



## Wordstruck: A Memoir

*Robert MacNeil*

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## **Wordstruck: A Memoir** Robert MacNeil

The man who made the English language come alive for millions of readers and viewers with 'The Story of English' reveals his own early enchantment with the English language.

'Wordstruck' is the story of Robert MacNeil's unabashed affair with words, from his Halifax childhood awash with intriguing accents to life as a traveling journalist who "delighted in finding pockets of distinctive English, as a botanist is thrilled to discover a new variety of plant."

Each aspect of Robert MacNeil's youthful existence prompted yet another linguistic thrill. Childhood churchgoing "did not provide me with any spiritual awakening ... but it anointed me with language." His mother's passion for the natural world and his father's life as a ship's skipper gave him two more complete vocabularies. And "If you define yourself by the language you acquire as you enter different spheres," MacNeil writes, the absurd language of "cricket was another piece of my self-definition."

## **Wordstruck: A Memoir Details**

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## From Reader Review Wordstruck: A Memoir for online ebook

### Herb Hastings says

This is a book that should be on every passionate reader's shelf. The author drapes a memoir on the framework of the books and words that helped shape him. The almost reverence with which he approaches his love of language, is moving in its beauty. This is a book to take your time with, sipping gently from it and listening to the sound of it in your head.

I highly recommend it.

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### Autumn says

Mostly personal, but with some entertaining observations about language.

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### Jesse Markus says

This book is SO BORING! Don't read it! I'm a major lover of words - I like terms like logophile and verbivore - and this book was such a disappointment. No wonder I got it for a dollar. The author mostly just babbles on about his family and his childhood in Nova Scotia. There is very little in here about words. What little there is was also quite dull to read. I am not usually one to complain about books, especially books about being in love with language, but this book will bore you to sleep. I should mention that there was one brief good part at the end, but that was not enough to redeem it. I recommend you read anything but this.

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### Anne Marie says

I averaged my rating for this book. 5 stars for the chapters on his childhood, which in my opinion incorporated cute childhood anecdotes with literary quotes and MacNeil's discoveries about the English language either then or how his childhood influenced later discoveries quite well. Admittedly the book focuses on why he personally loves language, which may or may not mean much in the way of discoveries about the language for well-read readers, but I found it enjoyable. I would give this 3 stars for the chapters on his coming of age and adulthood, which is possibly being generous as I was a little bored and antsy by the end of the book. This is because I found the second half incorporated quotes and discoveries about the English language more clumsily and because it starts to use autobiographical sketch more than anecdotes, which is frankly boring, especially as he skipped over many of the juicy bits. How did he meet and court his wife? What moments made him fall in love with his daughter, his first child who was born slightly before the book ends? I know these things are personal, but it is a memoir, after all. And if he was going to focus so much on his career history, what eventually made him go back broadcasting as a career?

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### Christine Bowles says

Even though it took me a while to finish reading this book, I still enjoyed it. I too have been Wordstruck, so I

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can easily relate to the feelings of the author. And getting the chance to see how he grew to love the language so much was a nice experience.

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### **Tiffany Chan says**

he brings us back to the moment of discovery. the feelings, honesty, and clarity are some of the strong points that make the piece. i can relate to it a lot. an enjoyable read.

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### **Timothy R. says**

I read this book in a day. It's too bad he left the MacNeil / Lehrer band. They rocked, in that PBS kind of way.

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### **Linda says**

I found it hard to stick with this book for some reason, but I did because parts of it were very close to my heart as far as being wordstruck. I skipped over a lot of the inserts of poetry and prose and stuck with him. Clearly this book will only appeal to writer's and people who love to be "wordstruck." I'm always looking for that perfect description or perfect sentence or perfect word.

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### **Richard Evans says**

My high-school English teachers might be the last to expect a book recommendation.. Still, I always find myself pulling it back off the shelf, going back to MacNeil's perspective on the beauty of language, in all dialects. There is no right or wrong. We communicate, as best we can, from country to urban. No judgement. Only appreciation.

