

For Wordsmith Lovers

Perhaps it is no surprise that I have been a lover of words ever since I was a child. Even so, it was not until I was in high school, and took numerous literature and creative writing courses, that I learned a true appreciation for the English language. No, I am not talking about appreciating how difficult and tedious it is to diagram a sentence or learn the myriad of grammatical rules! Rather I am talking about the fascinating history of our language and the words that we use daily.

While most of my friends complained incessantly about memorizing all of those words and definitions in preparation for the SAT test, I enjoyed learning the definitions and origins of words I had run across while reading, but could often neither define nor pronounce. My love affair with words continued during college and afterwards. As a young mother, my favorite place to steal away from my babies was always the book store or library. One day I stumbled upon a section of my favorite bookstore that was devoted entirely to people who wanted to improve their vocabulary. It was a word-lover's jackpot. Over the years I visited that section of the bookstore often—finding many tools that can help you expand your vocabulary while at the same time teach you some amazing facts about where our words come from. Random House Webster's puts out one of my favorite pocket sized versions called "Power Vocabulary." The book is quite small and fits easily into your purse, glove box or briefcase. On car trips, pull out the book and quiz your spouse and/or children. When you are in the waiting room at the doctor, take a few minutes and learn a few new words.

Sound boring? Read on for some words and origins that may surprise you:

Insolent: The word comes from the Latin "insolentem," which literally meant "not according to custom." Because those who violated customs were likely to offend others, "insolent" evolved to imply that the offending person was also vain and conceited. From this meaning, our present usage derived. Insolent means "contemptuously rude or impertinent in speech or behavior."

Halcyon: According to classical mythology, the demi-god Halcyone threw herself into the sea when she saw the drowned body of her mortal husband. After that, the gods changed Halcyone and her husband into birds, which they called "halcyons." The Greeks believed the birds calmed the sea as the birds built their nests and then hatched their eggs upon its waves during the seven days before and after the winter solstice. This time period came to be known as "halcyon days." The adjective halcyon as we know it now means, "calm, peaceful, prosperous or joyful."

Gregarious: The Latin term for a herd of animals is "grex." When a group of people banded together as in a military formation, people said the group resembled an animal herd and was thus also referred to as a "grex." The word came down to us as "gregarious" and means "friendly, or fond of the company of others."

Ottoman: In the late 13th century, the Muslim Turks established Turkey as "the Ottoman Empire," under the leadership of Othman (also known as Osman I). The empire was famous for its exotic silk and fabrics. Travelers took the fabrics back to Europe and the

materials became popular with the royals. The French named “low, backless cushioned seats or footstools,” “ottomane” after its country of origin. The English called the furniture an “ottoman.”

Narcissism: The definition is “an inordinate fascination with oneself.” The word comes from the Greek myth of Narcissus. There are several versions of the legend. One version says the young Narcissus fell in love with his own image which was reflected in a pool. Since he was unable to embrace his image, he died from unrequited love. Another version says Narcissus fell in love with his identical twin sister. After her death, he watched his own reflection in a pool and then died from his grief.

The internet is also an excellent resource for discovering web sites that can assist you on your word-quest.