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My Collection: Defined

Words excite me. Whenever I hear a new word, everything stops until I learn its meaning. At four, I began badgering my parents for definitions of words, often forgetting my manners and interrupting their “grown-up” conversations (“Bill, don’t forget the tax appointment on Thursday.” “Mom, what does *appointment* mean?” “Not now, honey.”) As I have matured, so, too, has my interest in words. Now, instead of interrupting my parents, I reach for one of my dictionaries. Unlike most of my books, which sit neatly on shelves gathering dust, my collection of books about words is stacked on the floor next to my bed. This is because out of all the books I own, these are the books I reach for when I wake up in the middle of the night, the books I take on trips with me, the books I feel naked without.

My earliest memories of word-books involve dictionaries. I remember clambering up into my dad’s lap to listen to him read *The Wind in the Willows*, the sun filtering through the big window by the comfy reading chair in my room. I also remember the way I suddenly tuned out my dad’s voice and fixated on the meaning of some unfamiliar word. *What did it mean? Did it mean this? Could it mean that?* Finally, “Daddy, what does ‘ostentatious’ mean?” My dad smiled patiently, all too familiar with my need for definitions, put the book down, took my hand, and said, “Let’s look it up.” Together we walked to the study, my favorite room in the house, with its walls filled floor to ceiling with my family’s books.

My dad confidently lifted the heaviest book in the room off its shelf, far too high for me to reach; together we turned the musty pages bound in faded red cloth, searching for the page that contained the answer to our question. This was an amazing book. It had the answers to so many questions, so many words I did not even know existed. I was fascinated by the puzzling

introduction to each entry: Why were there those dots in the middle of the words? What did those peculiar symbols and upside down letters mean?

By third grade it was apparent that I, like much of my family, had a “thing” for words and dictionaries. I was the only one in my class who consistently chose to do the “definition” option on the spelling homework; I knew where all my relatives kept their dictionaries. I had found a dictionary of medical terms at my doctor grandpa’s house, a Scrabble player’s dictionary at my aunt’s, a rhyming dictionary in my mom’s first-grade classroom, and most intriguing of all, a Spanish to English translation dictionary in my big brother’s room. I snuck into his room time and time again to examine the black book, but no matter how I opened the mysterious *diccionario*, I never seemed to be able to figure out how it worked.

Most telling, though, was the fact that I was the only person in my family who was significantly upset by the replacement of our household dictionary. My old red friend had definitely seen better days: its threadbare cover was stained, its spine was cracked, its pages were crumpled. But all the same, when my dad opened his Christmas present from my grandparents one year and found a new shiny yellow dictionary, I could not find it in me to share his enthusiasm. I asked if I could keep the old one—for sentimental reasons—and my dad chuckled in amusement. I moved my new treasure to my room, carefully placing it next to my copy of Macmillan’s *Very First Dictionary*. This was the start of my collection, my obsession, of books about words.

As I got older, my interests diversified, reflected in my growing book collection. My piano and flute studies led me to ask for a music dictionary for my birthday; dictionaries of quotes, legal terms, and art terms soon joined the assembly. In high school, my interest in words expanded beyond English—I became deeply immersed in Spanish studies and acquired a number

of Spanish dictionaries. Most significantly, my brother finally gave me the *diccionario* I had snuck peeks at for so many years. When he gave it to me, I learned that the dictionary had a history. It had belonged to another word lover in my family, a great-grandfather I had never met.

About this time, I began pursuing my interest in words through other avenues; my collection expanded beyond dictionaries. I joined two word-a-day e-mail groups and read *The Adventures of English: The Biography of a Language* by Melvyn Bragg and a fascinating account of the formation of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *The Madman and the Professor*, by Simon Winchester. Though these are not exactly dictionaries, I consider them part of my collection because they fill the same need in me, the need to answer the question I have been asking since I was four years old: “What does that mean?” And more recently: “Has the word always meant that? How did it come to mean what it does today?” and, “Where does that word come from?”

As I packed for my first year at Washington University, I could not imagine leaving my collection at home. I did not anticipate, however, the reaction I would get from other college students in the dorms when I pulled out my pile of dictionaries. The unanimous response was “Why do you have a dictionary? Can’t you just use dictionary.com?” Although I occasionally use on-line dictionaries (urban dictionary, a communally edited dictionary of contemporary slang, is one of my favorites) I find it much more enjoyable to use an actual book. When I look up a word in an on-line dictionary, I am taken directly to the correct entry. This is efficient, but it is also completely devoid of the sense of adventure I usually associate with opening a dictionary.

Each time I open a dictionary, I begin a quest. This time, I slash my way through a jungle of pages, slicing back snarls of nouns and adjectives as I stealthily stalk the elusive

limacine. Along the way, brightly colored *lachrymal* arrests my attention, luring me off my path. To my keen observer's eyes, these tear-producing glands remind me of *lagrimas*, Spanish for tears. Perhaps they are members of the same genus? When I finally arrive at the expanse of the correct page, I approach the word carefully, tiptoeing from *lily pad* to *lima bean* to take the sleeping *limacine* by surprise. Granted, this is not an efficient way to find out the meaning of a word, but when I am done, I feel more satisfied.

Is this idea of incidental learning not similar to the philosophy behind a library with open stacks? After relinquishing my card to a librarian at a closed-stack library, I have felt the same sense of sterile productivity I feel when using an on-line dictionary. I so much prefer having the freedom to meander through open stacks, reading titles, touching spines, forming questions about everything I see. There is a direction to my meandering, to be sure; I have an ultimate destination, but could not the intent of my journey be twofold? To learn what I set out to learn, and also to learn along the way? There is no getting lost in the stacks; there is only serendipitous learning.

My collection of dictionaries and word-books is more than a group of reference materials (although I usually have three or four in use on my desk). It is an unfinished reflection of my evolving interests and a tribute to my love of learning. These books have done more than help me with homework and increase my vocabulary. Their contents have settled arguments, instigated investigations, and placated my questioning mind. My books have taught me about every subject and instilled in me an appreciation for the complexities and subtleties of language. I know I will never read every word or even every page of every book in my collection, but I know that every word I do read will teach me and excite me to learn more.

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