



The Word Detective: Searching for the Meaning of It All at the Oxford English Dictionary

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Can you drink a glass of balderdash? What do you call the part of a dog's back it can't scratch? And if, serendipitously, you find yourself in Serendip, then where exactly are you?

The answers to all of these questions—and a great many more—can be found in the pages of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the definitive record of the English language. And there is no better guide to the dictionary's many wonderments than the former chief editor of the *OED*, John Simpson. Simpson spent almost four decades of his life immersed in the intricacies of our language, and guides us through its history with charmingly laconic wit. In *The Word Detective*, an intensely personal memoir and a joyful celebration of English, he weaves a story of how words come into being (and sometimes disappear), how culture shapes the language we use, and how technology has transformed not only the way we speak and write but also how words are made.

Throughout, he enlivens his narrative with lively excavations and investigations of individual words—from *deadline* to *online* and back to *101* (yes, it's a word)—all the while reminding us that the seemingly mundane words (can you name the four different meanings of *ma*?) are often the most interesting ones. But Simpson also reminds us of the limitations of language: spending his days in the *OED*'s house of words, his family at home is forced to confront the challenges of wordlessness.

A brilliant and deeply humane expedition through the world of words, *The Word Detective* will delight and inspire any lover of language.

The Word Detective: Searching for the Meaning of It All at the Oxford English Dictionary Details

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Cat. says

What a fun read! If you're a word nerd and love the OED, you will enjoy this trip through the life of a former editor of The Dictionary, who was there as it went from dusty file drawers full of cards to its current life online.

Plus, the fun of etymology interspersed among the stories--random words and where they came from and squee! fangirl!

I really love words.

Heather Browning says

On the surface, an autobiography from an editor of the OED doesn't sound particularly compelling, but Simpson is a good storyteller, and funny, so his discussion of his work, and digressions into the history of various words, never becomes dull. I also appreciated the perspective on the importance and inevitability of language change, a nice counterpoint to the apparent gatekeepers who seem determined to lock English forever in the state it was in at some arbitrary point in time.

Cheryl says

In this case the title is accurate, the subtitle & blurb misleading. More narrative memoir, not enough nerdy wordy tidbits. I'm paging through the darn thing but finding few passages that catch my eye.

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But hey, that's just me. There is some wit, some nuggets... now that I'm done I can safely say that if you want to read this, I'll support your choice. But I won't recommend.

Andrea says

This book has made me half-seriously consider what it would take to give up on librarianship and pursue lexicography as a career instead. I'm sure I won't, but damn if it doesn't sound right up my alley. Simpson takes us from his early days of almost stumbling into a job at the OED in the 1970s, back when they were collecting words on index cards, up through his time as chief editor, leading the massive undertaking of converting the whole publication to an online format and beginning a comprehensive update that is still ongoing today.

He gives an overview of the OED's history, as well as a look at the everyday work of a lexicographer and how that work has changed with the advent of electronic databases and the internet. In true word-nerd fashion, he also singles out individual words here and there for brief asides discussing interesting facets of their meaning, usage, or history. And in each chapter, he devotes some space to discussing his family and life outside of work. These sections seemed tacked-on, and while his experiences raising a special-needs

daughter could also have been interesting, not enough information is given to really draw the reader in. He seems to be going for a sort of thematic tie-in, pointing out the irony of having a career so focused on words while having a daughter who is nonverbal, but this discussion doesn't really go anywhere.

The rest of the book is an absolute delight, though. It's both fascinating and well-written; not surprisingly, Simpson has a facility with language that makes for well-crafted and eminently readable text. The tone is intelligent but conversational, with periodic glimpses of humor -- usually dry, often self-deprecating, very British. Obviously, not everyone is the sort of nerd who wants a behind-the-scenes look at writing a dictionary, but if language is your nerd-catnip, then you should definitely give this book a try.

thefourthvine says

I thought maybe every book by a lexicographer would give me the same hit of joy as Kory Stamper's *Word by Word*, so I picked up this book. It handily proved that theory wrong.

