

BOOKS ABOUT WORDS

Translating, trust, and being translated

There was no escaping the truth, especially at 10:20 am in AP literature. “Wait, you *read* the dictionary? All of it?!” I couldn't deny it. I didn't know why my mother had decided to mention to my teacher that I was reading the dictionary, and I was even more baffled that he had decided to tell the class. I was mortified by the incredulity of my classmates and guessed (correctly) that the teasing would continue throughout high school. I felt the illusion I had when I began the dictionary in middle school: I was somehow separate. I was a word people didn't know.

Like many others, I began collecting words when I was born, but I began craving *books* about words in sixth grade. Around that time I realized I no longer had words to describe my inner experience, much less that of anyone or anything else. So I retreated to my grandparent's copy of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. I stumbled dazed into a vast new world of familiar phrases I had never really understood and strange words I had never dreamt of. I was entranced and decided to read a page every night. It may sound odd to seek comfort in the dictionary, but I had found a way to codify my oddity, to make my non-belonging legitimate and intelligible to myself and audible and visible to others. Instead of wondering why I wasn't good at explaining myself, I could declare that I had a *perspicacious sesquipedalian parlance*.

Of course, finding new and fanciful words didn't help me talk to others much. I became insufferable, spouting arcane words at every opportunity. However, my torrents of words only made sense to myself, and that just barely. I had discovered a secret hoard, and I think a certain part of me took pleasure in being inaccessible. It was certainly easier not to explain myself. I discovered *Lost in Translation* (the book by Ella Francis Sanders, not the movie) several years later and found even more obscure words, this time not even in English. Things I had thought inarticulable now suddenly appeared as words. It was a revelation I could describe things. I just couldn't share them with the people around me.

As I got older the need to be intelligible grew. Frustrated with words, I sought other means of communication. Anorexia and self-harm proved just as ineffective as language did. As always, I returned, this time with a new purpose, to the books. Learning new words was not enough. I had to share them. These same books which I had used to isolate myself and prove that I was somehow beyond whatever I couldn't explain now gave me a way to speak to others. As I began to share these wild and wonderful words, I realized I hadn't grasped their definitions in the first place. How narrow is a definition that only exists within one's self? Listening to the books helped me to talk to people, and listening to people helped me talk to the books. Now I get to do that all the time at St. John's, and now other people teach *me* new words. I think it's time to read the dictionary again. I've forgotten a lot. I still am an imperfect communicator of all I want to say, but maybe with books and words between us, we can figure something out.

THE COLLECTION

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. Boston, Mass: Houghton Mifflin, 1969.

The inaugural book that sparked this collection and my love of language. It is by far the most important. My grandparents used this dictionary, and it has been read, highlighted, poured over, cried over, spilled on, and treasured. It is my constant reading companion and occasional translator.

Beale, Paul. *Partridge's Concise Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1989.

Rescued from the free pile at my former school library, this book contains some *very* strange 1980's slang and is a marvelous, perhaps even melancholy reminder of how quickly language changes. My favorite expressions include "Jizzer-rizzer" to describe "gravy, meat juice" and "musical bathtub" which is a "motor can, especially a small one looked upon with little favor by professional drivers".

Espy, Willard R., and Paul Degen. *O Thou Improper, Thou Uncommon Noun*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter inc. , 1978.

One of the most absurd linguistic collections I have read. It is an odd little whirlwind tour of American history and at the same time a glimmer of the author's subconscious. It is also a testament to humanity's enormous dexterity in translating their personal experiences and lives into widely intelligible words.

Langenscheidt Universal Dictionary French French - English, English - French. Munich: Langenscheidt, 2017.

Bought for an apprenticeship/singing tour in Corsica which was canceled due to the pandemic, this little book has nonetheless been a delight. Even what we would consider ordinary words somehow are translated into a delight when in an unfamiliar language.

Lee, William F. *Music Theory Dictionary: The Language of the Mechanics of Music*. New York: Charles Hansen Educational Music and Books, 1979.

So many musical terms are in French, German, and Italian, and it is very helpful to know what tempo, dynamic, and mood notations mean in their original languages. This book also has an excellent (if curtailed) "highlights of music in history" chronology.

Morrow, Susan Brind. *The Names of Things: Life, Language, and Beginnings in the Egyptian Desert*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1998.

This book is a true testament to the talismanic power of names and words, even when the thing which they recall is inaccessible or gone. Language itself has substance, and substance is what we create. It is a very comforting book, and although I am not finished with it, I already want to return to it and read it again.

O'Conner, Patricia T., and Stewart Kellerman. *Origins of the Specious: Myths and Misconceptions of the English Language*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2010.

This is a good look at our uniquely American and uniquely bastard language. The loose narrative structure mirrors the meandering and fitful way we use and change words.

Onions, Charles T. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 2006.

A more recent gift, this book is invaluable for cogitating (-OF. *cogitacioun* - L. *cogitāo(n)-*, f. *cogitāre* to think, f. com CO- + *agitāre* put in motion, spec. turn over in the mind...) on the precise shade of meaning. It also is a surprisingly useful spelling aid, as my spelling is shamefully bad, and knowing Latin and Saxon roots is occasionally helpful.

Pien, Joshua H., and Fauzia Farooqui. *Beginning Hindi: A Complete Course*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015.

I bought this book at age ten in advance of a trip to see my grandmother in India. I didn't end up learning very much Hindi, but the little I did absorb proved very useful. I also discovered that there were many people who were just as excited about the bit of English they knew as I was about my (inferior) bit of Hindi. Hindi itself, like English, is a cobbled-together language, but unlike English, this process was intentionally and centrally orchestrated.

Sanders, Ella Frances. *Lost in Translation: An Illustrated Compendium of Untranslatable Words from Around the World*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2014.

This is a beautiful little book that peers through the gulfs in every language and the inescapably human experiences between them. Favorite entries include *Pisan Zapra* (Malay) which is "the time needed to eat a banana" and *Hireath* (Welsh) which is "a homesickness for somewhere you cannot return to, the nostalgia and the grief for the lost places of your past, places that never were".

Sanders, Ella Frances. *The Illustrated Book of Sayings: Curious Expressions from Around the World*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2016.

This is a follow-up by the same author, and makes me wonder exactly how culture reflects, forms, and is bound up in language and the way we speak. Favorite expressions include "Jeegratō bolhoram" a Farci expression that literally means "I will eat your liver" and is used as a familiar term of endearment, and "Nosom para oblake" which in Serbian means "he's ripping clouds with his nose" (or in other words, he's very conceited).

Wheelock, Frederic M., and Richard A. LaFleur. *Wheelock's Latin*. New York: Collins Reference, 2011.

Throughout high school, My constant refrain was some variation on “where are you, Wheelock? I need to ask you something!” I may have been (worryingly) personifying a Latin textbook, but I really did engage in dialogue with this book about how language is structured and how that structure affects meaning and communication. Of course, I also talked to people about it.