

What Does Dave Barry Know?

DAVE BARRY, THE CELEBRATED HUMOR COLUMNIST for the *Miami Herald*, reported this in his June 29, 2003, column: A few days before, he had found himself stopped in his car at a stoplight when a 1964 or 1965 Skyline Blue Pontiac GTO convertible, top down, pulled up alongside him.

Seeing this car and hearing its rumbling engine reminded Mr. Barry that the car he was driving was “boring.” In fact, he related, every car he’d owned in the past two decades was boring and he could barely remember anything about them.

At this point in his story, searching for a readily understandable comparison to convey the full extent of how dull his car was, he wrote that his current car had the personality of a pension actuary. Because of this he named his car “The Actuary.”

Now, I’m picturing Dave Barry driving his nondescript, dependable but boring car around Miami with the words “The Actuary” stenciled on his driver’s side door, and I’m thinking: Babe Magnet.

You ladies out there tell me if this isn’t the way it would work: You’re at the crosswalk when Dave Barry drives up and stops for the light. Your eyes quickly pass over his car. It’s boring and provides no distraction until you notice, in quotes, “The Actuary” stenciled on the driver’s side door in a gold script lettering.

Your thoughts are confused, and you flush with excitement. Yes, excitement! You’re not bored! You’ve never seen anything like that before. The last car that truly turned you on was the General Lee. (For those of you too young to have been turned on by the General Lee, it’s the red 1969 Dodge Charger from the “Dukes of Hazzard” television series.)

Anyway, you finally look up at the man behind the wheel and your first thought on seeing his face and looking into his eyes is: He’s not Bo Duke, and I sure as heck hope he’s not a *pension actuary*.

Reading Between the Lines

At first I thought (and this is only a presumption from reading between the lines) that Dave Barry thinks actuaries in general are boring and that *pension* actuaries are

the most boring of all. But then I thought, hey, Dave Barry is a humor columnist. What he really thinks is that actuaries are funny and that pension actuaries are the funniest actuaries of all. After all, if he were just

looking for boring, he would have named his car “Jell-O.” “Brown Jell-O” would have been even better.

Also, if you read the story carefully, Dave Barry clearly uses the word “boring” to mean unexciting in a dependable sort of way. And that’s not bad—at least not for a pension actuary. In fact, if you’re a pension actuary, it would be pretty good to have the reputation of being boring in a dependable sort of way.

So thank you, Dave Barry, for bringing this to the public’s attention. It seems to me that pension actuaries

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have gotten two well-deserved compliments out of this. They’re dependably boring, and they’re funny. They can’t lose either way. Both traits will serve them well in serious situations—both work and play.

In fact, given how widely read Dave Barry is, his column could end up adding useful and helpful phrases to our language and make “pension actuary” a common, everyday term. For example, at the company picnic some wacko from accounting tries to pin the blame on you for sitting on the bag of potato chips he left on the cooler. Your response (“I’m a pension actuary!”) gives you enough time to make sure there are no grease stains on your shorts. And the careful intonation of your voice leaves the distinct impression that if he doesn’t start pointing his finger someplace else—and soon, buddy—it could be a long time before he sees any accrued benefits.

Another example: You find yourself tapped for a bit of trivia. “How much water should a normal person drink

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every day?" you're asked.

There are two ways to go on this. You could say: "Who do you think I am, a pension actuary?" Meaning: "You've asked the wrong guy. I don't store useless bits of trivia in my head like some people we know. I've got better things to do than be your boring encyclopedia."

Or you could be a pension actuary and, with economy of speech brought on by years of study and practice, you could say: "One flush." Meaning: six to eight cups per day.

Anyway, there are endless possibilities. But let's get back to that GTO.

Back to the GTO

It was Skyline Blue. Sitting next to Dave Barry was a hot and exciting 1964 Pontiac GTO convertible, rumbling and drawing attention to itself and away from him. And it made both him and his nondescript automobile feel like pension actuaries.

Surprisingly, it was *not* Marimba Red Metallic. It was *not* Grenadier Red. It was *not* Singapore Gold Metallic. It was *not* even Aquamarine Metallic, a color that in the wrong light might be mistaken for

light blue. It was Skyline Blue!

I'm sorry, but that's just not a cool color on a hot car. OK, it's a 39-year-old classic car with more muscle than normally drives off the lot today, and it could make any color cool. But, still, you've got to ask yourself: Who puts Skyline Blue on a Pontiac GTO convertible, for heaven's sake—even back in 1964?

The 1964 Pontiac GTO had a choice of 15 exterior body colors. That in itself is exciting. You don't get that range of choice today. The Toyota 4Runner I just bought (now that's an exciting car, at least when you take it off road) comes in only nine colors.

You'll have to trust me on this. Of all the 15 body colors you could have your Pontiac GTO painted (I've seen them all), Skyline Blue is the most boring. And, to eliminate all possible objection to this conclusion, let me point out that I am an actuary and I ought to know boring when I see it.

In fact, the frosting on the cake is that you can't get a Toyota 4Runner in light blue. I don't think you can get any car made today in light blue, or if you can

nobody buys them. The reason is it's a boring color. I can't overemphasize that fact.

Oh, the Irony!

In a flash, it hit me. Dave Barry was sitting, at that light, dwarfed by excitement, and likening his boring car to a pension actuary—all because it was an actual *pension actuary*, living his dream, who drove up in that Skyline Blue Pontiac GTO convertible and stopped beside him.

It makes sense, doesn't it? I don't have to check Florida motor vehicle records and match them against the directory to know what I know.

The guy's about Dave Barry's age. He's probably made enough from his consulting practice to spend a little time in Florida and actually likes it there. And, c'mon, the guy drives a *Skyline Blue* Pontiac GTO convertible. That's why that color exists—to take just a little bit of the edge off of an exciting car so that pension actuaries can feel more comfortable.

Personally, I've opted for a much darker shade of blue.

But then, I'm not a pension actuary. ●