I recall an entire a subculture of a certain radio host was laughing at the phrase "Don't tase me bro". Nevermind someone was being hurt. That's cruelty beyond my comprehension. Will go so far as to suggest that particular subculture of hate mongers has more reading to do, beyond what was authored by any popular radio host of the era. I'll never master English, however am able recognize racism and ignorance, and unable to grok laughter at it.

MacNeil so well eloquated ("eloquated" is not an official word, but WTH) ... that English has always evolved, that's why it is beautiful, and there's nothing we can do about it. Will leave my book recommendation at that ... pages 218-219.

"Change is inevitable in a living language and is responsible for much of the vitality of English; it has prospered and grown because because it was able to accept and absorb change."

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## **Chuck Jackson says**

I really enjoyed this book. His story seems storybook perfect where he has a naval captain, stern father, books everywhere, loving family, didn't wear his first long pants until he was twelve. ?! Very worthwhile read.

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## **Paula Dembeck says**

Robert MacNeil is the co-author of the well-known book and TV series “The Story of English” and the respected co-anchor of the acclaimed MacNeil Lerner Newshour on TV.

This volume contains two themes: one is MacNeil’s wonderful childhood memories of growing up in Halifax Nova Scotia with his family, and the other is the ongoing romance with the English language that he has had his entire life.

I enjoyed this read except for one problem: his idea to combine these two themes is at times more successful than others. As he recounts his younger days, it is easy to become immersed in his childhood and his love of language that grew from his mother’s reading of bedtime stories. She was never a passive reader but read with enthusiasm and delight, dramatizing the voices of different characters and feeling as well as speaking the descriptive passages, conscious at all times of her diction and enunciation. In his inner ear, MacNeil can still hear the cultured musical quality of her voice with the rise and fall of its rhythms and rhymes. It is to his mother that he gives credit for shaping his feel for language.

During this period of the Depression, reading provided affordable, cheap, entertainment. MacNeil’s parents always read and collected books, and since there were few funds for extras, the family read extensively and talked about what they read. Interestingly, MacNeil does not remember any experience in his younger days at school which gave him an appreciation of the joy or pleasure to be found in language. There, they were taught the obligatory English poets in the same manner they were dragged around various museums and historical landmarks, bored, distracted and completely disinterested. It was more through his family, church, or choir that he learned about the pleasure of language. Church, and the Book of Common Prayer did not provide him with any spiritual awakening, but its endless repetition of powerful prose made him conscious of the sound of language and choir practice made him conscious of the importance of diction.

His voracious reading and even the science classroom with its precise verbiage helped him to understand how language can do its magic. But it wasn’t until he went to boarding school at Rothesay Collegiate in New Brunswick and met a teacher he nicknamed “The Duke”, that he was fully initiated into the world of poetry, the value of memorization and the magic of poetic sound. At Rothesay, he substituted German for Latin classes and learned how to repeat text clearly and accurately, opening his ears more consciously to the music of words. In the Cadet Corps he learned the language of command, and how the same words can sound very different when they come from different mouths. It taught him how to be brave with words, something he found less difficult than others.

After failing the exam to enter the Navy, a career his father had always planned for him, he went to Dalhousie University for a year and began dabbling in acting and the theater. It was here that he discovered Shakespeare. At this point the book begins to falter. Up to this point, the two themes have been seamlessly intertwined in the text, but now MacNeil has more difficulty writing what he wants to about his discoveries of language and weave it into his own personal life story.

He gives us a good deal of interesting information about language, the sense and sound of it and what captivated him so thoroughly about listening to it, but at these times, which often take up several pages of text, he is diverted from his own personal story which is left behind. This problem continues as he recounts his experience in radio work with the CBC and later television. There is a short trip to the United States for acting school, but he soon returns to Ottawa and a delayed college education at Carleton University. Again all interspersed with sections on language. From there he is off to London. But the entire flow of his personal life in which I was immersed and held, was interrupted and I had to work to pick it up again.

