


The Secret Life of Words: How English Became English

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Words are essential to our everyday lives. An average person spends his or her day enveloped in conversations, e-mails, phone calls, text messages, directions, headlines, and more. But how often do we stop to think about the origins of the words we use? Have you ever thought about which words in English have been borrowed from Arabic, Dutch, or Portuguese? Try *admiral*, *landscape*, and *marmalade*, just for starters.

The Secret Life of Words is a wide-ranging account not only of the history of English language and vocabulary, but also of how words witness history, reflect social change, and remind us of our past. Henry Hitchings delves into the insatiable, ever-changing English language and reveals how and why it has absorbed words from more than 350 other languages—many originating from the most unlikely of places, such as *shampoo* from Hindi and *kiosk* from Turkish. From the Norman Conquest to the present day, Hitchings narrates the story of English as a living archive of our human experience. He uncovers the secrets behind everyday words and explores the surprising origins of our most commonplace expressions.

The Secret Life of Words is a rich, lively celebration of the language and vocabulary that we too often take for granted.

The Secret Life of Words: How English Became English Details

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Chris says

There are many ways to write human history. Most writers of history books tend to go the traditional way - following kings and queens, wars, revolutions and invasions. The history of the world is almost always written in military or political terms, and while that's certainly a valid way to do it, it's a little overdone. A truly creative historian might try to look at the progress of humankind through a different lens - the history of art, perhaps, or literature or science.

Hitchings has decided to look at history through the rise and spread of the English language - once an agglomeration of angry noises from a few small tribes in what would eventually become Europe, now a tongue that dominates the world. The English language is used by billions, studied by millions more. It's the language of business, commerce, politics, law, entertainment and news, and has spread like no other language before it.

The big question then becomes, How did this happen? How did English become what it has become? What is the history that led it to span the globe, and what qualities does it have that other languages don't? In this book, Hitchings looks at the history of English - and by extension the Western world - through the growth of its vocabulary. Where did our words come from, and what does their journey into English tell us about our own history?

A modern English speaker, equipped with a time machine, could probably go back about four or five hundred years and still be confident that she would be able to converse with people. Maybe not with perfect clarity, and it would be an entertaining thing to watch, but it would certainly be possible. Before that, the conventions and lexis that we are all so familiar with will start to be more and more scarce, and by the time of Chaucer, our time traveler would have a hard time indeed. So, as far as languages go, modern English is a fairly young tongue. Over the last half-millennium or so, the sheer number of words available to English speakers has exploded, mainly due to what some would call the language's "whorish" qualities - English will take up with any other language that comes along, accepting its words and making them its own. By following the spread of English, and the changes that it has made, we can see how people and cultures intermingled in the last thousand years or so.

Hitchings begins at, more or less, the beginning, with the Anglo-Saxon roots of English and its almost immediate conflicts with Norman French and the languages of the invading and pillaging Norsemen. He follows the political swings of English, as the rulers of the British Isles alternately embrace and shun the language, until it finally becomes the tongue that defines that tiny island on the edge of the North Atlantic. He looks into Arabic and Latin, Japanese and the languages of the Native Americans. We see the wellsprings of the language of food and music, science, military and law. He introduces us to words that came into English through long and winding roads (one of my favorites is *Alcatraz* - from the Spanish word for "pelican," which in turn comes from Arabic's *al-qadus* for "machine for drawing water," which in turn comes from Greek's *kados*, meaning "jar" - quite a journey for such a miserable place.) The history of the English language is a fractal history, meaning that in order to understand it you also have to understand the histories of a dozen other languages and then the languages that came before them. To try and put it all down on paper is a monumental task indeed.

The study of English words is fascinating, though. I have recently become enamored of the "Way With Words" podcast, which dedicates itself to unraveling questions about English usage. The hosts are funny and engaging, and manage to give a brief history of words and phrases and all the little tics of English that make

you annoyed enough to have to call a radio show about it. It's a pleasure to listen to, which is probably why I listened to that show a whole lot more than I read this book.

Mr. Hitchings has done an admirable job with this book, trying to cover all the different avenues by which words came into English. The paths that they followed are fascinating, and the stories behind them are the stories of Western culture and civilization. The trouble is that Hitchings doesn't do all that good a job in making it interesting to the lay reader, i.e. me.

