



Word Origins ... and How We Know Them: Etymology for Everyone

Anatoly Liberman

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"Millions of people want to know the origin of the words they use. Word columns in daily newspapers and numerous books attempt to satisfy their curiosity. Word histories are usually digested like pills: the user is interested in getting well, not in the chemistry of the prescribed medication. Those who send letters to the Editor also want a straight answer without bothering about how "editors" come by their knowledge.

Therefore, they fail to realize that etymologies are seldom definitive and that the science of etymology is intensely interesting. Perhaps if someone explained to them that, compared to the drama of words, *Hamlet* is a light farce, they might develop a more informed attitude toward philological research and become students of historical linguistics rather than gullible consumers of journalists' pap."--Anatoly Liberman

Word Origins is the only guide to the science and process of etymology for the layperson. This funny, charming, and conversational book not only tells the known origins of hundreds of words, but also shows how their origins were determined. Liberman, an internationally acclaimed etymologist, takes the reader by the hand and explains the many ways that English words can be made, and the many ways in which etymologists try to unearth the origins of words.

Part history, part how-to, and completely entertaining, *Word Origins* invites readers behind the scenes to watch an etymologist at work.

Word Origins ... and How We Know Them: Etymology for Everyone Details

Date : Published March 24th 2005 by Oxford University Press, USA (first published January 1st 2005)

ISBN : 9780195161472

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Format : Hardcover 252 pages

Genre : Humanities, Language, Linguistics, Nonfiction, History, Writing, Reference

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Danielle says

The author has a great sense of humor and I also felt like I learned a great deal while reading this book. However it seemed like the author's digressions sometimes took on an asbergers-y aspect when he would get to explaining, then explaining, then explaining some more, but never fully coming to his point. The book could have been more concise, used a stronger outline, etc. Fun read though.

Sarah says

I enjoyed much of this book. I learned a lot about the science of etymology and had fun learning about various English words and their surprising origins. There were large sections especially near the end where it felt very dry and specific to the etymology crowd- I got a bit lost and bored with the details at times. But overall I enjoyed it!

rr says

I had high hopes for this book. I wanted it to be something I could use as a supplementary book in my etymology course. Alas, no. I feel that the book is uneven in the amount and kind of explanation it provides, and it seems to me to raise more questions than it answers--and not the questions it would profess to want to raise. I also found the progression of the chapters odd; it's not what would seem to make most sense to/for students (who are included in the author's imagined audience). Sadly, by the end I felt like I worked through a pile of trivia, which is always the danger with etymology. I was hoping that such an accomplished practicing etymologist would be able to provide students and serious leisure-readers with a better introduction to and overview of the field.

Jorg says

Sly, rambling, convoluted and involved, labyrinthine and playful as language itself--both an excellent introduction into modern study of etymology and its travails and a grab-bag of etymological miscellanea, this book should be required reading for anyone even remotely as much in love with words as the author clearly is.

Sarah Finch says

A brisk and witty tour of etymological theory of 'standard' English (slang, Spanglish, AAVE, etc are not covered). Liberman gives past scholars their due while forging his own path by grouping chapters more along the lines of phonic concepts such as onomatopoeia and vowel shifts than on which linguistic sources

contributed which words. Though the reader need not have a background in linguistics to enjoy the book, Liberman does engage in some deep dives into theory that require your close attention if you want to keep up.

Carolyn says

I imagine it is difficult to write a book about etymology without becoming a dictionary. Liberman also confuses his audience getting too caught up in technicalities, but for a linguist not clarifying his orthography. At times he mentions phonetics and pronunciation, at others, nothing.

Briana Grenert says

I bought "Word Origins" when Borders was shutting down and I found myself with \$100 in stockpiled gift cards. I was 14. This book took me two years of (highly inconsistent) reading to get through. I don't know how to rate: it was fascinating and informative, and I liked the writing well enough but I didn't enjoy reading it and I'm happy to be done. I learned a lot, and will definitely enjoy reviewing sections, but the idea if reading it again in full makes my stomach turn. Sometimes it felt like torture, but the idea if permanently abandoning this book did not occur to me because I was fascinated...Liberman is clearly intelligent, and this book was rather dense... Obviously not made for one sitting, but there is nothing wrong with that!