Towards the end of the book, as he married and began a family, the personal text jumped years ahead. Again, he has given us an excellent analysis and many examples of why he loves the spoken word, but we are left hanging without any sense of his own personal story in those years. One thing he does do well throughout the entire book though, is give us what we need to fully appreciate not only his love of language but also for the feel of books, for good paper and well sewn bindings.

MacNeil shares some interesting personal philosophy about language. First he talks about the reading his mother did when he was young, as the successful groundwork for his love of language. He notes she not only read children's books to him, but also the classics. Winnie the Pooh, Jungle Book, Peter Pan, Treasure Island and Robin Hood were interspersed with Gulliver's Travels, Oliver Twist and David Copperfield. In addition, she was always engrossed in the story herself no matter how many times she read it. This, and the way she read, with enthusiasm, clear enunciation and dramatic tone all contributed to the experience. He advises continuing to read to children even after they can read themselves and to include the classics as well as childrens' stories.

Secondly, he talks about the demise of the spoken word. We seem to define good literature as what is written to be read silently when we should be judging language with our ears as well as our intelligence. He notes that most good English is now assigned to the written word and it is seldom we hear words spoken with any depth of feeling or engagement. Most speakers are reading from an assigned text to which they have little or no connection. They are simply printed words prepared by others that they speak. He mourns what we have lost here, what he considers to be "the weight of the words".

Thirdly, he speaks of the universality of English, a language that he believes belongs to everyone. MacNeil is not a language snob. He believes English to be the language of the common people, not just the academic. As such, it is sprinkled with slang, idiomatic terms and expressions from different cultures and the peoples who use it. We all speak differently when we are in different circumstances. There are words and language we use in formal occasions, language we use with close friends, family language and there is the talk we use in intimate moments. Language is spoken and written by those who wish to be careful with it, as well as those who don't care. It is not important to complain about bad language, but it is important to continually pass on your enthusiasm for good language to others, as it is there it will unconsciously take root.

And finally MacNeil warns against immersing ourselves so completely with one or two writers that you forget about all the others. He describes different points in his life when he became obsessed with Shakespeare, Chaucer, Thomas Dylan, T.S. Eliot and Thomas Mann, to the complete exclusion of others. It was only later in his life that he began to realize what he was missing and so cast a wider net, opening himself up to other authors and thinking, "How could I have missed all this?"

An interesting book about the magic of language and how it captured the heart and mind of a small boy holding him firmly into adulthood.

MacNeil's childhood memories are charming and we get a glimpse of the people, events and literature that shaped his character. As a man who is crazy about "the sound of words, the look of words, the taste of words", he gets you thinking of things you may never have paid much attention to.

If you like words and language you will appreciate this book.

### **Diane says**

I enjoy books about words and was surprised to find the parts of this book I like most were the Robert MacNeils memories of growing up. The “words” portions of the book appeared to be inserted and somewhat irrelevant. I did enjoy the story of MacNeil growing up in Nova Scotia, his musing about his father and mother, and his own obsession with the music, cricket, and the theater.

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### **Michael Holbrook says**

Well-crafted and well-written. Insightful about the English language, but can be elitist and, at times, boring. Would I recommend this, but make time to really read and not just skim. MacNeil has a passion for the language and it comes through in this book. If you are a word lover and, especially a poetry aficionado or a connoisseur of English, you will enjoy the read.

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### **Lezley says**

I really enjoyed this book. The author has such an appreciation for the evolving English language although I'm not sure how he would react to the lovely word 'Seaforth' being replaced by "C4th". I loved how he forces the reader to slow down and listen to the sounds of the word. He even pushes the reader to read aloud for a full reading and auditory experience.

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### **Richard Evans says**

I recall an entire a subculture of a certain radio host was laughing at the phrase "Don't tase me bro". Nevermind someone was being hurt. That's cruelty beyond my comprehension. Will go so far as to suggest that particular subculture of hate mongers has more reading to do, beyond what was authored by any popular radio host of the era. I'll never master English, however am able recognize racism and ignorance, and unable to understand laughter at it.

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