

OBB_022_Funk & Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary 1932

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It's time once again to examine the intersection of alcoholic refreshment and the written word.

Welcome to . . . of books and booze.

Hello, everybody, and welcome back to the show.

The intro song for this episode is courtesy of the man that brought us such gems as, "Poisoning Pigeons in the Park," "The Masochism Tango," and "The Vatican Rag" --- that brilliant balladeer of mid-century modern culture, Tom Lehrer.

You may remember "Silent E" from its musical cartoon appearances on the 1970s PBS kids' show, *The Electric Company* --- and if you're not old enough to remember The Electric Company, that's OK . . . the internet can remember it for you.

"Silent E" has long been one of my favorite songs thanks to the rough --- and roughly --- Peter Max style in which the cartoon was rendered, as well as for the ingenious way Lehrer demonstrates words and language be fun.

Which brings us to the topic of today's

Next to my writing desk sits a book roughly the size and shape of a 6-inch Solid Corner Sash cinder block and weighs as much as a five-and-a-half month old human child.

This 17 and a half pounds of paper and embossed leather measures twelve and an eighth inches long, by 9 and seven-eighths inches wide by five and a half inches thick.

It has two thousand, eight hundred, fifty-four pages filled with what looks like some of the tiniest print manageable at the time.

This publishing marvel is the 1932 edition of the Funk and Wagnall's New Standard Dictionary of the English Language - Complete in One Volume.

"Prepared by more than three hundred and eighty specialists and other scholars" this dictionary was, quote

"Designed to give, in Complete and Accurate Statement, in the Light of the Most Recent Advances in Knowledge, in the Readiest Form for Popular Use, the Orthography, Pronunciation, Meaning, and Etymology of All the Words, and the Meaning of Idiomatic

Phrases, In the Speech and Literature of the English-Speaking Peoples, Together with Proper Names of All Kinds, the Whole Arranged in One Alphabetical Order.”

As you can surmise, this dictionary is neither collegiate, desktop, practical, nor concise.

This baby is massive, unwieldy, and monumental.

Monumental:

page 1608

column two

entry #6

adjective

1. Of, pertaining to, or like a monument;
2. Serving as a monument; preserving memory; memorial
3. Fitted to serve as a monument; impressive; conspicuous; permanent.
4. [colloquially] Conspicuously great; exceeding; excessive

If you held a gun to my head, I still couldn't tell you where this thing came from. It's been around for as long as I can remember.

Not that I'm saying this thing is a family heirloom.

No doubt my grandmother or my mom picked it up a one rummage sale or another as an interesting looking something to adorn the house.

The same goes for 1921 Royal #10 typewriter with beveled glass windows and the Western Electric 202 D1 desk phone with rotary dial.

The phone didn't have the network connection-slash-ringer box so it couldn't be jacked in for service. It just perched on the upper corner of the old roll top desk that anchored the living room.

For the record, I still have the typewriter and the phone — both of which have been restored and work like the technological marvels they've always been.

As for the Funk & Wagnalls, it's impressive as hell, but it's not like we were a family of habitual dictionary users.

My dad wasn't much of a reader until later in life; my mom read books the definition of whose higher-value words are apparent from their context; my brother hated reading; and I hated dictionaries.

To be fair, when my brother was in first and second grade, he had a couple of hardware issues that kept him from receiving the full benefit of an early elementary school education. First, his eyes didn't want to work together so that it was a struggle to read.

Second, he had an undiagnosed problem with his adenoids that progressed into some pretty significant hearing loss before they were removed.

Adenoid:

page 35

column 1

entry 16

definition 2a

noun — (anatomical) a variety of connective tissue consisting of meshes filled with leucocytes; found in lymphatic glands and elsewhere in lymph-baths; retiform, reticular, or lymphoid tissue.

For my brother, book learning was something to suffer through in order to get to the good stuff like gym class — which is why he's never read for fun and has all of the street smarts.

And while I've never seemed to be able to read enough, for a while there, I couldn't stand the dictionary.

This was not due to witnessing my parents' back-alley murder by a lexicon of bad words.

As far as I can remember, the basis for this aversion was a series of 3rd-grade exercises requiring me to put a list of words in alphabetical order.

Aversion

page 197

column 2

entry 28

definition 1

noun — the state of being averse; a mental condition of fixed opposition to or dislike of some particular thing; antipathy: sometimes with with for or toward before the object

As far as the exercises went, I'd followed the instructions, lined up the words in order by their first letter — and received an F.

Either I failed to understand the instructions or they were insufficiently clear for the purpose of the assignment. The apparent point of the exercise was that alphabetization should be repeated for each of the subsequent letters in the group of words.

So, Descent needed to come before Describe but after Descend — that kind of thing.

I remember feeling like I'd been tricked and thinking this was both stupid and a complete waste of time. What made it worse was that I had to do it over and over again with different word lists because I just wasn't getting it.

