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The Story Of Ain't: America, Its Language, And The Most Controversial Dictionary Ever Published



Synopsis

“It takes true brilliance to lift the arid tellings of lexicographic fussing into the readable realm of the thriller and the bodice-ripper. David Skinner has done precisely this, taking a fine story and honing it to popular perfection.” —Simon Winchester, New York Times bestselling author of *The Professor and the Madman*

The Story of Ain by David Skinner is the captivating true chronicle of the creation of Merriam Webster’s Third New International Dictionary in 1961, the most controversial dictionary ever published. Skinner’s surprising and engaging, erudite and witty account will enthrall fans of Winchester’s *The Professor and the Madman* and *The Meaning of Everything*, and *The Know-It-All* by A.J. Jacobs, as it explores a culture in transition and the brilliant, colorful individuals behind it. *The Story of Ain* is a smart, often outrageous, and altogether remarkable tale of how egos, infighting, and controversy shaped one of America’s most authoritative language texts, sparking a furious language debate that the late, great author David Foster Wallace (*Infinite Jest*) once called “the Fort Sumter of the Usage Wars.”

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Customer Reviews

“An immensely entertaining history. Skinner manages to transform this somewhat arcane lexicographical dispute into a real page turner. Skinner ably and amusingly captures the hysterical tone of the bitter public quarrel while suggesting that it foreshadowed many of the arguments over values and standards that we’re still fighting about today.”

(Associated Press) "An engrossing account of the continuing ruckus over Webster's Third New International Dictionary. (New York Times Book Review) "Mr. Skinner does a fine job detailing the controversy that greeted Webster's Third, but he is even stronger when describing the internal politics at Merriam and the mechanics of revising a dictionary. (Wall Street Journal) "A spry cultural history (Harper's) "[Skinner] provides well-argued critiques of the orthodoxies that define language studies (New York Times) "A highly entertaining, thoughtful new book. (Boston Globe) "Skinner is good on the development of 20th-century linguistics and on the interplay between America's language and its sense of itself. (Financial Times) "A comprehensive and evenhanded, and written in a clear and jaunty style What in less skilled hands might have been arid and parochial in David Skinner's becomes a lively account of a subject of interest to anyone concerned about the English language in America. (Weekly Standard) "Mr. Skinner weaves a true tale fascinating not just to linguists and lexicographers, but to anyone interested in the evolution of our language during a critical period in America's History. (New York Journal of Books) "Skinner has written an entertaining book about a controversy that still lingers and throws light on how emotional our ties to language are. a funny and informative account. (Columbus Dispatch) "...delightful new book on lexicography Skinner leaves no doubt as to the importance of Webster's Third as the game-changer in dictionary standards and the impetus for an American cultural metamorphosis. (Shelf Awareness) "The Story of Ain't is a book about words, the national character, and the inevitability of change. And it's so fun, you might not even realize that you're joining the debate. (Hillsdale Collegian) "Skinner offers a highly entertaining and intelligent re-creation of events surrounding the 1961 publication of Webster's Third New International Dictionary by G. & C. Merriam a rich and absorbing exploration of the changing standards in American language and culture. (Publishers Weekly (starred review)) "A compelling reminder of the cultural significance of words and word-making. (Booklist (starred review)) "A fascinating, highly entertaining cultural history that will enchant an audience beyond word nerds.... Skinner nimbly, concisely--and without academic dryness--traces the everyday changes that shaped what came out of Americans' mouths and into our dictionaries. (BookPage) "It takes true brilliance to lift the arid tellings of lexicographic fussing into the readable realm of the thriller and the bodice-ripper. With his riveting account David Skinner

has done precisely this, taking a fine story and honing it to popular perfection. • (Simon Winchester, New York Times bestselling author of *The Professor and the Madman* and *Atlantic*)

“The flap over Webster’s Third in 1961 was a never-to-be-repeated episode in American cultural history. David Skinner tells it brilliantly as he brings to life the odd cast of characters who played a role in the affair. • (Geoffrey Nunberg, University of California at Berkeley, emeritus chair of the American Heritage Dictionary usage panel, language commentator, “Fresh Air,” NPR)

“A fascinating account of a major paradigm shift in the American language, when a group of bold lexicographers decided to tell it like it is and causing a huge cultural rumpus. This is more than just a story about a new edition of a dictionary. • (Christopher Buckley, New York Times bestselling author of *They Eat Puppies, Don’t They?* and *Thank You for Smoking*)

