



Bryson's Dictionary of Troublesome Words

By Bill Bryson

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By Tom Hess

Perhaps better known for his light-hearted travel tales (*A Walk in the Woods*, *In a Sunburned Country*, etc.), author Bill Bryson has also written several books relating to the quirky and 'troublesome' use of the English language. Bryson's *Dictionary of Troublesome Words*, touted on the cover as 'a writer's guide to getting it right', is his latest effort at helping us understand the foibles, quirks, and charm of this crazy language.

Born in my home-town of Des Moines, Iowa, Bryson found himself working as an orderly at a small-town English mental hospital in the early 1980s. Instead of returning to the U.S. from a summer European vacation between college terms, Bryson found himself falling in love with a nurse at the hospital. He failed to return to the United States from England for many years.

Working later as a copy editor on the *London Times*, Bryson pitched to editors of Penguin Books the idea of a compilation of common "troublesome" words, phrases, titles, names, idioms, and clichés. With just a touch of grammar and spelling thrown in for seasoning. The result was his first published book *The Penguin Dictionary of Troublesome Words*. Twenty years later Bryson has "revised, updated, and thoroughly (but not overly) Americanized" his original book.

The 'mulligan stew' of a book that he now serves up, while perhaps not gourmet, is still a filling and exotically-spiced pastiche. And it is served with a tongue-in-cheek, slightly sardonic style that never loses its sense of humour.

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Glossary

The main ingredient in this book is an alphabetical listing from A (a,an,) to Z (zoom), the Troublesome Words. Bryson uses a variety of responses throughout this section.

Some are simple comments about the correct spelling of a word:

"pizzeria. not pizza-, for the place where pizzas are made."

Others explain the choice of one word over another:

"irony. sarcasm. Irony is the use of words to convey a contradiction between the literal and intended meanings. Sarcasm is very like irony except that it is more stinging. Whereas the primary intent behind irony is to amuse, with sarcasm it is to wound or score points."

Simple definitions are included for unusual words or phrases:

"faux pas French for an error or blunder. The plural is also faux pas."

Common misuses of words are also worthy of multiple entries. Bryson uses published examples of the misuse of a word, for example:

"nauseous. "Martinez left early, complaining that he felt nauseous" (Newsweek). . . . "

. . .and follows that example with an explanation of the error:

"nauseous. "Martinez left early, complaining that he felt nauseous" (Newsweek). Make it nauseated. Nauseous is an adjective describing something that causes nausea ("a nauseous substance"). As Bernstein neatly put it, people who are nauseated are no more nauseous than people who are poisoned are poisonous."

Other entries tackle proper spelling of names, places, businesses, organizations, titles, etc. While some might be interesting:

"Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There is the full, formal title of the 1871 Lewis Carroll classic. Note the hyphen in Looking-Glass."

. . .others are so esoteric as to be meaningless to the reader:

"Tallinn for the capital of Estonia."

Bryson also is not shy about discussing grammar in the book. Time is spent exploring various

topics including dangling modifiers, starting sentences with and (go for it!), double negatives, gerunds, using like v. as, metaphors v. similes, number, split infinitives, who v. whom, and many more.

The Appendix: Punctuation section discusses. . .yes punctuation marks. From apostrophe to semicolon. As with the previous section, numerous examples from print are used to illustrate 'how to do it wrong' and how it might have been done correctly. If only Mrs. Doyle had explained these marks as clearly in my fifth grade English class.

Bibliography and Suggested Reading lists thirty-plus resources cited in the book or recommended for further reading. Most are published or revised within the last twenty years and are as 'cutting-edge' as a printed book can be.

A simple glossary concludes the book. From adjective through genitive to verb, Bryson again uses published phrases to explain the meaning and uses of the various words that define English as we know it.

— What's good about this book? —

Bryson writes in a witty, pithy manner. He pokes holes in the beliefs of those he finds wrong and supports his view with reasoned analysis. All done in a humourous manner. The scope of the book is very wide and a reader will find information and concepts that they have not encountered before reading.

— What's bad about this book? —

Despite the claim of the book being "Americanized", there is still a heavy flavor of all things British or British derived. From St. Katharine's Docks of London to the Woolloomooloo district of Sydney, Australia. (Please note the second 'a' in Katharine's and the single l in Woolloomooloo.) Definitely not a book for the Anglophobic reader...

— The Bottom Line —

Bryson's Dictionary of Troublesome Words is best enjoyed as a humourous look at various oddities encountered using the English language. Fun, witty read for lovers of the English language.

[Tom Hess](#) writes reviews on the [Epinions.com site](#).