By and large, each chapter deals with a different source of vocabulary or a different time in history, but the narrative that he sets up tends to... wander about. There's no real narrative to focus on, and while I know this isn't supposed to be one, Hitchings is trying to tell us a *story*. It's a long and complicated one, but it's still a story, and as such needs to flow in order to keep the reader's attention.

I can't fault him for his research or his dedication, but I think he could have given more thought to the organization of the book. Instead of trying to cover as many sources as possible, perhaps he could have narrowed his focus. Instead of throwing out a dozen or so words at a time, he could have given us an in-depth narrative on just a few. Each chapter could probably have been expanded into its own book on the Arabic/Spanish/Latin/German/Greek/African origins of words, and so in reading it you get the feeling that there's so much more that he's glossing over. By trying to follow all the twisted paths of the history of English, it's very easy for the reader to get lost.

All I kept thinking as I read this was that I had much more fun reading Bill Bryson's book, *Mother Tongue*, which covers the same topic but is much more enjoyable to read, and perhaps that was my mistake. By the time I got to the end, and was more or less just scanning pages so that I could legitimately say I'd finished it, I realized that this is not the kind of book that you settle down with and read all the way through. It's a piecemeal book - pick it up, read a chapter, put it down and leave it alone for a while. When you're in the mood for more language history, pick it up again and read another chapter. Give yourself time to mull it over and digest, and finish it when you finish it.

However you decide to get through it, you will certainly have a greater appreciation for the richness and diversity of the English language, so regardless of how interesting it was narrative-wise, Hitchings has achieved his goal. English is an amazing language, and it behooves all its speakers to learn a little bit more about the amazing confluence of cultures that produced the sounds that you speak every day.

Veronique says

The book is very boring . It only tells us something about words . As you know , remembering words is the most uninteresting thing . I hate remembering words and anything about words . The dull book lacks interest!

Shelley says

A very satisfying read; educational, interesting and humourous, this book appealed to me because of my interest in the English language and teaching it. But it was much more than another history of the English language; it is a very wide and deep examination of events and trends (ancient and contemporary) that has led to the evolution of our language to the global powerhouse it is today, and continues to be. This book will add to any reader's appreciation of the English language (ALL the Englishes) and it's wonderful journey in time and space. Recommended.

Morgan says

This should have been the perfect book for me - I'm a word lover, I love etymology, history, and social anthropology. Although I did enjoy reading it, I have to admit that I did have to force myself a bit to finish it. As many of the other reviews have noted, the book is exceedingly dry and has very little in the way of a narrative thread to connect the chapters. It feels more like a collection of articles in the same series, which becomes a bit tedious after a couple of hundred pages.

That said, I admit that my copy of this book is littered with dog-ears marking bits of interesting trivia or historical perspective. Many of the actual facts presented really are fascinating, I just wish they weren't presented as a series of facts.

Regarding the author's intellectually playful writing style, I can understand how it might irritate some readers, but I actually did enjoy it. Perhaps it's a bit of elitist pride showing through, but I admit that I did feel good about "getting it". There's a fine line between subtle ironic wordplay and eye-rolling punning, and I think Mr. Hitchings walked it pretty well.

Overall, I guess I'd say that I'm happier having read it than I was while actually reading it.

Emily says

Getting pummeled with fun facts but pacing plods sometimes.

Ben Babcock says

These days, it is common to lament the spread and dominance of English, the way its uncouth touch corrupts and infects other languages. Yet it's no secret that English is a prolific thief when it comes to words. Henry Hitchings explores this phenomenon in *The Secret Life of Words*, where he examines how the encounters between people who speak English and people who speak other languages have shaped and influenced English over its long history. Along the way, he spouts a veritable fountain of words cribbed from abroad. Thanks to those years of French class, I knew that *souvenir* is from French, and I was even aware that *swastika* comes to us via Hindi. But I didn't know that *gambit* is from Italian, *mattress* from Arabic, and *nephew* is a Norman alternative to the Saxon *brothorsunu*. I also discovered while reading that *totem*, a word we Canadians might associate more with the totem poles of British Columbia, is actually from Ojibwe, a people closer to my neck of the woods. Hitchings also makes the connection between *bikini* the swimsuit and the Bikini Atoll. (Interestingly, he doesn't delve further to explain that the island takes its name from the Marshallese *pikini* for "coconut place". I had to visit Wikipedia for that tidbit.)

