling

She's buying time. She's trying to decide if the Nu-Word is spelled like it sounds or if it has some silent letter.

"P-O-L-Y-W-O-M-A-C-K. Polywomack."

"That is correct."

The crowd gives a hoot. Wilma is a crowd favorite. She dresses right, smiles right, spells right. Cute and competent. I hate her. But she is good. Me, I'm all spell. I get up, I spell. End of story. No show, no pretty dress, no little waves. Just give me the word and get out of my way. Coach says I could learn from Wilma, learn to use the positive vibes of the crowd to feed my head. But I don't need them. I'm a badass speller. B-A-D-A-S-S.

Shaka stands and shuffles to the microphone, looking like she might shatter into a hundred pieces. She is shy as hell. Afraid of all those eyes she can't see. She'd probably be the champ if she weren't so afraid all the time. She rocks the in-class scrimmages, but the pressure of the real thing, the crowd, the Pit, all get to her.

"Your word is *clematises*."

"*Clematises*?" Her voice breaks a little. She's going to choke. Better here than in the Bee for Oil Reserves of Canada.

"C..." she takes a long pause. Like she's frozen. "L?" Oh, this is bad. The Pit opens just a crack below her feet. She's trembling something awful. "E..." she squeaks it out. The Pit crack opens a little more. We can smell it. Heat is rising out of it. The crowd must be on the edge of their seats. "M-A-T..." The crack beneath her spreads, she's got a foot on either side, her legs making a giant upside down V. There's a trickle of pee running down her leg. That's awful. Just awful. "I-S-E....." Come on, Shaka. Finish it up. "S. Clematises."

"That is correct." The crowds cheers. The pit closes. Shaka bites her lips and starts to cry a little. Jesus, she looks bad. So she has another week, but after pissing yourself in front of a billion people I think I'd rather get the Pit.

Then it's me. I walk to the Spot. I don't think about the Pit, or Peter, or Wilma's dress, or Shaka's pee, or anything. I just wait for the word.

"Your word is *ebullient*."

Easy peasy. I guess they like me. "A..."

Oh, God. It's not 'A'. It's 'E'. Oh, God. I can't go back. "B..." What do I do? Once I'm done spelling the Pit opens. Do I spell the rest of

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*ebullient* or do I spell some other word? Do I spell the right word wrong or the wrong word right? Oh, man. “A-L...” I glance behind me. All the spellers know. No one is smiling, not even Wilma. “I-E-N” You know who doesn’t know? The crowd. They have to wait on some wrong bell to tell them how to spell. Man. The letters are getting furry. I can feel them on my tongue, furry and sticky. “A-T-E.”

“Bing!”

The pit opens under me and I fall, but my pants snag on a corner, and I’m hanging head down. I see the crowd through the window. All staring at me with egg eyes. Their faces are paste. My pants start to tear, I drop down a few inches. From above I hear Shaka wailing. Below me in the dark I can see the wet eyes of a hundred pigs. I can hear them crawling on each other. I’ll be falling soon. My pants rip a little more. I wish this moment would last forever.