“David Skinner tells the tale of a great battle in the 1960s War Between the Real and the Ideal. It was a conflict with realists laying claim to idealism and idealists asserting realism and vice versa. Skinner makes it all clear. • (P.J. O’Rourke, New York Times bestselling author of *Holidays in Heck* and *Don’t Vote--It Just Encourages*)

“A cultural story as much as a linguistic one, teeming with colorful characters and big ideas, *The Story of Ain’t* is a must read for anybody who loves language. • (Toby Lester, author of *Da Vinci’s Ghost* and *The Fourth Part of the World*)

Created by the most respected American publisher of dictionaries and supervised by editor Philip Gove, Webster’s Third broke with tradition, adding thousands of new words and eliminating “artificial notions of correctness,” basing proper usage on how language was actually spoken. The dictionary’s revolutionary style sparked what David Foster Wallace called “the Fort Sumter of the Usage Wars.” Critics bayed at the dictionary’s permissive handling of ain’t. Literary intellectuals such as Dwight Macdonald believed the abandonment of the old standard represented the unraveling of civilization. Entertaining and erudite, *The Story of Ain’t* describes a great societal metamorphosis, tracing the fallout of the world wars, the rise of an educated middle class, and the emergence of America as the undisputed leader of the free world, and illuminating how those forces shaped our language. Never before or since has a dictionary so embodied the cultural transformation of the United States.

This book is a detailed and well-documented account of the controversy over the publication in 1961 of the third edition of Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language (Webster’s 3rd). It would replace the second edition published in 1934 (Webster’s 2nd). I avoid describing

Skinner's book as a "scholarly account," not because of any deficiency I found in his book, but because it might make the book sound dull and so suffused in detail as to discourage the average lay reader. As it is, I imagine that the potential audience for any book about the development of a dictionary to be a small one. In the case of this book, that would be a shame. Everyone who takes an interest in reading, words, and the power of words should find this story entrancing. Skinner describes an almost unbelievably negative reaction to the content of this new dictionary by the Merriam-Webster company. Some of the most influential voices in America (New York Times and other big-city papers, Life magazine and other popular magazines, powerful organizations like the American Bar Association, and many public intellectuals and university libraries) condemned the new edition of Webster's in often hyperbolic terms as a corrupting influence on American life, culture, and politics. To help us understand the basis for this negative reaction to what became known as Webster's 3rd, Skinner takes us back a half century to the production of its predecessor, Webster's 2nd. The second edition of Webster's famous dictionary was published in 1934. Its editors produced this much-admired work without questioning a number of assumptions about what a dictionary should be: especially, without questioning the notion that a dictionary should be an authoritative source of information about the meaning and pronunciation of words. Later, this attitude would be described as prescriptive, ie, the dictionary should prescribe the correct use of words in the English language. It would be the final authority in any disputes about how to say or use in writing any word. What happened between 1934 and 1961? In a word, change. Actually, of course, change had been taking place before 1934, but Webster's 2nd seemed to ignore that fact. The changes taking place in American society from the end of the Civil War and into the 20th Century and beyond were accelerating at a rapid pace. Changes in technology, in social mores, in politics, and daily life were affecting the American language. New words were being added, old ones became extinct, and more importantly the meanings of words and even their pronunciations were changing as Americans began using new media and as they became more mobile. Something else, more subtle, was changing too: the way people thought. As democracy expanded and as science and technology increasingly affected daily life, the voices of authority were eroding, and people were beginning to ask for reasons to accept stated opinions, not only about words, but about everything. Inevitably the scientific frame of mind would change language and words. Linguistics, the scientific study of language was already in existence in 1934, but it would not begin to affect dictionary making until the old language experts, who were products of a Victorian culture, began to fade away. When it became clear to executives at Merriam-Webster somewhere in the late 1940s that the old standby was no longer adequate, they began to make plans for a new edition. They

