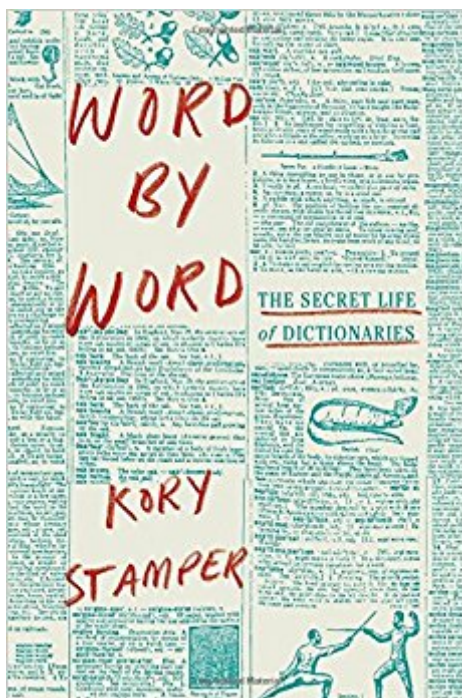


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Word By Word: The Secret Life Of Dictionaries



Synopsis

Do you have strong feelings about the word “irregardless”? Have you ever tried to define the word “is”? Brimming with intelligence and personality, this vastly entertaining account of how dictionaries are made is a must-read for word mavens. Many of us take dictionaries for granted, and few may realize that the process of writing dictionaries is, in fact, as lively and dynamic as language itself. With sharp wit and irreverence, Kory Stamper cracks open the complex, obsessive world of lexicography, from the agonizing decisions about what to define and how to do it, to the knotty questions of usage in an ever-changing language. She explains why small words are the most difficult to define, how it can take nine months to define a single word, and how our biases about language and pronunciation can have tremendous social influence. And along the way, she reveals little-known surprises—for example, the fact that “OMG” was first used in a letter to Winston Churchill in 1917. *Word by Word* brings to life the hallowed halls (and highly idiosyncratic cubicles) of Merriam-Webster, a startlingly rich world inhabited by quirky and erudite individuals who quietly shape the way we communicate. Certain to be a delight for all lovers of words, Stamper’s debut will make you laugh as much as it makes you appreciate the wonderful complexities and eccentricities of the English language.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

An Best Book of March 2017: “We think of English as a fortress to be defended, but a better analogy is to think of English as a child,” writes Kory Stamper in her witty and surprising new book, *Word by Word*. “As English grows, it lives its own life, and this is right

and healthy. Sometimes English does exactly what we think it should; sometimes it goes places we don't like and thrives there in spite of all our worrying. We can tell it to clean itself up and act more like Latin; we can throw tantrums and start learning French instead. But we will never really be the boss of it. And that's why it flourishes.

• Word by Word is part memoir, part history of dictionaries in particular, those published by Stamper's employer, Merriam Webster. Language lovers (can we call them logophiles, Ms. Stamper?) will have a fine time in the author's company as she discusses the unpredictable and uncontrollable ways of her mother tongue. The surprises come when she describes the difficulties of defining seemingly simple words like "nude" and "marriage." Stamper and her fellow lexicographers work mostly in silence, but they can't escape being drawn into our era's vociferous political discourse. Along the way, there's much pleasure to be had in Stamper's down-to-earth, frequently ribald narrative style, which keeps Word by Word from feeling overly intellectual or highfalutin.

• Readers will find a deeper understanding of how dictionaries are compiled, and a trove of amusing insights into definitions and derivations. "On fleek"? Invented by a 16-year-old YouTuber. Pumpernickel? Translates to "fartgoblin." Posh? If you're certain that term derives from English-Empire lingo for "port-out-starboard-home," think again. While you might not choose to spend an entire month of your life writing a dictionary entry for "take," Stamper conveys the delight, frustration, and satisfaction her vocation entails. She has that special "feeling for language" she calls *sprachgefühl*: "the odd buzzing in your brain that tells you that 'planting the lettuce' and 'planting misinformation' are different uses of 'plant'.

• Word by Word offers laymen a glimpse into a crack lexicographer's mind, and it turns out to be a very entertaining place indeed. --Sarah Harrison Smith, The Book Review

"As a writer, Kory Stamper can do anything with words: define them, split them, lump them, agglute them, and make them work for her every bit as ferociously and precisely as she works for them in her day job as a far from mild-mannered lexicographer at Merriam-Webster. You will never take a dictionary entry for granted again."

• Mary Norris, bestselling author of *Between You & Me*

"A love letter to letters themselves... A cheerful and thoughtful rebuke of the cult of the grammar scolds. Stamper [is] a wry and charming correspondent. Word by Word is, like a dictionary itself, a composite affair: It's a memoir that is also an explanation of the work that writing a

dictionary entails." *—Megan Garber, The Atlantic* "An unlikely page-turner *—Kory Stamper displays a contagious enthusiasm for words...Illuminating.*" *—The New Yorker* "Delightful *—Informed, irreverent and witty*" *—A gloriously (occasionally even uproariously) well written book, and unsurprisingly erudite. Do read [Word by Word].*" *—Stevie Godson, New York Journal of Books*

This was a book club selection and a excellent one. The process of creating a dictionary was fascinating. It was a learning lesson and explanation of the craft and knowledge needed to create a dictionary. I never gave much thought to the book I use so much and now have a real appreciation for the labor of love that it take to produce such a work. I would recommend this to all word lovers.

Stamper has a marvelous wit as she runs through every aspect of a dictionary-writer's job. I've given it as a gift to people who love words and enjoy seeing stories about them.

This book was amazing. It's not a light read, it is a book to be enjoyed and savored. Stamper's explanation of a process I took for granted is fascinating. She is truly passionate about words and language and as a result, sometimes she wanders into the weeds, but she always brings it back with a brilliant quip or insightful story. One doesn't expect to laugh out loud while reading a book on dictionaries, but I did to the point the I'd snort laugh and my kids would shake their heads "she's reading that dictionary book again".

How terrific is this book? If you're a word nerd, you're going to adore it--and if you're not, you're still going to laugh yourself silly! Kory Stamper is an intelligent, witty, and incredibly well-informed writer who will astound you with remarkable insight into things you thought you knew, things you never knew, and things you just can't get enough of. There's a reason for all the buzz around this book--it's a delight!

I thoroughly enjoyed this book! It's packed with information and anecdotes I found fascinating and frequently hilarious. It was such a treat to get an in-depth, behind-the-scenes look at the creation of my favorite dictionary! Word by Word has joined my list of most laugh-out-loud, entertaining books ever. I recommend it to everyone I know who, like me, is sure to appreciate the curious world of lexicography.

Lovers of words, this one is for you. A deep dive into the world of lexicography made into a fun read by Ms. Stamper's prose-writing skills and story-telling chops. So why not five stars then? It gets dinged one star because, a few times (only a few), the deep dive gets a little too deep-divey and reads like a treatise (though still quite interesting!). But with Ms. Stamper's writerly abilities, she set the bar pretty high for herself, so it's easy to nitpick. In other words, it's still a good read!

Just fascinating. A must read.

Loved the book, both funny and informative... gave copies to fiends who all loved it as well. A book you will want to talk about and share.

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