

Lingering over a good book: the dictionary

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By Katharine
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What book would you choose to have on a desert island? Lots of people select the Bible or the complete works of Shakespeare. When I questioned a number of people on this subject for an article last year, the

answers ranged from favorite novels to practical survival guides. No one came up with what would have been my answer: Webster's Second International Dictionary, unabridged.

Whenever I look up a word in the dictionary, I get hooked. Look up the spelling of *bourgeois* and there you see *bouw* (an Indonesian unit of land area equal to 1.75 acres.) And what about *boutade* (a caprice or whim) — now there's a nifty word. Now, how was *bourgeois* spelled again?

I call this habit "adjacent reading." Sometimes I can stop writing something in midsentence in order to check a spelling or meaning in the dictionary, only to become engrossed in adjacent reading for very long periods of time. I lose track of whatever I was writing, the time, and above all, my original quest for information that sent me to the dictionary in the first place.

While checking to see if *flight song* ought to be hyphenated, what did I find but *flimp* (to spirit away, to rob), *fliffus* (a double somersault performed on a trampoline), and *fliskmahoy* (a flighty woman). I find myself trying to fit some of my new finds into everyday conversation, but it is usually a little conspicuous. Many a fliskmahoy has found herself in a fliffus over a fellow, only to discover that he has flimped her heart. You start talking that way and people know you've been hitting the old dictionary pretty hard again.

Sometimes a word that seems vaguely familiar is defined by a word that is utterly foreign. *Footstalk* might sound like something you could figure out, but it is in fact a) the pedicle or peticel of a flower, b) a peduncle, or c) the lower part of a millstone spindle. Time to look up *peduncle*, and off we go into the p's.

Peduncle turns out to be less interesting than it sounds because it's one of the many thousands of words in flower language. But it is on the same page as *peesweep* (an English bird). If you do a lot of this kind of free-form adjacent reading you begin to realize that lots of good words turn out to be birds, the private parts of flowers or the names of things that lived at the bottom of certain Peruvian lakes during the Triassic period.

Whilst one wanders among the p's, one's eye is caught by *pewless*. What could it mean? "He was a sniveling and pewless coward" sounds about right. But no: the dictionary entry reads "*pewless* — having no pews."

Sometimes I see if I can find an entire dictionary page that consists of words that are more or less familiar, scientific terms excepted. So far I haven't succeeded, although I've come pretty close. There are amazing numbers of words stockpiled in the dictionary that we just don't use. Even William F. Buckley doesn't use them all.

Did you know that something that is *torulose* is somewhat *torose*? An *ursogram* is not an urgent communication from a bear. You may be a *usufructuary* in your own backyard. Another term for *yampee* is *cush-cush*. Dr. Seuss did not make up the *zonule of zim* and you have two yourself.

Every year we read about the newest accumulation of technical terms and word concretions that have permeated the outer membranes of everyday language. It has been more than a decade since Edwin Newman began wringing his hands over the misuse of "hopefully" and he is still right, but it has been accepted by most dictionaries. (It's only a page or two away from *howkit* and *holus-bolus*.)

It is tempting to suggest a moratorium on the creation and acceptance of any new words or phrases until we have made full use of the ones we've got. The reason that would never work is that our language is constantly growing and evolving. It is a living thing. The oldest and most established rules of language and grammar were once new.

I might have personal objections to much of what passes for new language today, but I defend its right to exist. Common use makes anything legitimate if a long enough time passes and the word or phrase remains in currency. Trendy words and expressions tend to go the way of the nehru jacket.

Meanwhile, there are lots of neglected words that are well worth saving. You too can adopt a word and take it out for some fresh air. Your sponsorship can help make the difference for underprivileged words that haven't been used in years. Anargyrose sponsors are welcome. (Look it up.)

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