Right around then was when my mom bought me a junior dictionary. It was dove grey with orange and black lettering on the high-gloss hardcover and didn't have a single swear word in it.

I've no idea where she'd have gotten it from because it wasn't like Amazon was around, nor did we have a bookstore in town.

I want to say I appreciated the gift, but knowing how I pissed-off I was about the assignments, combined with how thrilled the average third-grader would be getting a dictionary, I'm sure she got a grumbling, "thanks," and that was about all.

It wasn't until I went back to college the second time and tried to be a writer that I started to appreciate the value of a quality dictionary.

So that's what today's episode is about: This gargantuan book, its history, and its contents.

Gargantua

page 1009
column one
entry five

French, noun — In Rabelais's satire, Gargantua, the hero, a giant of great longevity with a phenomenal appetite. He has many wonderful adventures, and, founds the abbey of Thélème.

The 1932 edition of the Funk and Wagnall's New Standard Dictionary of the English Language indicates that, since Gargantua is a proper name, its adjectival form — *Gargantuan* — should also be capitalized. However, this is no longer *a la mode*.

Before going too much farther, we'd better talk about the booze.

Sitting on my desk today is a glass with my last seven-and-a-half fingers of Writer's Tears Irish Whiskey.

Writer's Tears is made by the Walsh Whiskey Distillery of Carlow, Ireland, and has been around since 1999, putting Walsh at the forefront of the Irish Whiskey renaissance.

Over the years, the Writer's Tears portfolio developed more than two dozen expressions of their premium and super-premium whiskeys, including exotic yet thoughtful styles aged in cognac, sherry, and Marsala casks, as well as a new one that spends its last 12 months finishing in icewine casks.

Writer's Tears also comes in a rare and limited edition aged in a single cask made from Mizunara oak trees grown in the foothills surrounding Mount Fuji.

The Mizunara oak is reported to impart hints of green fruit, vanilla, clove, sandalwood, and coconut.

And while all that sounds delicious, the Mizunara Cask Writer's Tears typically runs upward of a hundred bucks for a fifth. Instead, I've opted for their original offering: a triple-distilled, non-peated version matured in flame-charred American Oak bourbon casks, which averages \$45 bucks a bottle.

But don't suppose this means settling for one of the ugly stepsisters.

Writer's Tear's Copper Pot is an enchanting, award-winning whiskey included in Ian Buxton's list of *101 Whiskeys to try before you die*.

As with any whiskey of this caliber, it's going into a rocks glass with a chunk of ice, in this case, an oversized ice sphere.

I'll forego the geometry of why a single ice sphere is preferable to a cube of the same width and just say it's because the sphere has less surface area in contact with the booze.

Unlike the cube, or any other shape, the economy of the sphere effectively cools the whiskey and adds just enough water without diluting it.

For more info about the science surrounding having just the right amount of water in your whiskey, check out the Smithsonian Magazine article in the show notes.

Anyway, in the glass, the color of the Writers' Tears Copper Pot is a warm gold akin to looking at the sun through some clover honey.

On the nose is the alcohol burn of beverages with a 40% ABV, but once past that, there are hints of butterscotch, granny smith apple blossom, and even a hint of juniper.

The mouth feel of Writers' Tears Copper Pot is typical of what I find for most high-quality Irish whiskies, which includes a full body with some slickeryness that some might liken to petrol, but I just consider "booze."

On the tongue, the butterscotch smells have deepened into flavors of toffee or peanut brittle, and I get some baking spice and unbaked apple pie filling.

The medium-long finish resolves into some toffee, light oak, and a bit of parchment – which sounds odd, but is not remotely unpleasant.

In the final analysis, the Writers' Tears Copper Pot Irish Whiskey is a little bit of all right.

If I wanted to take the rest of the afternoon off, I'd two-fist this with a pint of the black stuff, then lay on the couch and pretend to read.

But you know what they say: Duty now for the future.

Speaking of duty — take a minute to listen to some good people doing good things, and we'll be right back.

What, exactly, is the dictionary definition of "dictionary"?

Page 705, column 3, entry number two states a dictionary is:

A book containing the words of any language, sometimes together with their equivalents in another language, or the words employed in any science or art, or special branch of knowledge, arranged alphabetically, and usually also with the spelling, pronunciation, etymology, and definitions of the words, together with other explanatory or illustrative features; lexicon; a word book

The entry lists a few synonyms for dictionary then goes on a kind of editorial harangue about the differences between an encyclopedia and a dictionary.

An encyclopedia, as the name implies, aims to sweep the whole circle of knowledge; a dictionary (in the strict sense of the word) confines itself to such matter as is absolutely necessary to explain the meaning and correct use of words. There is a tendency at the present to include in dictionaries much encyclopedic matter.

