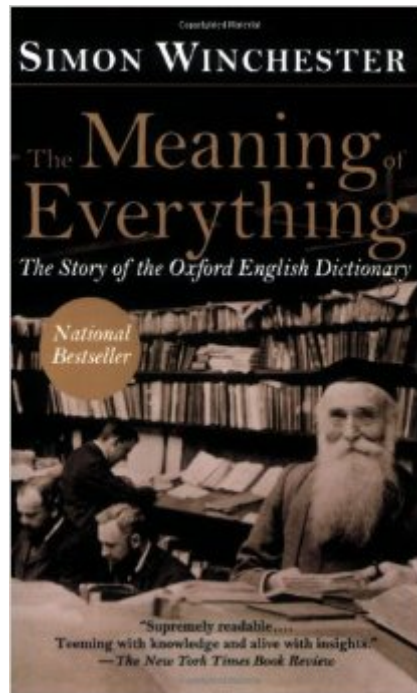


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The Meaning Of Everything: The Story Of The Oxford English Dictionary



Synopsis

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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Customer Reviews

The Oxford English Dictionary is an unrivaled monument to the history, beauty and complexity of the English language. The story of the men and women who made this marvelous work makes for compelling reading, especially in the hands of such a skilled storyteller as Simon Winchester. "The Professor and the Madman," Winchester's first best-seller, was the story of Dr. W.C. Minor, an American who had gone to England in what was a vain hope of regaining his sanity. Instead, he committed a senseless murder, and was imprisoned in an asylum for life. Minor found redemption in his otherwise ruined life by devoting decades of service as a volunteer reader/researcher for the OED. In his introduction to this volume, Winchester explains that an editor at the Oxford University Press suggested that since he had written a footnote to the story of the great enterprise, he might want to undertake the main story. Fortunately for us, he took up the suggestion with enthusiasm. The pace of the narrative never falters in its entire 250 pages. The opening chapter provides a brief overview of the evolution of English and of previous efforts to compile a truly comprehensive dictionary of the language--and why all fell short of that lofty goal. What became the OED enterprise had its origins in the late 1850s, but the first completed dictionary pages did not see the light of day until the early 1880s. Why the project was almost stillborn, how it survived deaths, disorganization, lack of funds and innumerable other setbacks--all of this is brought vividly to life in Winchester's tale.

In a world of uncertainties, there is at least one human effort we can count on. For 75 years, if you have needed to know about an English word, you could turn to the Oxford English Dictionary and you could expect enlightenment. You could know you were getting the authoritative low-down on any word you might come across, and you could not only find its definition, but its history of use given in quotations dating from its very first known appearance in print. For word fans, using the OED is a joy, and every turn of the pages in its monumental volumes registers new affection and admiration for an unequalled intellectual accomplishment. Five years ago, Simon Winchester wrote The Professor and the Madman, an inspiring account of an inmate of an asylum who helped compile the OED's words. It was a footnote to the OED's larger history, and now, in The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford University Press),

Winchester has given that history with the same humane and appreciative tone of his first book on the subject. Anyone who uses English ought to know the OED, and anyone who loves the OED will find this book fascinating. Winchester gives a fine brief guide to the history of our language, and shows that by the Victorian age, philologists felt a comprehensive dictionary was needed. In 1842, the Philological Society settled on a proposal of a gargantuan dictionary, one that would have old words and new, one that would have every word and every meaning for that word. There was certainly something of power in such a scheme; great men and great ambitions would push the influence of English throughout the Empire, nay, the world, and increase the influence of Britain and her church.

There were some human endeavours of the modern world which were to be known to posterity as spectacularly gigantic, given the difficulty, hardship and human toil to have them fully completed. The British effort to build the Suez Channel, and the American on the turn of the 19th century to build the Panama Channel, are good examples of such gigantic steps the human race took in order to bridge distant lands and to ease communication between peoples of distant lands. The same could be said of the making of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), a phenomenal task both by the ample range of its scope, which was to solidify and market English as the leading language of the world, and by the number of people involved in the project. Editors? Eight. Number of pages? More than 20.000. Number of entries? More than 400.000, and so on. The task, which initially was estimated to take some 10 years, did not reach its end before many decades passed. *The Meaning of Everything*, by Simon Winchester, is a detailed account of the making of the OED, and the reader is entitled to a full range of the most interesting narrative concerning the idiosyncratic personalities of each and every successive editor of the dictionary, specially of the legendary Scotsman James Murray, with whom the dictionary is most commonly associated, due to the maturity of purpose the project acquired in his experienced hands. By the way, Murray was a polymath, a man grown up in poverty but with a keen curiosity and many different interests and who spoke/read more than 25 languages. The many photographs of him and of the many editors are a good add-on to the book.

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