



The Accidental Dictionary: The Remarkable Twists and Turns of English Words

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Our everyday language is full of surprises; its origins are stranger than you might think. Any word might be knocked and buffeted, subjected to twists and turns, expansions and contractions, happy and unhappy accidents. There are intriguing tales behind even the most familiar terms, and they can say as much about the present as they do the past.

Busking, for instance, originally meant *piracy*. *Grin* meant to *snarl*. A *bimbo* was a *man*; *nice* meant *ignorant*; *glamor* was *magic*, and a *cupboard* was a *table*. *Buxom* used to mean *obedient*; a *cloud* was a *rock*; *raunchy* originally meant *dirty*.

Focusing on one hundred surprising threads in the evolution of English, *The Accidental Dictionary* reveals the etymological origins and quirky developments that have led to the meanings we take for granted today. It is a weird and wonderful journey into words.

So, let's revel in its randomness and delight in its diversity—our dictionary is indeed accidental.

The Accidental Dictionary: The Remarkable Twists and Turns of English Words Details

Date : Published October 3rd 2017 by Pegasus Books (first published October 2017)

ISBN : 9781681775692

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Format : Hardcover 224 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Humanities, Language, Linguistics, History, Writing



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Laurel says

In principal this book sounded like a good one for word nerds. Although I appreciated the explanation of why we have the words we do, some of the writing was repetitive. I felt the end sentence after each word can have been revised, as they consistently centered on some extent to "this is how we know the word today." I also wanted to know more of why the author chose to write about these words, how he researched their path into our modern language. If you want to understand more of how words evolve over time, this book is a good start.

Lindsay says

Very interesting. I've always wondered how and why words shift in meaning, and this book does a good job of explaining that in its examples. I've often thought that the problem with time travel would be that you would be using words in a way that isn't understood by the people in that time. This book is confirmation of that. LOL

Joshua says

History is the discourse about the events of the past, and alongside etymology there is no other study that probes into the way language and society changes. The Accidental Dictionary then is for any reader who can and does appreciate the way our language alters over time, and how culture can both influence and be influenced by said language. Paul Anthony Jones has written an approachable, wonderful book that allows the reader to dig, or even simply dip their toe, into the vast network of language and see for themselves how the words we use everyday are not simply abstract representations.

Words are real breathing individuals with complex pasts and histories, and the beauty of a book like this is that it allows us to step back from language and truly reflect on it. Because language is so intuitive it's easy to take words for granted; to simply use words to communicate and then move on. But the Accidental Dictionary asks more from the reader. Jones's book is an invitation to really reflect on the fact that words have a real power and place in our world, and therefore we should take the time to consider the historical, cultural, psychological, economical, and philosophical weight to them.

Anyone can use words, but only a few will take the time consider that the pencil their using on their exam use to mean paintbrush, or penis depending on the situation.

Nick Bateman says

A lovely mixed bag of etymological oddities. Fun to dip into for short, sharp blasts of word origins. Most of which I have in turn been boring my class with, the morning after having read. Recommended for anyone

interested in how the English language evolves.

Dee Eisel says

It took me a few days to read this, in part because of work being really intense and health trying to outdo work. Nevertheless, it's a quick and fun read and I adored it. It's not for children, but language-loving teens and adults will have a great time with it!

Jones takes a selection of common words in everyday use and shows how they not only don't mean what they originally meant, but some mean the exact opposite and some have less than nothing to do with their original meaning! While those who have paid attention to their Greek and Latin roots may not be surprised by those original meanings (such as that of *affiliate* for instance) some of them are actually stunning.

Jones has a warm sense of humor and clearly loves his topic. I would recommend this to anyone who likes language and isn't a prescriptivist. Don't miss it.

Arthur Graham says

As an armchair linguist, I've always been fascinated by the often quite obscure origins of our everyday words, marveling at the ways in which seemingly unconnected terms spring from the same etymology, the ways in which seemingly connected terms spring from different etymologies, and the common misconceptions and the sheer amount of guesswork behind word origins. In *The Accidental Dictionary*, Jones sets his focus on precisely this phenomena, tracing a selection of words from their origins in Latin and other ancient tongues all the way up through their present usage today.

Most of it was really quite interesting, and I learned a lot, but if you've been subscribed to dictionary.com's Word of the Day since forever like I have, parts of this dictionary are going to seem less mind-blowing than others. Still, I'd recommend it for an entertaining, educational and accessible read on the subject.

Erika says

Unfortunately, this book was not very interesting to me. I thought that many of the words chosen lacked any surprise or unusual factor. I also thought many of the paragraph descriptions could have been shortened to 1-2 sentences. I did not read it all and only read words that seemed to have a more unusual back story. I skipped things like "cupboard originally meant table" as that seems pretty obvious. Other I skipped: inmate, ostracism, and raunchy.

Paul says

The Accidental Dictionary – A surprising history of some of our words.

Paul Anthony Jones has once again written a book that tells us a surprising history of some well-known

words in the English language. He is already known as an expert etymologist and blogger on the English language and published widely on various books on the English language which have always been interesting and highly readable. The Accidental Dictionary is going to be another book that you will enjoy dipping in and out of, and make you sound like a word nerd when Johnson has done all the work for you.