[whistles]

That's definitely a glove in the face of lexicographers who'd gotten a little too free with their verbiage.

Verbiage

page 2642

column 3

entry five

noun — "use of many words without necessity; superabundance of words; wordiness; verbosity"

Now, it's no happy accident I've invoked "verbiage" in this episode.

Oh, no.

"Verbiage" is being discussed here today as both a public service and a word of caution.

Consider this . . . an intervention.

First, stop saying "verbiage" in corporate settings, public forums, or other environments.

In fact, quit saying it anywhere at all.

Using the word "verbiage" doesn't make you sound any smarter and there's close to a 100% chance that you're using it incorrectly.

"Verbiage" isn't a synonym for words, or text, or content, or ad copy, or iambic octameter, or whatever-the-hell else it's presumed to be.

"Verbiage" means "too many words."

Learn it, know it, live it.

Second — and, you'll thank me for this — stop, stop, stop saying "Verbage."

Just . . . fucking stop.

"Verbage" is the loathsome mutant form of a word somebody — most likely a corporate executive — saw somewhere that one time and either read it too quickly or didn't bother looking up how to properly pronounce it.

So rather than fall back on a word they were already familiar with, they tried to look smart in a meeting and coughed-up a craptastic jargon-virus that's infected the American workplace.

"Verbage" . . . is not a word.

It's not even a thing.

"Verbage" is gibberish.

And saying it makes you sound stupid.

Think of this like you're warning your kids about crack, or the Kardashians:

"Verbage" — not even once.

And so much for all that.

Now's a good time for a quick break. Take a minute to listen to good people doing good things, and we'll be right back

[COMMERCIAL/PSA]

So, way back in 1875, a guy named Isaac Kaufmann Funk founded a publishing house in New York with an old college pal, Adam Wagnalls, who came on as an accountant, corporate counsel, and, apparently, silent partner.

Before starting his company, Funk had been an ordained Lutheran pastor spreading the gospel around Indiana, Ohio, and New York state, so it was only natural that he launched his new enterprise churning out religious texts and periodicals.

In 1877, the Funkmeister changed his company name to include friend Wagnalls to reflect the latter's importance to the overall business.

By 1890, the company started publishing other material. Then in November 1893 came the first volume of their Standard Dictionary of the English Language.

This was kind of a big deal at the time --- not only because of what it cost to produce and the number of words between the covers, but because of this dictionary's revolutionary organizational structure.

Per britannica.com, this included:

- the ordering of definitions according to current . . . usage;
- the appearance of [a word's origin] at the end of definitions, rather than at the beginning;
- the use of one alphabetical list for all entries, rather than separate sections for geographical, biographical, mythological, or biblical terms;
- the use of lowercase initial letters for all entry titles except proper nouns.

These changes few in the face of long-standing dictionary tradition which printed the word, then the word origin, then the root meaning, followed by a string of archaic and sometimes obsolete uses and variations — and only then putting the current meaning and usage dead last.

According to the 1932 introduction, "The average man . . . goes to a dictionary to find one or more of three things about a word: (1) its correct spelling, (2) its correct pronunciation; (3) its most common *present* meaning . . . hence nothing has been

permitted to stand between the vocabulary word and its most obvious or important *current* meaning.”

At this point, the Introduction gets a little dickish by stating, “The average man is thus embarrassed and confused” because he’s had to read a slew of material he may not understand before getting to the relevant details.

It turns out that the 1932 edition of the *Funk & Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary of the English Language* was a full overhaul of the 1913 edition.

There were strict injunctions to stick to old man Wagnall’s governing principle that, “The function of a dictionary is to record usage; not, *except in a limited degree*, to create it . . . ,” and that “. . . the essentials of a good dictionary are comprehensiveness, accuracy, and simplicity.”

It had been 20 years since the previous revision, so “every word . . . every quotation, definition, or other item [was] studied anew, with a view of bringing all to the highest attainable perfection by reediting and resetting.”

The company examined, revised, or refined more than five-hundred thirteen thousand terms — then rejected 63 thousand of those for being dead beyond resurrection, of little or no value, or so esoteric that nobody would go looking for them in a general-purpose dictionary.

Ultimately, the revision teams added around one hundred thousand *new* entries for a total of four-hundred-fifty-five thousand defined words and phrases.

According to Funk & Wagnalls, their publication had “fifty thousand more living terms than any other dictionary.”

As anyone with a quarter-ounce of acumen understands, no work of quality gets done on the cheap.

The 1932 Introduction states that Funk & Wagnalls spent more than \$1.5 million dollars putting together the new edition.

No doubt, part of the expense was typesetting the bastard.

I’m not going to get into the whole history of typesetting, or what methods were likely used for producing this beast, because it kind of doesn’t matter for this episode.

