



The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary

By Simon Winchester

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The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary By Simon Winchester

From the best-selling author of *The Professor and the Madman*, *The Map That Changed the World*, and *Krakatoa* comes a truly wonderful celebration of the English language and of its unrivaled treasure house, the Oxford English Dictionary.

Writing with marvelous brio, Winchester first serves up a lightning history of the English language--"so vast, so sprawling, so wonderfully unwieldy"--and pays homage to the great dictionary makers, from "the irredeemably famous" Samuel Johnson to the "short, pale, smug and boastful" schoolmaster from New Hartford, Noah Webster. He then turns his unmatched talent for story-telling to the making of this most venerable of dictionaries. In this fast-paced narrative, the reader will discover lively portraits of such key figures as the brilliant but tubercular first editor Herbert Coleridge (grandson of the poet), the colorful, boisterous Frederick Furnivall (who left the project in a shambles), and James Augustus Henry Murray, who spent a half-century bringing the project to fruition. Winchester lovingly describes the nuts-and-bolts of dictionary making--how unexpectedly tricky the dictionary entry for *marzipan* was, or how *fraternity* turned out so much longer and *monkey* so much more ancient than anticipated--and how *bondmaid* was left out completely, its slips found lurking under a pile of books long after the B-volume had gone to press. We visit the ugly corrugated iron structure that Murray grandly dubbed the Scriptorium--the *Scrippy* or the Shed, as locals called it--and meet some of the legion of volunteers, from Fitzedward Hall, a bitter hermit obsessively devoted to the OED, to W. C. Minor, whose story is one of dangerous madness, ineluctable sadness, and ultimate redemption.

The Meaning of Everything is a scintillating account of the creation of the greatest monument ever erected to a living language. Simon Winchester's supple, vigorous prose illuminates this dauntingly ambitious project--a seventy-year odyssey to create the grandfather of all word-books, the world's unrivalled *uber-dictionary*.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

With his usual winning blend of scholarship and accessible, skillfully paced narrative, Winchester (Krakatoa) returns to the subject of his first bestseller, *The Professor and the Madman*, to tell the eventful, personality-filled history of the definitive English dictionary. He emphasizes that the OED project began in 1857 as an attempt to correct the deficiencies of existing dictionaries, such as Dr. Samuel Johnson's. Winchester opens with an entertaining and informative examination of the development of the English language and pre-OED efforts. The originators of the OED thought the project would take perhaps a decade; it actually took 71 years, and Winchester explores why. An early editor, Frederick Furnivall, was completely disorganized (one sack of paperwork he shipped to his successor, James Murray, contained a family of mice). Murray in turn faced obstacles from Oxford University Press, which initially wanted to cut costs at the expense of quality. Winchester stresses the immensity and difficulties of the project, which required hundreds of volunteer readers and assistants (including J.R.R. Tolkien) to create and organize millions of documents: the word bondmaid was left out of the first edition because its paperwork was lost. Winchester successfully brings readers inside the day-to-day operations of the massive project and shows us the unrelenting passion of people such as Murray and his overworked, underpaid staff who, in the end, succeeded magnificently. Winchester's book will be required reading for word mavens and anyone interested in the history of our marvelous, ever-changing language.

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From [Booklist](#)

The story of the making of the *Oxford English Dictionary* has been burnished into legend over the years, at least among librarians and linguists. In *The Professor and the Madman* (1998), Winchester examined the strange case of one of the most prolific contributors to the first edition of the OED--one W. C. Minor, an American who sent most of his quotation slips from an insane asylum. Now, Winchester takes on the dictionary's whole history, from the first attempts to document the English language in the seventeenth century, the founding of the Philological Society in Oxford in 1842, and the start of work on the dictionary in 1860; to the completion of the first edition nearly 70 years, 414,825 words, and 1,827,306 illustrative quotations later. Although there is plenty of detail here about the methodology (including the famous pigeon holes stuffed with quotations slips from contributors around the world), the emphasis is on personalities, in particular James Murray, who became the OED's third editor in 1879 and died in 1915, "well into the letter T." The project backers complained loudly about the slow pace over the years, but the scrupulous care taken by Murray and the many others who worked on the OED gave us what is arguably the world's greatest dictionary. Publication of this book coincides with the OED's seventy-fifth anniversary, even as work on the third edition is under way. *Mary Ellen Quinn*

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Review

"Winchester's book is a wonderfully thorough account of the mechanics of dictionary compilation, the tribulations of a project of this scale, and the array of brilliant and often eccentric characters who brought it to completion."--*The Dallas Morning News*

"Full of engaging characters and incidents."--*Wall Street Journal*

"As inspiring as it is informative. A dazzling detective story and a poignant group portrait. A must-read for every language lover."--*Seattle Times*

"Devastatingly brilliant.... Fascinating, witty, extremely well-written.... Winchester makes words exciting. He obviously loves them."--*The Boston Globe*

"The extraordinary story of the making of the *Oxford English Dictionary* is a subject perfectly suited to Winchester's magpie mind.... It can be recommended in all seriousness to committed Scrabble players. Here, for instance, you will learn that the first edition closed with the definition of 'zyxt,' a Kentish dialect word for the past participle of the verb 'to see.' Here, too, you will find words like 'aa,' an obsolete term for a stream or watercourse. An affectionate and frankly partisan study of the making of a great dictionary."--Robert McCrum, *Los Angeles Times*

"Winchester has no peer at illuminating massive and complex endeavors through the quirks and foibles of the brilliant and powerful personalities who carry them out."--*Chicago Sun Times*

"Winchester tells the story with great verve in an easy-going, anecdotal style that's delectably readable."--*Christian Science Monitor*

"Fascinatingly told. Winchester brings to life the trials and tribulations of creating the OED, particularly the never-dull personalities of those who were involved. Moreover, he delightfully, admiringly gives us an appreciation of the wonderfully adaptive, ever-expanding English language."--*Forbes Magazine*

"Supremely readable. Teeming with knowledge and alive with insights."--William F. Buckley, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Entrancing.... An engaging read...resonates with all the chauvinism and misgiving, the self-congratulation and self-doubt that emerge when we think about our language."--*Chicago Tribune*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Bill Bobby:

Book is to be different for each grade. Book for children right up until adult are different content. As it is known to us that book is very important for us. The book The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary was making you to know about other understanding and of course you can take more information. It doesn't matter what advantages for you. The reserve The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary is not only giving you more new information but also being your friend when you sense bored. You can spend your own spend time to read your book. Try to make relationship with all the book The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary. You never feel lose out for everything should you read some books.

James Pickett:

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Ann Yoho:

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Jean Fair:

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