## Whom Ya Gonna Call?

If there's somethin' strange in your neighborhood Who ya gonna call?

—The Rasmus, Ghostbusters

*Whom.* You can't say the word without sounding snooty. As soon as your lips close on the uncool *m*, your nose tilts up.

Imagine a group of rockers walking out on stage, announcing themselves as (watch their noses) The Whom. Visualize Dr. Seuss sitting at his typewriter, writing about (again the nose) all the Whoms in Whomville. Picture Abbott and Costello standing at their microphones doing Whom's on First.

Silly, I know. The point is that *whom*, the word itself—right or wrong—offends some people's sensibilities.

"Who's she calling *offended*?" I can practically hear people whispering. <sup>44</sup> Even talking about the word *whom* feels somehow impolite. Presumptuous. Un-American. Dropping the *m* has become a form of cultural sensitivity, an expression of democratic values, a way of saying, "We're in this together." If you and I were created equal, common usage seems to say, why shouldn't *who* and *whom* be equal too?

But *who* and *whom* are no more interchangeable than you and I. Ignoring this truth (which is apparently not held to be self-evident) doesn't make it less true.

How do you know which term is correct? More to the point for the *whom*-averse, when is it safe to use *who*?

<sup>44.</sup> If you wonder about the *who* in "Who's she calling offended?" come back to this question when you finish reading this chapter.

Word Up!

Try this. In the split second before you say *who*, think *he*. If *he* works, *who* works. But if your *he* needs the *m* in *him*, then your *who* needs an *m* too.

Think of it this way:

who = he

(Both pronouns are in the nominative case.)

whom = him

(Both pronouns are in the objective case.)

## Example:

You want to ask this: Who did you walk with?

You do the *he* test: *He* did you walk with?

You flip the words around for more natural phrasing: Did you

walk with he? (Ugh.)

You swap in him: Did you walk with him? (Yes.)

You realize you could ask this: Whom did you walk with?

Or this: With whom did you walk?

With practice, your brain flies through these steps. You simply know. Who cares? Often no one. Take Twitter. How many tweeple do you suppose complain about the phrase *Who to Follow* in their menu bar? This gaffe probably bothers only a fraction of the millions of people who use this site every day.

Hold on. A fraction of millions. That could be a lot of bothered people.

No one says that you have to use the *m* word. If you don't want to, don't. George Thorogood would never have hit the charts with a song called "Whom Do You Love?" But think before you use *who* as a substitute. Many people know the difference. Who knows when one of them is listening?