That said, composing each of the twenty-eight hundred pages, then reviewing, then making corrections, then getting management sign-off must have been a nightmare.

Another major chunk of change was spent on the high number of quality inline illustrations and full-page photographic plates showcasing things such as:

- forms of bacteria
- examples of remarkable ancient coins
- modern steel construction
- recent additions to the flags of the world; and
- types of hand-made lace

Many of these plates are in full color with a sheet of onion paper bound in to keep the printed text from sticking to the image.

The back of the book — the pages after the actual dictionary part — has four appendices that include lexicographical housekeeping and other bits of nerdgasm-inducing info, including:

- Disputed Pronunciations
- Rules for the Simplification of Spelling
- a Glossary of Foreign Words, Phrases, etc., Currently in English Literature and Law; and
- Statistics of Population

The Disputed Pronunciations section is essentially a list of 25 men and women — yes, women! — all professors of language, literature, or education — and their voting record on what was to be the official pronunciations of words such as *blancmange*, *cantaloupe*, and *matricide*.

Who'd have guessed at this remove that there'd ever been disagreement over how to say what we say —

but according to the Disputed Pronunciations section, we nearly got stuck with “mole-ekule” and “a-cow-sticks.”

I mean, I kind of get mole-ekule, but “a-cow-sticks?” Come on!

And for the record, there is not now, nor has there ever, been disputed pronunciations for ‘verbiage.’

It’s “verbiage.”

And don’t ever say it.

Probably the weirdest of the pronunciation disputes I spotted is over the word spelled, *w-i-g-w-a-m*.

It’s some pretty tragic-comic shit that two dozen white people were throwing lots from their ivory towers over whether it’s, “wig-whom” or “wig-wham” when all they had to do was talk to the real authorities on the subject.

But this is to be expected — or at least shouldn't be a surprise — when looking at a book that's close to a hundred years old.

Along with some of the pronunciation disputes, there's a definite colonial attitude in the selection of new words.

"It has been deemed wise to include . . . those terms that are commonly used, dialectically or otherwise, by large numbers of people in different parts of the English-speaking world. This body of terms has been augmented considerably by the territorial growth of the United States and of Great Britain, through the introduction of words in daily use among the peoples enjoying the protection of these two nations in their recently acquired dependencies The English language has been so greatly enriched by words drawn from dialectal sources and enlisted for general use that sufficient reason is manifest for recording them in a popular dictionary. Such words are worthy of special consideration, and not infrequent provincial usages will repay a careful study."

Then they go on to polish that shit with this Shinola:

Again, the requirement of Commerce, of the Manufacturing industries, of the Arts, of Finance, of Insurance — life, fire, and marine — as well as of Agriculture, Engineering, Eugenics, Political Economy, Sociology, etc., have made the coinage of many new words imperative.

Eugenics . . . ?

page 859
column 2
entry 24
definition 1
noun

the science and art of improving the human race by applying the ascertained laws of inheritance of characteristic to the selection of marriage mates, with the aim of securing to the offspring a desirable combination of traits, including resistance to untoward conditions: term first used by Sir Francis Galton in 1883;

*sub-definition: **negative eugenics**, the science and art of preventing the procreation of weak and defective persons, including the practice of segregation the sexes during the reproductive period and rendering sterile the highly unfit.*

So, yeah . . . that was happening in 1932 . . . in the United States of America.

Charles Lindberg was a fan.

So were Teddy Roosevelt and Helen Keller.

Anyway, along with being a fundamental resource for clear and accurate communication, dictionaries eventually become time capsules for the culture when and where they were published by capturing word definitions, pronunciations, usage, ideals, mores (morays), and history — and point the way to the evolution of language.

I have no idea what the MSRP was for the 1932 edition of the Funk & Wagalls New Standard Dictionary of the English Language, but nowadays, they list online anywhere from \$30 to \$500 bucks, depending on condition.

Even so, none of the copies I've seen are even close to the primo shape of the one I've got.

Not that I'm looking to sell anytime soon.

Because like Mark Twain once said: "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter. 'tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning."

Having this boat-anchor of a book around — this tome heavy enough to curve spacetime — is a leather-bound metaphor that words not only have meaning but power and weight; and that each one should be carefully chosen and correctly used.

And for anybody still inclined to say "verbage," rest assured you'll be beaten to death with an 18-pound dictionary.

That's it for the show, but there's plenty more to know.

For specifics on the books, booze, and other material referenced, take a look at the links section in the web page for this episode.

Any comments,

book suggestions,

booze suggestions,

or sponsorship offers,

can be sent to my producer, Chauncey,

at OfBooksAndBooze@gmail.com.

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This is Bradley Weber on behalf of the crew saying thanks for listening and reminding you to:

Shop local,

read local,

drink local,

get vaccinated,

tip your servers,

drink but never drive—

then get up and do it all again tomorrow.

See you next time.

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