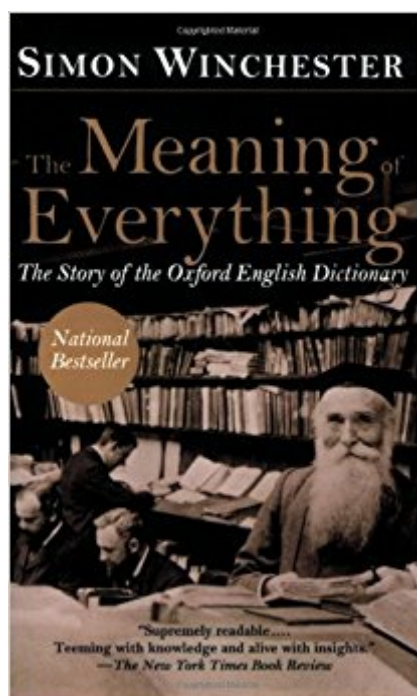


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# The Meaning Of Everything: The Story Of The Oxford English Dictionary



## Synopsis

From the best-selling author of *The Professor and the Madman*, *The Map That Changed the World*, and *Krakatoa* comes a truly wonderful celebration of the English language and of its unrivaled treasure house, the Oxford English Dictionary. Writing with marvelous brio, Winchester first serves up a lightning history of the English language--"so vast, so sprawling, so wonderfully unwieldy"--and pays homage to the great dictionary makers, from "the irredeemably famous" Samuel Johnson to the "short, pale, smug and boastful" schoolmaster from New Hartford, Noah Webster. He then turns his unmatched talent for story-telling to the making of this most venerable of dictionaries. In this fast-paced narrative, the reader will discover lively portraits of such key figures as the brilliant but tubercular first editor Herbert Coleridge (grandson of the poet), the colorful, boisterous Frederick Furnivall (who left the project in a shambles), and James Augustus Henry Murray, who spent a half-century bringing the project to fruition. Winchester lovingly describes the nuts-and-bolts of dictionary making--how unexpectedly tricky the dictionary entry for marzipan was, or how fraternity turned out so much longer and monkey so much more ancient than anticipated--and how bondmaid was left out completely, its slips found lurking under a pile of books long after the B-volume had gone to press. We visit the ugly corrugated iron structure that Murray grandly dubbed the Scriptorium--the Scrippy or the Shed, as locals called it--and meet some of the legion of volunteers, from Fitzedward Hall, a bitter hermit obsessively devoted to the OED, to W. C. Minor, whose story is one of dangerous madness, ineluctable sadness, and ultimate redemption. *The Meaning of Everything* is a scintillating account of the creation of the greatest monument ever erected to a living language. Simon Winchester's supple, vigorous prose illuminates this dauntingly ambitious project--a seventy-year odyssey to create the grandfather of all word-books, the world's unrivalled uber-dictionary.

## Book Information

Paperback: 288 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; Reprint edition (October 14, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 019517500X

ISBN-13: 978-0195175004

Product Dimensions: 7.9 x 0.6 x 5.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 125 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #199,535 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #31 in Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Books & Reading > History of Books #102 in Books > Reference > Encyclopedias & Subject Guides > Literature #144 in Books > Reference > Dictionaries & Thesauruses > English

## Customer Reviews

With his usual winning blend of scholarship and accessible, skillfully paced narrative, Winchester (Krakatoa) returns to the subject of his first bestseller, *The Professor and the Madman*, to tell the eventful, personality-filled history of the definitive English dictionary. He emphasizes that the OED project began in 1857 as an attempt to correct the deficiencies of existing dictionaries, such as Dr. Samuel Johnson's. Winchester opens with an entertaining and informative examination of the development of the English language and pre-OED efforts. The originators of the OED thought the project would take perhaps a decade; it actually took 71 years, and Winchester explores why. An early editor, Frederick Furnivall, was completely disorganized (one sack of paperwork he shipped to his successor, James Murray, contained a family of mice). Murray in turn faced obstacles from Oxford University Press, which initially wanted to cut costs at the expense of quality. Winchester stresses the immensity and difficulties of the project, which required hundreds of volunteer readers and assistants (including J.R.R. Tolkien) to create and organize millions of documents: the word *bondmaid* was left out of the first edition because its paperwork was lost. Winchester successfully brings readers inside the day-to-day operations of the massive project and shows us the unrelenting passion of people such as Murray and his overworked, underpaid staff who, in the end, succeeded magnificently. Winchester's book will be required reading for word mavens and anyone interested in the history of our marvelous, ever-changing language. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The story of the making of the Oxford English Dictionary has been burnished into legend over the years, at least among librarians and linguists. In *The Professor and the Madman* (1998), Winchester examined the strange case of one of the most prolific contributors to the first edition of the OED--one W. C. Minor, an American who sent most of his quotation slips from an insane asylum. Now, Winchester takes on the dictionary's whole history, from the first attempts to document the English language in the seventeenth century, the founding of the Philological Society in Oxford in 1842, and the start of work on the dictionary in 1860; to the completion of the first edition nearly 70 years, 414,825 words, and 1,827,306 illustrative quotations later. Although there is plenty of detail

here about the methodology (including the famous pigeon holes stuffed with quotations slips from contributors around the world), the emphasis is on personalities, in particular James Murray, who became the OED's third editor in 1879 and died in 1915, "well into the letter T." The project backers complained loudly about the slow pace over the years, but the scrupulous care taken by Murray and the many others who worked on the OED gave us what is arguably the world's greatest dictionary. Publication of this book coincides with the OED's seventy-fifth anniversary, even as work on the third edition is under way. Mary Ellen Quinn Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