My biggest problem with this book was the author, John Simpson, or, as he came to be known in my house, That Fucking Guy. He describes how he became a lexicographer in the first chapter — he went to York to read English because a teacher picked out the school for him (he hadn't even read the prospectus), then applied to the OED because his then-girlfriend Hilary found the ad and picked out the job for him. He was totally unqualified and utterly unprepared for his interview, in which he chatted a little bit about Tolkien with the chief editor of the OED, and didn't get offered the job. He just went back to school and waited. Six months later, the OED offered him a different, better job. He'd applied to one job and been through one job interview, ever. And his whole career is like that. He's basically the definition of a mediocre white man achieving above his abilities, and it makes his ascent through the ranks read like a Gilbert and Sullivan song — he polished up that handle so carefully that now he is chief editor of the dictionary! (Sorry for the broken meter.)

So I was biased. But Simpson didn't do a lot to help me past that, either. His narrative voice is flat and lackluster most of the time, and when it isn't, it's patronizing. He's got a lot of “more alert readers will notice [extremely obvious thing]” and “did you notice [extremely obvious thing]? If not, that's why you're not a lexicographer.” He also works very hard to make it clear that he doesn't love words, or love lexicography, or indeed love anything except possibly his family — he's not enthusiastic! Really! Just an average chap who happened to be chief editor of the OED. And really, isn't an interest in words a bit — *declassé*? Come on, John boy. You wrote a book about the OED and I'm reading it, so I think we can both dispense with the pretense that we aren't interested in words, yes? Well, I could, anyway. Simpson is still out there looking down on everyone who admits to an interest in words and doesn't get paid for it.

Also, Simpson honestly doesn't seem to know what kind of book he's writing. Is it a personal memoir? If so, it needed to have more personal history in it — ideally enough to make the reader know and like him. As it is, he includes just enough personal detail to make it weird. Is it a history of his time at the dictionary? If so, it needed to have more information about other people at the dictionary and the day-to-day life of a lexicographer and chief editor of the OED. He does include a lot of that, but his laser-like focus on himself does rather give the impression that he and his buddy Ed were pretty much solely responsible for every aspect of the dictionary for thirty years, and was only an occasional helper at that. Is it a memoir about being the word-focused father of a disabled, wordless daughter? If so, the book needed a heart, plus a lot more about Ellie, his younger daughter, and his home life. Is it a book about interesting words? If so, it needed more than just the occasional section on a word. Instead, the book is sort of all of these things, and sort of

none of them. It's awkward.

But there were aspects of this book I did enjoy. The thing I appreciated most was that it made it clear to me what the OED is, and why it's never been especially useful to me. I need, in my working life, an up-to-date dictionary that is about today's usage. The OED is presented in this book as a perennially out of date dictionary about historical usage, but the reality seems to be that it's more of an academic journal about the history of English words — one where, until recently, the editors made the mistake of trying to do almost all the research themselves. So of course the OED has definitions that haven't been updated since 1914! Of course it is always massively behind schedule! Of course it's unavailable without an expensive subscription! It's a prestige academic journal. (But now, at least, they do actively solicit contributions from experts who don't work for the OED — just don't expect to get paid or credited.)

And the word information and history is interesting, because words always are. I'll admit to believing that, even though it makes me a pathetic tryhard keener in the author's view.

Laura Jean says

A fascinating memoir from the Chief Editor of the OED. He describes the transition from print to computers and how this impacted the ways in which we can study language. Along the way he explains the evolution of several words and phrases. A very enjoyable read

Elizabeth K. says

This was charming, in large part because it was very British. I'm of an age where I remember when it was NEWS that the OED was going to become available in an electronic form, meaning available on disks, for libraries. Our author was the editor who oversaw this process, and that feat is at the center of this book, although it's also a memoir as well about how he first came to the OED and the things he learned about its original assembly, process of revisions, and its impact on the culture at large. He's very entertaining and tells a good story. People who like the history of information as a concept might be more interested in the detailed parts of how a dictionary moves from analog to digital, but even if that's not so intriguing, there are plenty of anecdotes and word histories interspersed throughout.

I'm not sure this would be a good choice for a person with absolutely no pre-existing interest in dictionaries or the evolution of English (I'm sure I don't know any of those people personally), but otherwise it's very cute and engaging and has lots of neat facts about words.

My only disappointment is that there weren't photographs.