Who knew that explode originally meant ‘to jeer a performer off a stage’ or fathom originally meant ‘to embrace’, Jones explains the original definition and how long that lasted before it changed in to its newer meaning in the English language.

Who knew that girl was originally a gender-neutral word that referred to girls AND boys, he also gives an example of how Chaucer mentioned it in the Canterbury Tales. Raunchy originally applied to anything was dirty or in bad shape, I suppose in a way it still does when used in the vernacular of today.

The Accidental Dictionary is a book that any word nerd would love to have and can impress people with their knowledge on the original meaning of words. This is a fantastic book, and I might go and drench someone in my local which is not a tiddlywink and when you have discovered what I meant I am sure you will be just as sad!

Nancy says

This was a solidly OK book. I thought I'd be more interested in etymology - maybe I didn't care about the words picked, or I haven't been in the right mood, or something - but I read a few and then skimmed through the rest. **I think this would be great as a coffee table book**, but I'll be returning it to the library and probably not thinking about it again.

Ron says

A pleasant enough little book about oddball etymology. the concept is that the current meaning of many words has strayed far from the meaning they had when they first entered the language. "Clue" (spelled "clew," originally meant ball of string; when "pencil" entered the language, users of the word meant what we would call a paintbrush, and so on.

A good book for bedtime reading: short entries, interesting enough information, clearly written, non-taxing, and easy to put down as eyes got heavy.

I won't remember many of the details, but I will be alert to situations when older uses of words seem to be implied.

Jessica says

A wonderfully fun and informative read! The author's style of writing is the style of nonfiction writing I love best, book educational, yet fun and very giggle-worthy to boot. I learned a great deal about the English

language and am extremely sad (i.e. satisfied) with my reading experience.

Kate says

I never thought I would see the day that I would be reviewing a dictionary. Dictionaries are books that live on the shelf, usually forgotten about and only ever used to win a game of scrabble or to settle an argument over the spelling or meaning of a word. With the advancements in modern technology, we no longer need to know how to spell, we have gadgetry that does that for us - be it smartphones, computers etc. But this dictionary is different, instead of the ubiquitous 'aardvark' at the beginning, we begin with the word 'affiliate' and explore the original use of the word all the way to the current uses in a light and carefree tone.

What struck me most about this book is the fact that some of the words contained within the beautifully designed covers are ones we use everyday and few of us know the true meanings of these words. Take for instance, 'fetish', it originally meant 'talisman', the author takes care to research the first uses of the word to ensure accuracy as well as making this a very interesting read. I particularly enjoyed 'Tiddlywink', 'Ragamuffin' and 'Refrigerator', words I would never have considered to have any other meaning than the ones we know of today.

This is the perfect book for fans of language, people who thrive on knowing the unique meanings of words, the origins and the history of phrases. I would thoroughly recommend this book, it's a fascinating read and one that you don't have to read all in one sitting to appreciate it. In fact, I dipped in and out of this one over the course of a week, reading a few entries at a time means you don't feel bogged down with information but still appreciate the time and work that went into this book. The writing is humorous, but clear and concise.

Probably one of my favourite books this year and one that I will be sure to return to many times.

Many thanks to Elliott & Thompson for the opportunity to read this book, all views are my own.

MiaJames says

This is an interesting book of random words and their histories. We all know that words change over time but the author has found some interesting historical backgrounds to common and uncommon words. I liked "myriad" and "man". Who knew that the old version of the word for man, "wer" survives in the word, "werewolf"? I have a few quibbles with author. People used ice boxes in their homes before refrigerators instead of ice houses. And neither ice boxes nor ice houses actually made ice. They were used to store ice. And nowadays, in baseball scoring a "hat trick" is striking out three times, instead of hitting three home runs in a game, although the older meaning still exists in dictionaries. There is also a terms for striking out four times, golden sombrero, used in scoring. But these are small issues. Since I have studied other languages it is interesting to see the relationship between English and the Latin-based languages after 1066 and the influences from other cultures in the period of world exploration.

Paul says

Words are chameleons, they start out meaning one thing, and being spelt in a particular way, and before you

know it the spelling has changed and they now mean the total opposite to what you thought. In *The Accidental Dictionary*, Paul Anthony Jones has taken 100 words that almost everyone would know or be familiar with, and peel back the layers of history behind each word to reveal the startlingly different meanings that they had originally.

In this strange and wonderful journey we will discover how alcohol once was eye shadow, a blockbuster was a bomb, hijinks was a drinking game and that a secretary could always keep a secret. The short witty essays on each chosen word are fascinating, you can see the evolution on some words, and others will surprise you in the way that they have flipped and twisted before settling in the form we know them these days. But they will no doubt change and evolve again.

The Accidental Dictionary is both fascinating and rigorous at the same time. Jones writes in an entertaining and informative way, and it is littered liberally with quotes and verse, making this an engaging book to read too. It is a great little book for the etymological nut; and for those that cherish the book this has a stunning gold leaf print on the cover.

Michael says

Find out the secret meaning of words. Cloud = Stone, Wife = Woman, Nice = Dumb. Annoy your friends with linguistic facts. Have something to talk to your loved ones at dinner. Each entry is a word. These entries make a book.
