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## *Reviews of Books*

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**David Crystal, *The Story of English in 100 Words*. Picador, St. Martin's Press, New York, 2011. 260 pp. ISBN 978-1-250-02420-6.**

**Mark Forsyth, *The Etymologicon*. Icon Books, Ltd, London, 2011. 252 pp. ISBN 978-184831-307-1.**

Etymology, or the study of the history of words, their origins, and how their form and meaning have changed over time, is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of linguistics, which never fails to surprise, enlighten, puzzle or amuse both scholars and laymen alike. Therefore, two books on the subject, which were written by two famous, in their own way, writers, David Crystal and Mark Forsyth, and published, by chance, the same year, are a real treat for language lovers, philologists by trade or liking. Beyond the shared subject and year of publication, the books under review have one more thing in common: they both are remarkable guides into the fascinating world of English and its ever growing, expanding, and transforming word stock.

A professional linguist and lexicological expert Crystal long ago developed an appreciation of the unlimited resources that etymology can offer him for generation of popularized publications on linguistics. In the Preface to the current book, he outlines two possible approaches to telling the story of the English language. One of them is the traditional approach of providing a chronological overview and identifying general themes and trends within the major periods of language development, such as Old English, Middle English, Early Modern and Modern English. The opposite approach, used in many popular wordbooks, is to present a series of interesting English words and phrases and explore their etymology. He himself has used both of these methods in his *The Stories of English* (Crystal, 2005) and *As They Say in Zanzibar* (2006). This time, he decided to bring together both approaches in one book: it is still a wordbook, but each entry is selected because it tells us something about the way the English language developed. His list in the book under review comprises 100 words, introduced in chronological order and presented by moving from particular to general, relating the word to important themes and trends in the language as a whole.

The book starts with a short history of English as seen through its vocabulary development. In this introduction, Crystal briefly analyzes well known to any student of English lexicology sources of word stock enrichment and points out the periods, when English incorporated loan words of Celtic, Latin, Germanic and other origins. True to his chronological principle, the story of his 100 words starts with the first ever-recorded English word *roe* (5<sup>th</sup> century). This chapter is accompanied by the illustration of the roe deer's ankle bone, on the surface of which the word was carved with six runic letters. Then, he moves to *lea* (8<sup>th</sup> century), which was widely used in naming places and can be detected in many English geographic names, as well as names of species common to those places. In this manner, the book goes all the way to the twenty-first century and finishes with *twittersphere*, that, according to the author, might give a reader some glance into the future directions of language development.

The narration is supported by 20 illustrations related to the described period or episode. Thus, the entry *Americanism* brings the story of "a new nation" and the appearance of the word, initially applied to all

American. The illustration, which goes with this chapter, shows the British and American book covers of one of the Harry Potter series, specifically of “*The Philosopher’s* (aka *Sorcerer’s* – Am.) *Stone*” book, where even the titles are different due to the language variant preference of its publishers.

Besides revealing the origin of a word and a historical fact connected with it, Crystal also provides rudimentary information on the ways of word formation. For instance, speaking about the significance of conversion in the English word coinage, he brings in Shakespeare as a remarkable “conversion expert” and the author of “really daring” conversion coinages (e.g., *Petruchio is Kated*, p. 15). To prove the productivity of conversion in a natural everyday usage he makes the following dialogue:

Child (at bedtime): But I want to watch Mickey Mouse.

Parent: I’ll Mickey Mouse you if you don’t get those pyjamas on right now!

As such, his book is amusing and very educational indeed and, as is mentioned in some reviews on its cover, “sparkles with information about how English grows, changes, adopts and plays”. These praises also say that some words of Crystal’s choice are somewhat “dirty” and the language itself is “delightfully mischievous”.

All these compliments can be shared by the second book under consideration, *Etymologicon* by Mark Forsyth; though with it, the degree of the latter set of epithets can be multiplied by ten. This is because Forsyth, a writer and journalist, whose nickname is *The Inky Fool*, treats lexicon in a much more playful, lighthearted way than Crystal. Forsyth’s approach lies in revealing the intricate etymological relationships between words, which often go very deep into the history of language and culture. Like Crystal, Forsyth has his own list of chosen words, or, rather, he starts with a word, chosen seemingly at random, and then traces its “relatives” down the hidden paths of their historic connections, coming up with unexpected and surprising links and partnerships. All that matters is which word he picks up first; from there he spins an endless thread of bonds and links, transformations and associations. His method is vividly described in the Preface to the book, a story about one careless chap who made the mistake of asking the author about the origin of the *biscuit* he was eating at the moment. Little did he know that this innocent question would open “the metaphorical floodgates” and that the flood would carry him from *biscuit*, or *cooked twice*, to *bicycle* and *bisexual*, and from there to *masochism*, *Kafkaesque* and *Retifism*. And all this happened because: “There’s always an extra connection, another link that joins two words that most mankind quite blithely believe to be separate, which is why that fellow didn’t escape until a couple of hours later when he managed to climb out of the window while I was drawing a diagram to explain what the name Philip has to do with a hippopotamus” (Forsyth, p. XVIII).