Melanie says

Fun book detailing the author's adventure of a career as an editor of the OED. I especially enjoyed the beginning of the book about how he stumbled into the job in the first place, and his first impressions of editing the OED. It was also satisfying to read the journey of the OED from a multi-volume print edition through to the online version. I'm not sure how successful the word blurb tangents were as far as reading

experience goes, but they did give insight and examples that illustrated the mind of a lexicographer, which is I think what he intended.

Warwick says

I suppose this is as good a review as any to come clean about my addiction to lexicography.

Like a lot of people, I first experimented at university. It began with an obsession over obscure words – I would roll a fat copy of *Ulysses*, digging out *anastomosis*, *boustrephodon* or *farraginous*, or cook up some Anthony Burgess in search of *furfur*, *hallux*, *ictal* or *margaric*. Before I knew it, I was mainlining Will Self, Guy Davenport and Thomas Pynchon, the highs of sequipedalianism (as I would doubtless then have called it) pulling me through even the most turgid of plots.

But the adolescent appeal of showy, ten-dollar terms like *dolichophallic* or *eutripsia* soon wanes. The real thrill, I soon worked out, is in unpicking the definitions of seemingly-familiar words. Reading Spenser was a watershed. Consider a line like *Shortly unto the wastefull woods she came, / Whereas she found the Goddesses with her crew*. At first glance there's nothing obvious that you need to look up. But wait – *wastefull* here clearly doesn't mean what is usually means, which is to do with wasting resources. Sure enough, checking a good dictionary will show that an earlier meaning is 'uninhabited, desolate': that's obviously what Spenser had in mind.

Another example from *The Faerie Queene*: *He lookt askew with his mistrustfull eyes, / And nicely trode, as thornes lay in his way*. Most people would read this without difficulty, but how many would grasp that *nicely* means 'carefully, fastidiously'? Or that when he talks about someone being *cherished*, he means that they're being cheered up? Or that when someone *mainly* does something, it means they are doing it forcefully or vigorously? That *preventing* something means outdoing it?

This was a whole new obsession. It changed the way I read books completely. Once you're tuned in to an older text, you start to realise that in almost every sentence there's a common word that 'feels' somehow wrong, and usually this is because its meaning has shifted over time, either subtly or quite dramatically. It was for predominantly linguistic reasons that I first read Robert Burton, Folio's translation of Montaigne, Francis Bacon, Sir Thomas Browne, Malory, Chaucer, or *Beowulf*. Come for the archaic verb inflections, stay for the artistry.

To describe all this, I got involved with the website Wiktionary, the dictionary counterpart to Wikipedia. It is terrifying to think of how many hours I have poured into that bloody site. (My wife once asked pointedly if I had worked on the definition of *divorce*.) I see that since I joined in 2005, I've edited more than 40,000 entries there and created well over 12,000 new ones. And the really involving, rewarding work was never the 'weird' words but the common ones – like *of*.

But that's just a hobby. John Simpson has made a living out of this kind of investigation into how words are used, how their meaning changes, and how quickly a dictionary needs to work to keep up. It was under his stewardship that the *Oxford English Dictionary* launched its incredible, fully-revised third edition, which began appearing in 2000 and is currently perhaps one-third of the way through, with more updates appearing online every quarter. It is truly vast, and will probably never appear in print, for ecological reasons if nothing else.

The OED is certainly now the best dictionary of any language in the world. In fact browsing the new entries convinces you of what a gigantic feat of scholarship it is – and that's because, as Simpson illustrates in this memoir, lexicography is above all a matter of deep and thorough archival research. The OED bases all of its definitions on citation evidence – it gathers together a load of examples of a word in use, and then tries to summarise what exactly it means in context. The citations are there in the entry so you can see for yourself. (This is in contrast to some other dictionaries, which first decide what a word means or should mean, and then conclude that people who use it differently are using it 'wrong'.) So digging out and collating these historical examples is an enormous undertaking (and one of the many things that has been revolutionised by the internet).

This is particularly important with new words, whose eligibility for inclusion is a common point of contention for lexicographers (and their critics). The OED has an informal rule that a word should be attested over ten years before it can go in, to weed out flash-in-the-pan coinages. But with the online updates, this still allows for a dictionary that's extremely up-to-date – this year alone, amid the hundreds of older and more technical inclusions, the OED has added entries for things like *glamping*, *bro-hug*, *sideboob* and *YOLO*.