I discovered this book by accident. I was actually checking to see if Suffolk Libraries had a copy of *The Secret History of the English Language*, by M.J. Harper, and it offered me this instead. "Sure, why not?" I thought, and I placed my reservation. Well, it's been an interesting but ambivalent read. On one hand, *The Secret Life of Words* is a very comprehensive yet detailed look at loanwords in the English language. On the other hand, it is a frustratingly verbose and unstructured compilation.

I am amazed and awestruck by the amount of research Hinchings must have done to prepare this text. He acknowledges his debt to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, my favourite dictionary and indubitably an invaluable resource in such an endeavour. Yet the sheer breadth of historical and linguistic topics covered here guarantee that Hinchings must have consulted hundreds of articles, papers, books, and oracles. And his organization and note-taking skills must be impressive. After reading this book, there is no way I can remember even a quarter of the etymologies he presents here; he has either a superhuman memory or an extremely efficient filing system....

Whatever the causes, the results are worth it. In every chapter, Hinchings provides a positively delectable feast of words. Starting with a broad historical summary of the events and movements relevant to that chapter, Hinchings slowly transitions into looking at specific words acquired by English during that period. This ramps up into more, longer lists of words, lists so fluid and euphonious that it's impossible not to slow down and feel the words roll off the tip of your tongue as your eyes scan over them. English owes such a debt to other languages, not to mention the expansionist and colonialist efforts of the British that drove our contact and interaction with the speakers of those languages.

And so we go through history. From the Roman occupation and withdrawal from Britain to the Anglo/Saxon/Jute/Pictish invasion to the Danes and the Normans, Hinchings explores how Old English developed in the crucible of the British Isles. Of particular interest was the observation that English began to care about word order and less about inflection as it rubbed shoulders with Norse. I found that fascinating! He goes on to look at the Norman role in Old English's transformation to Middle English, which naturally provides a springboard for talking about Chaucer. (Shakespeare is a recurring thread throughout the book, but Hinchings does not actually give him much in the way of his own section, curiously enough. He acts instead as a touchstone, his plays offering a kind of referent for Hinchings to use to note how certain words were used in the sixteenth century.) Later chapters follow Britain's expansion into the New World, Africa, and India.

Hinchings makes the perhaps obvious, nonetheless important connection between politics and language. Political ideologies and aspirations shape a language—certain words come into or fall out of favour based on the government in power. (This reminded me a lot of Orwell's musings on how politics will shape a language, which recurs throughout his novels and is explicitly articulated in *Homage to Catalonia*.) Similarly, English has at times embraced the words of another language even as the English have worked to eradicate or suppress that language and its people (after all, having a distinct language is just one step away from having a distinct identity, and we can't have that, can we?). This puts us in the unenviable position of having a language enriched by conquest. (English is by no means alone in this, of course.)

The Secret Life of Words contains a wealth of information, so much that it is overwhelming. Even a single chapter is dense with those lists of loanwords I mentioned above. Now try 16 chapters of that! Each chapter theoretically covers English's interaction with another language, with a strong historical component included for context. Actually, I found the history portion of every chapter far more interesting than the part that was mostly lists. Each new loanword is, by itself, a novelty. But I'm not going to remember them all, and presented like this in quick succession, they leave my head as quickly as they enter, prompting me to ask, "What's the point?"

There is also little continuity or connection between chapters. The lack of an introduction or conclusion chapter makes this evident. I don't require my non-fiction to have a narrative. However, it would have been nice if Hinchings had employed some larger themes tie everything together. Instead, each chapter is interesting in its own right, but altogether the book is more of a strange smorgasbord than a satisfying, multi-course meal.

I'm not sure I would *recommend* this book. I don't not recommend it. I urge those who would undertake it to dive and dip into a chapter at a time rather than trying to devour it in a single, sustained stretch. (I can't help

it; the latter way is just how I tend to read!) This might make it easier to enjoy *The Secret Life of Words*. As it is, I can admire this book, but it isn't as entertaining as I want my non-fiction to be.

darkseraphina says

What I like best about this is that the focus is on vocabulary, not grammar and syntax like so many histories of English seem to be. That and the connection between the impact of history and language was very interesting. Right now it is computers and technology that change our vocabulary; four hundred years ago the spice trade did the same thing. I especially loved the description of the word wars in the past, that the argument over 'true' English and the grammar purists is an old one.

