

The Last Word

By Julian Burnside

Pods

It is not possible to escape from the Pod these days. This is not a lament for unsociable cetaceans, but for those who noticed that Steve Jobs, recently dead, changed our world.

We talk unselfconsciously of *iPods* and *podcasts*. This near-universal usage has spawned facetious variants: *podgram* (a programme later available for downloading); *pod-people* (the people who download the podgram) and *vodcast* (Greg Proops' variant – he drinks a lot of vodka while podcasting). These variants may not seem surprising, until you recognise that the iPod has only been with us for a decade. For the name of any device to sink such deep roots in the language so fast is a remarkable feat.

The iPod is, as everyone on the planet knows, an electronic device which stores and plays audio files in various formats including, especially the mp3 format. It is one of the class of devices known as *mp3 players*. The first mp3 player was devised by Kane Kramer in 1979; the first mp3 device marketed was released in 1996 by Audio Highway. So far as I am aware, mp3 has not made any significant mark on the language, and their devices remain unnoticed.

Apple approached the matter differently, and the iPod was an instant success. They have about 90 per cent of the mp3 player market. In their first decade, about 300 million iPods were sold.

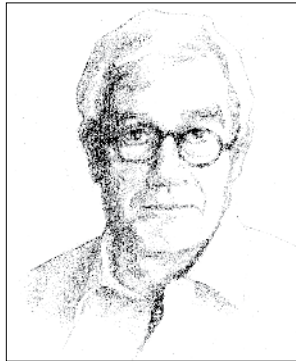
But why the name *iPod*? The word *pod* dates from the 17th century. Originally it was a vessel which contains seeds: the commonest is a pea pod, seen in every greengrocer and supermarket. From that origin, the focus was on autonomy and shape. The OED gives this history:

- 1688: A seed-vessel of a long form, usually dry and dehiscent; properly of leguminous and cruciferous plants; a legume or siliqua; but often extended to other long fruits.
- 1753: The cocoon of the silk-worm; the case or envelope of the eggs of a locust.
- 1883: The blade of a cricket-bat
- 1882: A purse-net with a narrow neck for catching eels.
- 1942: A body of ore or rock whose length greatly exceeds its other dimensions.

But *pod* had another meaning: in 1832 Massachusetts Senator Daniel Webster used it as meaning a small herd or school of seals or whales.

Pod as a reference to a social unit of whales or seals bears a natural relationship to the core sense of a distinct unit separate from the thing to which it is ancillary. The idea of an elongated shape is subordinated to the notion of semi-autonomous existence.

The name *iPod* was devised by Vinnie Chieco, a freelance copywriter working for Apple. It was inspired by a line in *2001: A Space Odyssey*: 'Open the pod bay door, HAL'. It is an interesting coincidence that the name was inspired by that film, as the iPod was launched in November 2001.



Pod also exists as a verb. Nowadays, to pod is the act of downloading a podcast. But it has been around a lot longer than that. Since 1734 it has meant 'To bear or produce pods'.

The unhappy practice of killing baby fur seals for their skins gave rise to another use of the verb: to pod is 'to drive (seals, etc.) into a 'pod' or bunch for the purpose of clubbing them' (1887).

Clubbing is not as sociable as it seems in other settings. To club a person originally referred to the archaic practice of beating them, probably to death, with a club; but more recently it refers to the act of introducing a person (generally male) into a group of like-minded people (all male) where they sit in comfortable armchairs and rule ever-diminishing stretches of Collins St or Philip St. A person thought fit to become a member is traditionally described as clubbable (1783), which may be truer than the speaker intends.

The traditional view of clubs comes, of course, from London where gentlemen's clubs are a feature of the cultural landscape. The received view of London clubs is that they are pleasant havens of quiet, exclusive camaraderie. This is not necessarily accurate. In *Leather Armchairs* by Charles Graves there is a delightful story of one London club which included a

The Last Word

particularly querulous old member. He steamed up to the club secretary one day and said:

Do you know what that new member just did?
No, Sir. What did he do?
He just said 'Good Morning' to me!
Oh. What did you do, Sir?
Well, I didn't want to be rude, so I just turned on my heel and walked off.

The other salient (if imaginary) feature of clubs is that the members are old duffers who sit about all day smoking cigars and drinking port. (It should be truer than it is, because port is a drink vastly underestimated, and at its Portuguese vintage best it is sublime.) *Duffer* has various meanings. Originally, it was a person who sold trashy goods as valuable, on false pretences (1756). Markets in Third World countries are full of duffers in this sense. In addition it is a person who 'fakes up' sham articles. In Australia it is a person who 'duffs' cattle: that is, steals them, especially by altering the branding.

This original connotation of dishonesty has been displaced. The other meaning of duffer, presumably the one more fitted to lounging club habitués, is: 'A person who proves to be without practical ability or capacity; one who is incapable, inefficient, or useless in his business or occupation; the reverse of an adept or competent person. Also more generally, a stupid or foolish person' (1842). In Australia this sense is extended to include a claim or mine which proves unproductive (1861). These senses are scarcely more flattering than the original.

These days, *duffer* is generally used with a softened meaning. It is used, not unkindly, for a person who is neither harmful nor useful; it has no connotation of dishonesty and neither does it suggest utter stupidity: it is more fitted to Wilkins Micawber than to Homer Simpson. This is possibly due to the influence of *buffer* which in Scottish and dialectical use refers to 'a foolish fellow'.

However that may be, it would be incongruous to see a duffer use an iPod. Incidentally, Homer Simpson does use an iPod, but he is a youthful 60 years old, by my reckoning. 'The Simpsons' was first aired on the *Tracey Ullman Show* in 1987. Homer was then a parent with three children. Inferentially, he must have been about

35 years old when the series began. Now, 25 years later, he must be about 60, although he has not aged at all. And Maggie is still on an infant's bottle at age 26 or so.

I notice how it goes against the grain to say *The Simpsons* was first aired... And yet we regularly see, without noticing, that Windows is shutting down. This prompted Clive James to write, a few years ago:

Windows is shutting down, and grammar are
On their last leg. So what am we to do?
A letter of complaint go just so far,
Proving the only one in step are you.
Better, perhaps, to simply let it goes.
A sentence have to be screwed pretty bad
Before they gets to where you doesnt knows
The meaning what it must of meant to had.

POETRY

By Trevor Bailey

Careering

Fire in my belly called me to the bar
What great wonders the law did portend!
Now flames have died to a glow and some char,
But my belly has prospered no end.

With Respect

(A Love Sonnet)

When women wail and counsel quail
The judge congratulates himself;
Encouraged now, he'll cancel bail,
And take a book down from the shelf
To throw at some poor bastard's head
- Then fault his subs to dry his lips -
To reinforce the role of dread
(Since parliament had outlawed whips).
But do we see a dinosaur
Inside that motley horsehair rug?
Will ways of bull and matador
Embrace some kindness and a hug?
*Pigs, at least, agree to be fair -
As we watch them flying in air.*