



Red Herrings and White Elephants

Albert Jack

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Bold as brass, cold feet, cock and bull, off the cuff, red herrings and white elephants. We use these phrases every day and yet have only the vaguest idea of where many of them come from. The origins of hundreds of common phrases are explained in this irreverent journey through the most fascinating and richest regions of the English language. Once you've read one, you'll be diving back in to look up all the others. Red Herrings is full of amazing definitions that take us all over the world, including military traditions and famous people who lent their names to describe familiar situations. From the drop of a hat to the bitter end - you'll never speak English in the same way again.

Red Herrings and White Elephants Details

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From Reader Review Red Herrings and White Elephants for online ebook

Andrew says

Ok first off this is hard work to read in one go - there are multiple entries giving you the suggested background to many well used idioms - now be warned this was written by a British author so many of the phrases though international in origin are heavily used (as I found out when I showed a few entries to a German colleague at work) they are not all internationally recognised. However it is great fun seeing which entries I knew (ok i am sad i admit it) and guessed right their origins and others I was very surprised! All in all a great book and one I can see myself dipping in to time and again in the future.

wally says

somewhere here, i believe, i saw this book/writing/words and took note. i am now tending to it and i enjoy it...a kind of look-see at idiom...so many that are nautical, which is nice. beep beep.

this makes a good bathroom reader...early morning...or whenever you are regular.

lots of interesting stuff here...lots of history...stuff you might read in the oed only more info here. where word phrases came from.

big thumbs up.

i especially liked the red herrings thingy...as apparently, there were...fox-lovers, for lack of a better word, way back when....and white elephants...because that was the title of my first novel, one that i lost on greyhound...or greyhound lost for me...and paid me \$32601 for....

yay! boy howdy!

it was my zip code at the time. yes.

see...i had to submit some form for the lost luggage--my seabag, may it do you fine--and the end result of my calculations....\$200 and some odd dollars for holy shorts, a poor selection of xmas presents (sue me, or confine me to hell) and some odds and ends...i assigned no dollar amount to my manuscript...

long and short is...the white elephants resides, i suspect, in fort knox..as that was one of two possible likelys the bus passed through...

all hail our men in uniform...they can do no wrong...but when a jar full of pennies in a seabag tempts them...all bets are off. I hope the subsequent cutting of the lock lead to at least a couple free beers for

some...circa...sheesh, when was it? 1986? yes.

reagonomics. no double dippers.

Deborah J Miles says

A wonderful reference book giving the meanings behind so many of the phrases we use every day, and some that have gone out of fashion.

Sara says

This book is a great quick read that explains the origins of several popular sayings. I learned a great deal about how language evolves through these phrases, and even learned a few new British sayings. I now only hope that I can remember and repeat the origins of these phrases during conversations in order to sound intelligent and witty.

Sam Ang says

The full review is available in the following link:
<http://bookunderthesun.blogspot.sg/20...>

What does either a Red Herring (a false or misleading clue) or a White Elephant (something useless, usually pointing to public buildings, that becomes a burden, much like our country's facilities...) has anything to do with their respective meanings? Just as the foreword of the book implied, such sayings are part and parcel of the everyday English and most native speakers are familiar with them, seldom giving them a thought.

Tracing the phrases to their origins is hard work but Jack's effort revealed that most of them originated from interesting, if not unexpected, sources. Not all of the provided sources and origins are clear since most of them have evolved over the years, with their roots lost in time. In cases which the root is ambiguous, the author is nice enough to mention that, bringing up the most plausible, and in some cases the funniest, origin which he thought most likely.

It is interesting to note that most of the sayings do not even originate from the English language, and are cobbled up from Anglo-Saxon, Latin, Greek, French, Swedish, Norse (when it's raining cats and dogs or when someone went berserk), Hindustani (when someone has gone Doolally), Jewish (when you tell someone to eat his heart out) and even Gaelic (when you declared something as phoney), just to name a few.

I believe reading this book is a better way to learn the language rather than memorizing them until your brain could take no more. Pick a few of them and try to use them in your everyday conversation, if only to amuse your English speaking counterparts. You may even surprise them with a few which are rarely heard of.

Teachers of the language, especially one teaching ESL (English as a Second Language), would benefit from the book as well. At the first sign of boredom your class shows in an English course (you should be able to

notice the blank looks and nodding heads), swipe Red Herring and White Elephants out and start to ask them why certain phrases are so.