An utter delight, if you love languages and linguistics and the often quirky personalities and strange behaviors of the uncommonly intelligent and life-long academic. If you don't find fascinating the study of the first nor yourself readily bemused by the second, you probably won't enjoy this book. Simply, it is the story of the conception and completion of what was and is, in all likelihood, the greatest lexicographical project ever undertaken and of the uncommon individuals who played major roles in it. I found it utterly fascinating and, at times, roll-on-the-floor funny, all told in style and tone perfectly suited to the tale. Well and delightfully done, Winchester!

Simon Winchester did an incredible job in *The Map That Changed the World: William Smith and the Birth of Modern Geology* (P.S.) of using a lively narrative to educate us on the relevance of a formerly unknown historical event. *The Meaning of Everything* seems to promise the same thing but ultimately did not deliver. I enjoyed the book and learned plenty about the Oxford English Dictionary and, for that matter, the English Language but it certainly was not as engaging as Winchester's other books. The story of the Oxford English Dictionary is certainly unique. In many ways the approach, asking thousands of people to read books and submit quotes over a period of years, is far before its time and is right along the line of the crowd-sourcing now being used for things like Wikipedia. The story presents some interesting lessons on what to expect from the human nature of people involved in this sort of venture and is worth reading for that aspect alone. In the end, it just seemed that there was not quite enough material to make this story as interesting as it could have been. I learned something, but was not inspired. I would definitely recommend *The Map that Changed the World* and *Krakatoa* over this book.

Utterly fantastic, utterly engrossing, one of the best books I've ever read. One of the best of Simon Winchester's books and I've read most of them. I found the book riveting and it is wonderful when

history can be brought to life in such a vibrant way. I read it on the Kindle Touch and it was fantastic to press so many words to check their meanings via the OED. Winchester's insight into how a dictionary is created and the time and involvement that were required to create the Oxford English Dictionary was fascinating. The character development of so many important people involved in the production of the first OED made the story very immediate and for anyone who loves the English language I reckon this book is a must.

I am a fan of the OED. I had heard that the story of its creation was compelling, so I was looking forward to this book. It was a workmanlike history of the dictionary, but it added surprisingly little to the brief stories I had heard about the characters.

This book should be required reading in all high schools, the understanding of the written words and meanings is with one of the biggest tasks undertaken by mankind for the benefit of all, not just those with a higher education, it allows and gives everyone the opportunity to improve themselves, peoples from around the world gave up their time and energy to contribute, even one from a mental institution for the insane who himself an educated man, spent at least 20 years helping with the building of the Oxford English Dictionary, it has been said to be the finest dictionary in the world and took over 70 years to be completed.

Simon Winchester is one of the more popular non-fiction authors of our time and this is one of the books upon which he made his reputation. While apparently a rather small book, it deals in quite fascinating detail with the origins and development of the OED. While it does discuss how the OED was researched and how its now legendary format and incredible amount of detail was developed, the book's primary focus is on the personalities that helped (or hindered) the gestation and birth of the OED. As usual Winchester is a master of story telling in his rather unique way. For those who are not very familiar with English tradition and culture, some causal references made by Winchester might be obscure and puzzling, but those willing to put in the time doing some Google research will be enlightened and entertained. Very much recommended as a good casual read.

I saw this book referenced in an article I was reading online, and I immediately purchased it. I love English language history, and this book was perfect for my interests! The author writes both for those knowledgeable about linguistics and those not. The characters are described endearingly, and you almost feel as though you know them by the end of the book. The pieces of trivia about

certain letters of the alphabet are great -- how B was hard because of difficult etymologies, how V was fast, etc. Highly recommended!

If nothing else is learned from reading this book, one should see what perseverance can do! "Let's write a new dictionary" is not a new thought - several had been written and were in use. But what happens when a group of learned people set out to accomplish something - the best available - is shown to take more time than originally anticipated. How long could it take??? Let's do it right....and just see how long it takes!!! This is a marvelous read once you get through the drugery of an introduction to the time, place and people. The longer you read, the more difficult it is to put it down. As one person said to me, it was like reading about the Founding Fathers. It couldn't have happened at any other time in history. This was the right time with the right people doing the right thing. The same can be said about the Meaning of Everything. This couldn't have been written at any other time - the right people were ready at this right time and they succeeded. This is a marvelous read!!

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