This is turning into an unwanted essay on why the OED is the greatest 'book' the world has ever produced (which it is – I've looked at it nearly every day of my life for the last twenty years). Suffice to say that Simpson takes you amiably enough through the story of how this beast of English scholarship has struggled, slowly but successfully, to keep up with and take advantage of the technological revolution to stay at the front of its field.

There is not much else to it – he attempts to maintain a kind of background story of his family life, but without much conviction. If you're not really into dictionaries, there's probably not a lot for you here. Though it is nice to learn that he once got performance poet Benjamin Zaphaniah into the office to gyrate in front of him and his team, so they could write an accurate description of *skanking*:

Stuff like that can still give me a pretty good high.

Audra says

This is by far the nerdiest book I have ever read but I absolutely adored it. If you are at all interested in words and the development of language or if you are curious about how dictionaries are made, then this is definitely the book for you

Kate Precious says

In many ways, it's a shame that this book will immediately appeal mainly to those who already have an interest in lexicography or etymology. This is because, while naturally of interest to the already converted, this book has the power to convert those who didn't know they were interested!

Both well-written (as you'd expect) and surprisingly entertaining, this book is an enjoyable read both for the

etymological content and the personal story underlying it. I thoroughly recommend it.

Jessica says

AM read-aloud, Karst pick. The house was quite divided on this one; a memoir written by the former chief editor to the Oxford English Dictionary. Karst gave it 4 stars and really found it interesting, and thought Mr. Simpson did a great job balancing the history of the dictionary, historical linguistic approaches, detailed asides about individual words, technological effects on an old institution, and personal and professional memoir. (I agree!) Meanwhile, Lena gave it only 1.5 stars. She groaned nearly every time I cracked it open, and found it slow-moving and dry. She's not really wrong, either. The story of a nearly 40-year career in dictionary editing does not make for many edge-of-your-seat thrills. But still, she heard the whole thing, and hopefully a little bit sunk in; if she now has a little more appreciation for the history behind everyday words, another exposure a different kind of idiosyncratic passion, that's fine by me.

Victor Sonkin says

This is a nice memoir of the chief editor of OED, interspersed with some brief essays about some words. I was shocked to read (I'm not even sure I understood it correctly) that the author's wife skipped through them, reading everything else; they are so much better than the rest of the book that I'm simply speechless. The author understands his limitations (almost) well enough, and as a history of one of the most important books in the English-speaking world (or at least a part of its history) it's quite okay.

Rick says

A book about words, and a memoir about bringing the Oxford English Dictionary into the 21st Century. I enjoyed the author's many discussions of words and phrases more than the technical aspects of putting together the dictionary. That got a bit too much into the weeds for me. If you're a word fan, go on YouTube and search for Balderdash and Piffle, a short BBC series about selected words and phrases that exemplify the book's discussions.

Sherri says

Pedantic, funny and ideal for anyone who is curious about words and language. Simpson chronicles the transition of the intimidating OED through decades, from print to online. There are details about the politics and inner workings of Oxford, a small world of its own. He gives a brief overview of the history of the dictionary, its traditions and methodology. Most of these elements remained the same for over 100 years and the ability of the archives and staff to maintain this is staggering.

He casually throws out random words and follows the origin and first known appearance of the word, how it changed and was added to the dictionary. This was how I learned the burpee was named for the sadist who invented it and a new definition of "skank," a word I believed I knew but apparently didn't. He also deals deftly with the most infamous four letter word and how the staff added new definitions and quotations to

words that were unchanged since the beginning of the last century.

Simpson adds personal details, how he got an entry level position and became the editor. He also tells the story of his young family including a disabled daughter but does so briefly and without changing the course of the book to his personal life. Simpson seems a little embarrassed to turn away from the dictionary to personal details, but that is likely because he's a quiet person and doesn't want pity.

The work that goes into updating, creating and dealing with deadlines isn't as bucolic as some readers might imagine reading and doing research in such a venerable institution. Simpson even discourages readers, showing that good lexicographers tend to be logical and problem solvers rather than dreamy readers who love words for the sake of words.