Choose the most ridiculous ones or ones which meaning is almost unrelated to its phrase (I think none will catch more attention than 'to swear on your testicles'). Entertain them with the origin and its story, and watch your students swarm to your class with expectation on the next class. That will drill the language into them better than any other method.

Having said that, do be careful of using the phrases found within Red Herring & White Elephants on everyone you converse with. Some of the phrases will sound a little ridiculous, and may sound offending, especially if your listener is not familiar with it, which most likely is the case in Malaysia. However the reader could always share the phrase with native speakers of English to see if they are amused, enlightened or pleasantly surprised by you uttering it like you had spoken it all your life.

Iva says

The only thing I didn't like about this book is that it should have included some sort of bibliography. It claims to be based on 'painstaking research', and certainly many explanations ring true, but how do we know if some cock and bull/shaggy dog stories haven't slipped through the cracks? But I'm nitpicking. The book is very entertaining and also great for non-native English speakers as each idiom's meaning is explained. In a nutshell, it's the cat's whiskers!

Ann says

Sadly disappointing - I love words and trivia and the concept really appealed to me. Unfortunately, this book contains way too many phrases I've never heard before, and many of the explanations are a let down (unnecessary, or based on folk stories). I started skipping some parts, but not even sure I'll get close to finishing it.

Janitag says

A lot of work was put into this and I found the whole book really interesting.

Not a "finish in one go from cover to cover" kind of book though, there's too much information for that.

Blake says

Starts off really well, entertaining and engaging. There are some great explanations about frequently used sayings in there. My favourites included "winning hands down" and "to be screwed."

But there was also a fair bit of what seemed like "filler" to me, and sometimes the explanations/descriptions

of the sayings didn't really shed much light on the origins at all or really weren't very interesting. I thought they could've whittled it down to the quality ones a bit more rather than trying to up the number of items but leaving the content a bit thin on the ground.

Monique says

Interesting book about the origins of common expressions. Useful as a reference and to demonstrate knowledge of trivia in social situations.

Maggie says

"A Battle Axe is a comic, if not offensive, term for belligerent and stubborn old woman. Its origins can be found in America and the early years of the women's rights movement. The phrase itself was originally meant as a rallying or war cry but backfired when the movement published a journal called "The Battle Axe" (to signify their resolve). Instead, the phrase was quickly used as a derogatory term for the domineering and hostile nature of the majority involved in that movement and as a reflection of what many, including less aggressive women, thought of its members."

Now, read that in a British accent, and imagine a whole book full of tidbits like that. Perfect for any 30 second increment you're looking to fill.

Norbert says

Not a sit-down and read cover to cover but a reference to phrases. If you overheard someone say he's "Dressed to Kill", you may conjure up a Ninja preparing to assassinate a dignitary. But it means "to suggest they are smart, fashionable and set to make a romantic conquest." Now I find out about the romantic conquest. Boy, have I been missing out all these years. I think I'll refer to it more often.

Red Herrings and White Elephants: The Origins of the Phrases We Use Every Day by Albert Jack

My rating: 4 of 5 stars

Not a sit-down and read cover to cover but a reference to phrases. If you overheard someone say he's "Dressed to Kill", you may conjure up a Ninja preparing to assassinate a dignitary. But it means "to suggest they are smart, fashionable and set to make a romantic conquest." Now I find out about the romantic conquest. Boy, have I been missing out all these years. I think I'll refer to it more often.

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S Prakash says

It was quite interesting to get to know the roots of some of the idioms and phrases. The way some of them had originated were quite baffling. As who could have thought that the the word salary was derived from Salt..

One of them If a person is **Not Worth His Salt** they are regarded as not good at their job and not worth the wages. During the days of Roman Empire salt was an expensive commodity and soldiers were actually paid partly in salt, which they carried in leather pouches. this payment was known as **Salarium**, from the latin word 'Sal' meaning salt. The modern words for wages, 'salary', also originates from this source.

It was time worth spending. Recommended for all of the word smiths and etymologists..

Nine says

Sehr hilfreich und mit typisch britischem Humor erklärt.

Sarah Tipper says

I was sometimes surprised at the origins of phrases, having made my own (wrong) assumptions. This is a pleasant book best suited to those who like history or linguistics and very suited to those who like history and linguistics.
