

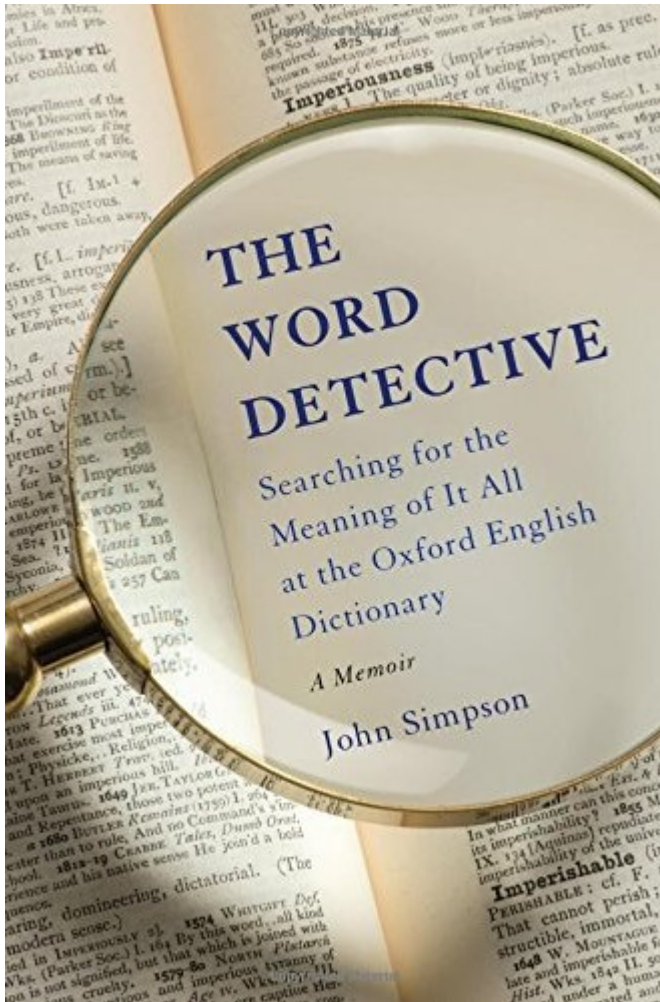
What words mean to us

John Simpson's new memoir is about words. More significantly, it's about our relationship to them.

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#)

January 3, 2017

In Review



The Word Detective

Searching for the Meaning of It All at the Oxford English Dictionary

by John Simpson

Basic Books

I remember vividly the first time I became aware of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It was the summer after my first year of college, and my friend Jane and I were engaged in a long-distance game of Scrabble. (This was before the days of apps and online interactive games. We set up our boards the old-fashioned way, each at one end of the country, and periodically told one another by phone which new letters we had chosen, which word we had created, and where on the board we were placing it. It was painstakingly and exhilaratingly slow.) At stake was a seven-letter word on a triple word score, and it all hinged on whether the gerund *wauling* could legitimately be made into *waulings*. (This was also before the days of a searchable online Scrabble dictionary.) After an intractable disagreement we contacted our favorite English professor for advice, and she wisely responded by telling us to look it up in the *OED*. I've been fascinated with the dictionary ever since.

John Simpson's lively memoir about the editing, updating, and online debut of the *OED* gives a glimpse into what the author portrays as a living, breathing book. Simpson, who worked at the estimable dictionary for most of his adult life, intersperses the story of his own life and vocation with the cultural, linguistic, and etymological stories of words. Along the way, there's drama, sadness, and a good deal of dry humor. "The English are temperamentally obsessed with the presence or absence of apostrophes. It remains for many people a divide between civilization and chaos." He comments on his office culture with the wry explanation that "the inability to see beyond the past is known to lovers of punctuation as the 'Oxford coma.'"

Simpson covers the history of many words that are fraught with meaning in today's world—including *gay*, *disability*, and *sorry*—as well as more mundane terms like *spa*, *juggernaut*, and *balderdash*. He explains how the editors of the original *OED* deliberately skipped from *fucivorous* to *fuco'd* in order to avoid being arrested for gross indecency. He traces patterns in the migration of "loanwords" from Hindi and Japanese into English.

Simpson's imagined interviews with famous intellectuals for the position of lexicographer are so funny that when I read them I laughed out loud on the train,

startling my fellow commuters. Archimedes, he writes, “was direct and to the point. . . . He was bony and angular, too. Sometimes went off at a tangent. That’s not something you want in a lexicographer.” He asks Immanuel Kant “How would you critique the prospective definition of an intellectual as a person who speaks at the same time as he thinks?” When James Joyce shows up for an interview and is quizzed about the word *selfie*, he responds with some puzzlement “Is it a hyper-referential term for introspective monologue? . . . Because that’s the way literature is moving.” Needless to say, none of these figures is offered the job.

In the end, the power of this memoir is in its understated conviction that the history, meaning, and evolution of words *matter* the way bodies and relationships matter. Writing with some vulnerability about how bodies, relationships, and words intersect in his own life, Simpson creates a space for his readers to reflect more broadly on why words matter to us.

As for my first foray into the *OED*, Jane and I determined that *waulings*, although not explicitly listed in the dictionary in that form, was valid as a plural form of the noun listed therein. She won the argument and soon thereafter the game. Still, I harbor no anger against the *OED*, just pure and simple admiration for it.