hired Philip B. Gove to shape the next Webster's to be published in 1961. Gove was a linguist, not a student of literature, and that made all the difference. His theory of what a dictionary should be was based on five concepts of linguistics: 1. Language changes constantly. 2. Change is normal. 3. Spoken language is the language. 4. Correctness rests upon usage. 5. All usage is relative. These five concepts were not beliefs; they were facts. They had been verified by observation and evidence. It was not a matter of faith. In fact, Gove contrasted the scientific concepts of language change to religious belief in revelation. There is no outside source and sanction for language other than common usage. The notion of a "correct" manner of speaking and writing was irrelevant. A dictionary could no longer prescribe the correct usage of words; it could only describe the ways in which language is used in a society. The dictionary was no longer prescriptive of language; it was now descriptive of the way language is used by a people. And this is what set off the firestorm. Those who had set themselves apart from the common herd by their manner of speech and writing suddenly felt their privileged position threatened by a dictionary, the very source of their authority. But, in spite of the relentless attacks, Webster's 3rd did have its defenders. Among these were the language scholar James Sledd and the author of a dictionary of usage, Bergen Evans. In defending the new dictionary, Evans cited that great 18th Century lexicographer and author of a model dictionary, Samuel Johnson. Johnson had said that lexicographers and grammarians "do not form, but register the language." And this is exactly what Gove and his linguistic lexicographers had done with the creation of Webster's 3rd. This book is about as exciting as one could imagine for a story about the creation of a dictionary. What is missing? The book ends with the sense that Gove and Webster's 3rd won the battle in the end. But a whole half century has elapsed since the publication of that great book in 1961. What is missing is the denouement of this play. What effect did Webster's 3rd have on society, culture, literature, and, more specifically, the dictionary trade? Did subsequent publishers follow the lead of Webster's 3rd, or were they intimidated by the harsh criticism of that book? A brief glance at my Random House Unabridged, published in 1987, suggests that later dictionaries followed the lead of Webster's 3rd. Though there were some reactionaries who reprinted and attempted to breathe life into Webster's 2nd, it was clear that that book was a dinosaur, a product of an era that no longer existed. Webster's 2nd was a museum of words, pronunciations, and usage rules of a bygone era.

Talk about the slow boat to China! It would be a much better book at a third of the length. Some authors just don't know when to stop. But where were the editors? I suspect they dozed off while reading the manuscript.

Very insightful into the way our language has transformed over the years. I had never thought of many of the points made, and now look at language differently. I used to get ticked at the misuse, but now I at least understand the misuse! I know we will never go back to the former proper speech, and I grieve this, but I see it as part and parcel of the transformation of society and the world.

I recently bought the Kindle version and immediately scanned it to see if it mentioned an interesting reference to the Third International at the beginning of the Nero Wolfe novel 'Gambit'. Wolfe's assistant, Archie Goodwin, finds Wolfe in front of the fireplace, tearing out pages of the newly-published Third International and throwing them into the fire, stating that it was 'subversive' and 'threatened the integrity of the English language - perfect for Wolfe! Unfortunately, this new book does not seem to contain this choice reference. In addition, during a 'Q&A' interview with Justice Scalia on CSPAN, in his chambers in the Supreme Court, they showed a close-up of the new official portrait of the Justice, showing his hand on a book, which happened to be the Second International. This being somewhat consistent with Scalia's judicial style. I suspect he agrees with 'Nero Wolfe' in regards to the Second vs Third International and his choice of dictionaries is not accidental. In any case, a very good book and good addition to my lexicographic library, which is currently dominated by material on the OED.

David Skinner's *The Story of Ain't* ain't just about ain't. It's the tale of the making of Webster's Third International Dictionary, the wonderfully controversial flashpoint in the cultural wars between realists and snoots. I wondered what Skinner would add to the well-known (at least by linguists) story of Philip Gove and the cultural battle over scientific lexicography and to the tale told by Herbert Morton's *The Story of Webster's Third: Philip Gove's Controversial Dictionary and Its Critics*. Quote a lot, it turns out. Skinner tells the stories of the dictionary and the linguistic and business issues that informed its creation--the use of the IPA, the process outlined in Gove's *Black Book of dictionary-marking*, the work-day at the Merriam-Webster office in Springfield (no talking), the initial public relations blunder about ain't (it said "ain't gets official recognition at last," setting Webster's III up to be about permissiveness rather than progress). Skinner describes the attempted buy-out by the American Heritage publishing company. And he tells the stories of not just Philip Gove and Dwight Macdonald but the presidents of Merriam and American Heritage (Gordon Gallan and James Parton), and the linguists and critics of the day (Leonard Bloomfield, Charles Fries, Sterling Leonard, James Sledd, Bergen Evans, and more). H. L. Mencken and David Foster Wallace even

make appearances. Skinner treats Gove and linguists of the day fairly, explaining their thinking and hinting at the difficulty of their position: describing the realities of language in a society that often wanted rules not facts. The detail research and explorations of the lives of the principals made this a compelling intellectual drama, and a tale with a moral, but not the one you might think. --Ed Battistella, on LITERARY ASHLAND

interesting, because it makes you think about what goes into making a dictionary and what a dictionary is supposed to be. a lot about the people who made the dictionary, who were very interesting characters

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