

The Secret Life of Words: How English Became English

By Henry Hitchings



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The Secret Life of Words: How English Became English By Henry Hitchings

AN *ECONOMIST* BOOK OF THE YEAR

The Secret Life of Words is a wide-ranging account of the transplanted, stolen, bastardized words we've come to know as the English language. It's a history of English as a whole, and of the thousands of individual words, from more than 350 foreign tongues, that trickled in gradually over hundreds of years of trade, colonization, and diplomacy. Henry Hitchings narrates the story from the Norman Conquest to the present day, chronicling the English language as a living archive of human experience.

A SAMPLE OF THE THOUSANDS OF STORIES BEHIND THE WORDS:

- Alcatraz Island was named by a Spanish explorer who arrived in 1775 to find the island covered with pelicans, or *alcatrazes*. And "alcatrazes"? The word goes back to the Arabic *al-qadus*, which was a bucket used in irrigation that resembled the bucket beaks of pelicans.
- What does a walnut have to do with walls? The word comes from the Old English *walhnutu*, meaning foreign nut. They were originally grown in Italy and imported, and the northern Europeans named them to distinguish them from the native hazelnut.
- A crayfish is not a fish. The name comes from the old French word *crevice*, through the Old German *crebiz* and the modern French *ecrevisse*. The "fish" part is just the result of a mishearing."

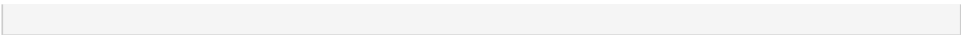
The Secret Life of Words is a wide-ranging chronicle of how words witness history, reflect social change, and remind us of our past.



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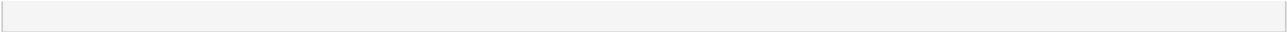
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Editorial Review

From [The New Yorker](#)

This historical tour of the English lexicon considers words as etymological ?fossils of past dreams and traumas,? revealing the preoccupations of the ages that produced them. The nineteenth century?s ?cult of fine feelings? gave currency to ?sensibility? and ?physiognomy?; ?popery? and ?libertine? sprang from the religious skepticism of the sixteen-hundreds. Many such relics began as imports: centuries of Anglophone empire-building have occasioned borrowings from some three hundred and fifty languages, including Arabic (?sash?) and Sanskrit (?pundit?). The chapters are loosely focussed on different themes, but trade is a constant thread: ?tycoon? comes from taikun, a Japanese honorific picked up on Commodore Matthew Perry?s eighteen-fifties mission to open the ports of Japan. Hitchings offers a rich array of anecdotes and extracts, but the absence of a strong over-all argument deprives his account of momentum.

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From [Booklist](#)

What Hitchings shows us is that the history of our vocabulary is the history of who we really are. Playing up the “acquisitiveness of English,” which has proved hospitable to words from more than 350 other languages, his book has a wide sweep, from pre-Roman Britain to online communities. Each chapter tends to address a particular influx of words, whether rooted in invasion and conquest or in the innovative use of the language by gifted writers. A chapter called “Angst” not only covers the twentieth century’s contribution to the vocabulary via the military, advertising, technology, and the business world, it also incorporates, in digressive but entertaining fashion, the history of coffee, a caustic evisceration of “management speak,” and an explanation of why purists are so resistant to new words. Ever ready with an apt quote, Hitchings makes a delightful and knowledgeable guide, privy to many fascinating facts about the language—those averse to the increasing power of technophiles are given a handful of pithy put-downs, including dot snots and entrepeneurs. A well-researched, fluidly written book that wears its scholarship lightly. --Joanne Wilkinson

Review

“Hitchings here provides a colorful, thematic history of the English language . . . Hitchings is a fine writer with an eye for the illustrative detail . . . With ninety-plus pages of notes, sources, and useful indexes, this is fine choice for libraries and a ‘smorgasbord’ for language aficionados. Highly recommended.” ?E. L.

Battistella, Choice

“A rich and readable history.” ?*The Boston Globe*

“Astonishing . . . Every page of *The Secret Life of Words* is stuffed with rewards. . .Painstakingly detailed, closely argued and suffused with a contagious enthusiasm.” ?*Daily Telegraph (UK)*

“A galloping history of English-speaking people and lists of words they have borrowed or invented.” ?*The New York Sun*

“Filled with fascinating nuggets.” ?*The Independent (UK)*

“A delightful book.” ?*The Roanoke Times*

Users Review

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Kristy Abrahams:

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Carla Helton:

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