So, unlike Crystal’s list of one hundred words, which takes us through the history, from the first *roe* to neologisms of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, Forsyth’s list is unpredictable, perhaps, even to himself. Take, for instance, the beginning of his book, which starts with the phrase *a turn-up for the books*, related to the bookmakers in horse races of Victorian Britain, and goes to the medieval gambling “game of chicken” in France, from which the word *pool* comes. From here the author comes to *gene pool*, *generation*, *oxygen* and other *gen* words, and from them to *general* and his *privates*, and from there, quite unexpectedly (or not so unexpectedly, as the reader will gradually realize in the course of the book) to a chain of words, hidden under the euphemism *privates* and their numerous synonyms. The nature of this book review does not allow quoting all of them; suffice it to say that, according to Forsyth, this extended group of etymologically related words includes *orchid* and *avocado*.

In a similar playful, occasionally bawdy, frequently witty and wonderfully erudite fashion Mark Forsyth guides the reader through a secret labyrinth, which lies beneath the English word stock, where *monks* and *monkeys*, as well as *boogies* and *bugs* go hand-in-hand, and where a new secret weapon, known by the code name of *Water Carriers for Russia* (*WC*, if abbreviated), got to be called *tank* due to Winston Churchill’s concern about lavatorial implications. The strange and unfathomed ways etymology works immensely

amuse Forsyth and he pours on the reader one hilarious story after another. Nothing is sacred for him – neither Jesus, nor the Bible, not even the “bible” of his trade, the Dictionary. Take, for instance, a story, where he ridicules the Apostle Peter, who attempted to walk on water following “a chap called Jesus”, after which the name *storm peter*, as well as *parrot* appeared. In the same frivolous manner he tackles such serious historical material as the genesis and evolution of lexicography. While Crystal, talking about dictionaries, introduces a photo, on which a group of scholars venerate Samuel Johnson on the occasion of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his dictionary publication in 1955, Forsyth quickly skips over Johnson, together with Webster, “who was an immensely boring man”. His purpose is to come closer to the appearance of the Oxford Dictionary of English, “the greatest work of reference ever written, and ... the result of a Scotsman who left school at fourteen, and a criminally insane American” (p. 131).

Just from one example above, it is clear that the books under review are very different and that makes them even more valuable to the lovers of etymology as they provide diverse perspectives and introduce mostly dissimilar material. There is one entry on which the stories of both vocabulary explorers are similar, *robot*. Otherwise their lists are pretty different, as well as their manner of presenting etymological information.

There is one more word they both discuss, *music*, and the way they do it will give still a better idea how different the approaches of Crystal and Forsyth are. Thus, Crystal introduces this word to show evolution in spelling during the 14<sup>th</sup> century. He points out that the word has gone through over forty different ways of spelling, and at the time it was entered in Dr Johnson’s dictionary (1755), spelling was guided by the rule: “The English never use *c* at the end of the word” (Crystal, p. 86). In Forsyth’s book, *music* gets quite different treatment. He tells the story of John the Baptist, who was born while his father lost his voice. From there, the author comes to other stories connected with this episode and finally to the fourteenth century, where the hymn to John Baptism was shortened by “a fellow called Guido of Aresso” to Do re Mi fa So la Ti Do.

So, which book on etymology would you like to read? I recommend both, as they are different, but equally delightful and informative, each in its own way. There is one little bonus in Forsyth’s book – it has a collection of quizzes to sum up the reader’s knowledge gained while strolling through his story of English words, or at least to provide “the greatest joy a human being can achieve in this sorrowful world, (which is) to get up on his or her fellow man or woman by correcting their English”.

## References

- Crystal, D. (2005). *The Stories of English*. London: Overlook TP.  
 Crystal, D. (2006). *As They Say in Zanzibar*. London & New York: Collins.

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