Colin says

It's full of fascinating stuff. Perhaps a little too full - it's all a bit overwhelming and the organisational plan of the book falls short of actually being a structure.

Mark Beyer says

I liked this book for its esoterica of etymology that takes you from the dawning of English before it was known as such, to the 21st century's fast-paced "changes" to the language. Likewise, Hitchings's idiosyncratic approach to the choices he's made to focus on (or even mention) allows for lots of fun. And that's his point -- as he's been making the same point for several books on language -- to make language fun, accessible, and a story worth knowing.

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What Beauty is my newest novel, a story of art, obsession and ego. *The Village Wit* (2010) is a humorous and sometimes dark odyssey through village life, love's fall, sexual politics, and that place where memory and modern love intersect.

Read excerpts of both books at my home-site, <http://www.bibliogrind.com>

Mary says

I'll leave my original summation below for anyone who feels the same after chapter 4.

1 Star off for really long, unstoppable chapters.

1 Star off for TOTALLY IGNORING IRELAND, YOU ASSHAT. We were relevant in every single damn bloody chapter!!!!

...*breathe*...

he is an idiot who has not realised that Ireland had actually separated from the UK for a long time, and didn't actually enjoy the joining while we WERE joined....

Or that we have our own minority language from which much borrowing has occurred.

....I actually felt a bit sorry for him in the end, because we could all get together with him for tea in London, and then all start talking to each other in one of our country's other languages, and he will just never get it.

And more, the DAMAGE English caused, forcing our language off us or BOOM, penal laws. He knows nothing of it! This is a starry-eyed, nostalgic catalogue of how poor Brits found themselves ended up here.

I don't want to be mad, but I am LOYALLY mad. Bill Bryson knows much more about the effect Irish had on English.

This book was more a badly laid out timeline dictionary of how, where and when words entered England English. And that part WAS interesting. But I would prefer the layout fixed as a list, and a note to say that they're purposely excluding Ireland (in favour of India, Japan, African countries, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Russia, Australia, HAWAIIAN, BECAUSE IT'S HAD SUCH A MASSIVE INFLUENCE... etcetera.)

----old review----

OMG, this is really hard to read.

Some of it IS really interesting, but it's killer trying to get through it. There aren't even any breaks within the chapters so you can take a breather and still know where you left off. Chapters are pages and pages of long historical facts - that ARE interesting, like I said, but just don't give you a chance to absorb anything...

Emily says

I tried.

I really did.

I wanted to like this book so badly. This seemed like the kind of book that would be right up my alley: history, literature, linguistics, fascinating minutiae about word origins and meanings. Exactly the kind of book I love.

But it was a battle to finish it.

It was difficult to find any through narrative in each chapter. It seemed like the author had discovered all of this interesting information during the course of his research and couldn't bear not to include a single piece of it. So it all got shoehorned into whichever chapter it fit most closely. Paragraphs often seemed completely disjointed from the ones directly before and after.

Perhaps shorter chapters would have been easier to follow or at least keep up with. A little more editing for relevance to the chapter's theme would have been helpful. There were some great nuggets of insight buried in this book, but I felt they were overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information included.

For more book reviews, visit my blog, Build Enough Bookshelves.

Terry says

Meh. There was no narrative. Each chapter was a collection of words and how they came about. References were neither superficial enough that themes and trends emerged nor deep enough that really neat nuggets emerged. I only made it about 250 pages into the book before going "what's the point?" and realizing I couldn't remember much of what was gone over. The information was poorly presented and some lists, section headers, cross references and references to deeper works except for some absolutely Byzantine reading suggestions.

Arlene says

Laborous feat but some interesting facts, the word nicotine stems from the French Ambassador on 1561 Jean Nicot when he brought tobacco back to Europe to help someone alleviate a migraine. Fun stuff!

Ryan Vaughan says

This book probably deserved less than four stars ,but I found it to be such a rich feast of information that I had to give it that extra star. I agree with the other reviewers that the book itself does not hang together. The author has a very digressive style and goes off on many tangents ,but I have a soft spot for books like that. I am curious to read his other "The Language Wars"

Lorena Reyna says

dull
