

Introduction

There is a long history in every sentence, every word we speak has a tremendous history, every metaphor is full of historical symbolism. —Carl Jung, *Dream Analysis*, 1958

The words of a living language are like creatures: they are alive. Each word has a physical character, a look and a personality, an ancestry, an expectation of life and death, a hope of posterity. —Morris Bishop, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 1969

For the most part our words came deviously, making their way by winding paths through the minds of generations of men, even burrowing like moles through the dark subconsciousness. —John Moore, *You English Words*, 1961

In an often cynical world where attention spans seem best suited to YouTube videos and where much of the populace is seemingly obsessed with the low-brow goings-on of Britney or Lindsay or Paris, one amazing fact rises above the muck: it's amazingly rare to meet a person who isn't in some way interested in words and language. From slang-slinging youngsters to crossword-solving oldsters, from inveterate punsters to intrepid neologists, some aspect of language appeals to each person.

Is there one slice of the language pie that everyone likes? Probably not. People are just too complex to like any one thing universally. However, in my own admittedly limited experience (I haven't met every person in the world), I have yet to come across a person who doesn't appreciate a good story about the origins of a word or phrase. Tell a person how an Egyptian god, salt, and camel dung were once combined linguistically to produce the word *ammonia*, and he'll beg for more. Explain how there's an honest-to-goodness saint behind the decidedly unsaintly word *tawdry*, and you'll start to gather a crowd. Explain how the unlikely word duo of *supercilious* and *eyebrow* are actually closely related, and you'll be the hit of the party (at least until they serve the cake).

You'll find these stories and hundreds more here in *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Weird Word Origins*. (Including the story of how the word *weird* is related to the word *fate*. Weird!) From *A1* to *zydeco*, this book gives

you the histories and mysteries, the unexpected twists and surprising turns, behind nearly 600 words and phrases. Why do magicians say *abracadabra*? Why do we eat crow and humble pie? Who put the pigeon in *pigeonhole*, the goat in *scapegoat*, and the dog in *underdog*? You'll find the answers to these questions and many more in the pages that follow.

Before you get started, here are a couple of housekeeping notes about the otherwise oh-so-simple text:

- ◆ **Pointers to related words.** One of the fascinating things about word origins is that a single root word can sprout many different lexical plants, so many of the words in the book are related. So if I use a word that's defined somewhere else in the book, I'll format it in small caps, like this: SMALL CAPS.
- ◆ **Handling gender pronouns.** Whenever I talk about a generic person in this book, I almost always refer to that person as *he* or *him*. This is nothing more or less than laziness on my part because in a book such as this that's not written linearly (that is, I didn't start with the As and work my way methodically to the Zs), it's just too hard to alternate gender (which is my preferred way of handling gender pronouns). Why not just use genderless (genderful?) constructions such as *his/her* or *s/he*? Don't be silly.
- ◆ **Sidebars.** Finally, you'll see tons of extra doodads called *sidebars* positioned on many of the book's pages. These asides are designed to supply you with extra information that I couldn't resist adding. Here's what they look like:

Snappy Title

Sidebars provide extra details, fascinating asides, linguistic diversions, and other TIDBITS. (Ooh, look, there's one of the word pointers that I just talked about.)

Acknowledgments

She was a copy editor, possessed of the rare capacity to sit all day in a small cubicle, like a monk in a cell, and read with an almost penitential rigor. —David Leavitt, *Lost Language of Cranes*

The editors of the world are, to me, both eyebrow-archingly inspiring and head-scratchingly awesome. They're smart, dedicated, and possessed of the seemingly impossible ability to see both the forest and the trees at the same time. I admire editors not only because they have that admirable quality of being right almost all the time, but also because they have the uncanny ability to track down the most subtle of grammatical gaffes and logical errors. In short, I'm pro-editors because editors make me look like a pro. For this book, the wonderful people who made me look like a much better writer than I am include development editor Lynn Northrup and copy editor Michael Dietsch. Special thanks, as well, are due to acquisitions editor Michele Wells, who was silly enough to ask me to write this book in the first place.

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