Cat. says

Well, *not* everyone. "Everyone" with a pretty high level of interest in the subject, and above-average intelligence. Liberman is very quick-witted and assumes a basic working knowledge of etymology, which I admit I don't have. On the other hand, towards the end, he mentions that he hopes that his book might be considered as a basic textbook, and for that it would work VERY well--best textbook I think I've ever read start-to-finish. While fairly short, this is a good overview of theory and practice, but if you don't know anything about the Great Vowel Shift in the English language, I'd steer clear.

Anne Nydam says

Although this book is amusingly written and full of interesting tidbits, I find that it does not deliver on its promise to explain HOW we KNOW word origins. If I, who majored in linguistics, find his reasoning arbitrary at times, I imagine that others might find his arguments utterly baffling. (Besides, Kipling never claimed that giraffes have humps!)

Kate says

Not at all what I was expecting. I kind of wanted examples of some interesting word developments, and how and why they came to be. What I got instead was never ending paragraphs filled with lectures on spellings,

pronunciations, language borrowing, phonetics etc, with 6 or 8 or 12 words thrown in all together to illustrate the author's point. There were a few amusing anecdotes hiding in there, but I couldn't get very far into it without feeling like I should be taking notes for an exam, so I just flipped after the first few chapters.

Paul Gallear says

When you only start to enjoy a book 220ish pages in, you know you're in trouble. I found it almost unreadable, which is a great shame as etymology is a subject I revel in.

Also, the arrogance of the last chapter is staggering.

Talbot Hook says

I can tell that I enjoy the author, as a person. Obviously erudite, he seems unaware, and perhaps a bit Pnin-esque. (An assumption derived from my reading.)

The book, let's see. The book, though short, was tiresome to me. There was simply too much detail. While I took away fun curios, such as the origin of the word 'daisy,' it was almost unbearable at times. But, from what I gather, Liberman wishes this book to form the foundation for a class in etymology or English Language Studies. Indeed, in that capacity, it would be much better.

I applaud him for his services to our language, and to our collective pool of knowledge and dialogue, even if his book, at this time in my life, did not sit well with me.

On the last page, though, he does state something rather true: "A book not worth rereading is not worth reading even once." On that note, I suppose my death bed shall yield those books I found best.

Vasha7 says

This was fun to read — not only does Liberman lay out very sound methods for determining the histories of words, with occasional appropriate ridicule of the storytelling that some etymologists have engaged in, but he peppers his prose with wordplay and wit. He introduces some ideas that were a bit unexpected to me. For example, he thinks the role of "sound symbolism" is quite important — that is, people either alter existing words or create ones with an appropriate sound to the subject, like *pig*, *pug*, *pod*, *pad*, etc. being appropriate to something "swollen". Also, his idea of etymology hopes to get to the *origin* of the word — either when it was coined or when it split off from related words in a sort of speciation event. I hadn't considered being that daring. But he's appropriately cautious about the subject of the origin of language itself, of course.

Frankie says

It's clear that Liberman is not a professional writer, nor did he have time or inclination to write out an outline of this "lecture." I have to admit I've learned a great deal, however ranting his style or arbitrary his points. I

knew little of etymology or philology, and this immersion of terminology and examples greatly helped, though at times I nearly drowned in overlapping digressions.

I felt the shortcoming was mine, until I read in the chapter "The State of English Etymology" the author's messianic description of the little-known Skeat, followed by a pages-long defense of his reclusive and elitist behaviour. I took this as a sympathetic/reflexive character, and conclude that the author is, like me, uncouth and possibly incapable of ironing out his arguments in a socially-acceptable form. He knows his stuff so well, his explanations fall short.

Regardless of his style, thanks to the author I now have a basic understanding of the principles and struggles of etymology.

Adam says

Like listening to a crazy professor for 250 pages. Learned a lot. Interesting subject that I was never into before.
