

Book Review: *More fun than a barrel of monkeys*

David Burke. 1992. Street Talk: How to speak and understand American slang. Los Angeles. Optima Books.

Review by JoAnn Miller

One of the most common requests we get from our students is for *slang*. Unfortunately, many of us--both native and non-native teachers--don't feel qualified to teach the up-to-date slang our students want. Non-native teachers are often not sure exactly how slang expressions should be used and native-speakers (especially those who are distanced from current usage by age or time out of the States) don't always know current slang. We hear it on the television and in songs; we read it in books, but in reality we don't use it. Even if we understand what is being said, we aren't confident enough to use it sufficiently in class to fulfill our students' desires.

Street Talk is a book that can help both students and teachers get up-to-date. It is a part of a series of books dealing with slang in various languages (There are French and Spanish versions as well). A second volume (*Street Talk 2: Slang used by teens, rappers, surfers and popular American television shows*) has recently come out.

This volume consists of ten different lessons dealing with common situations (*At School, At the Party, At the Mall, etc.*). Each lesson begins with a cartoon illustrating part of the vocabulary to be presented. This is followed by a dialog including many slang expressions. It is then repeated again in a standard English version. Here is a fragment of the conversation from the first unit (*At School*): (p. 2-3)

Dialogue in Slang

Anne: You seem really **ticked off**. **What's up?**
Peggy: Just **Get out of my face**, would you?
Anne: **Chill out! What's eating you**, anyway?
Peggy: Sorry. It's just that I think I **blew the final** and now my parents are going to get all **bent our of shape**. I **like** totally **drew a blank** on everything!

Translation of dialogue in standard English

Anne: You seem really **angry**. **What's the matter?**
Peggy: Just **leave me alone**, alright?!
Anne: **Relax! What's the matter with you**, anyway?
Peggy: Sorry. It's just that I think I **failed the final examination** and now my parents are going to get all **upset**. I, **uh**, **couldn't think of any of the answers!**

After the standard English gloss, the conversation is written as it would be spoken: (p. 4)

Anne: You seem really **tict off**. **What's up?**
Peggy: Jus' **ged oudda my face**, would ja?
Anne: **Chill out! What's eatin' you**, anyway?
Peggy: Sorry. It's jus' thad I think I **blew the final'n** now my parents'r gonna ged all **ben' oudda shape**. I **like** todally **drew a blank** on ev'rything.

There is also a cassette available which can be helpful when utilized with the written texts. After the various versions of each conversation, there is a glossary section which defines the terms previously presented. Besides the definitions, relevant notes, synonyms, antonyms and examples are included.

get out of someone's face (to) *exp.* to leave someone alone • *get outta my face! I'm busy!*; Leave me alone! I'm busy!

→ SYNONYM: **to get lost** *esp.* • *Get lost*; Leave me alone!

→ ANTONYM: **to hang [out] with someone** *exp.* to spend time with someone (and do nothing in particular) • *I'm going to hand [out] with Debbie today*; I'm going to spend time with Debbie today.

NOTE: (1) A common shortened version of this expression is "*to hang with someone.*"

NOTE: (2) The expression "*to hang (out)*" is commonly used to mean, "to do nothing in particular." • *Why don't you go without me? I'm just going to stay here and hang (out) today*; Why don't you go without me? I'm just going to stay here and do nothing in particular.

Once the vocabulary has been presented and explained, there are a series of exercises allowing students to practice what they have seen. In general, these exercises are not communicative but do give students practice through multiple choice and matching type drills.

The next section of each lesson is entitled *A Closer Look*. Here students are given more vocabulary used in slang expressions (i.e., fruits and vegetables,

How do you like them apples, body parts, *birdbrain*, colors, *Catch someone red-handed*, proper names, *no way*, *José*) and the first unit offers a very clear explanation of how contractions (really phonetic reductions) are used in slang.

Standard	Common Contraction	Example	Notes
should not have	shouldn'a	You shouldn'a done that.	
some	s'm	Want s'm breakfast?	
what do you	what cha or what chya or wuddy'a	What cha/What chya/Wuddy'a doing?	When wuddy'a is pronounced as two syllables, <i>wud'dya</i> , it becomes past tense. When pronounced as three syllables, <i>wud'dy'a</i> , it changes to present tense. This subtle difference is easily detected by any native-born American.

These *Closer Looks* are also followed by exercises. Answers to all exercises appear at the back of the book, a fact that makes this book useful for independent study.

At the end of each lesson, there is a brief section called *Just for Fun* which presents a paragraph including some of the slang which was just studied, together with a translation into standard English. And at the end of the book there is a glossary of all the slang expression presented in all the dialogues.

While this book works best at an intermediate level, it is possible to simplify the conversations for lower level students. Also, teachers should be warned that while no really "dirty words" are included, some of the dialogues are a bit crude and sexist and should be used with care.

So, why don't you make a bee line for the nearest bookstore and check this book out. Don't stop to grab a bite, hit the road and in no time flat you'll get into slang in a big way.