

THE
WORD
♦
DETECTIVE

Evan Morris

Solving the Mysteries
Behind Those Pesky
Words and Phrases

The
WORD
Detective

by Evan Morris



ALGONQUIN BOOKS
OF CHAPEL HILL
2000



TO MY PARENTS,
WILLIAM AND MARY DAVIS MORRIS,
WHO TAUGHT ME TO LOVE WORDS,
AND TO MY BROTHER,
JOHN BOYD MORRIS,
1938-1999,
WHOSE HUMOR, DECENCY, AND COURAGE
LIVE IN THE HEARTS OF
ALL WHO KNEW HIM.



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It all started with sticky dimes. It was 1958, I was eight years old, and my older sister and I sat in the library of my family's home in suburban Connecticut, opening the dozen or so envelopes that had arrived in the day's mail. Each envelope contained ten cents in some form—usually dimes or nickels taped securely to small pieces of cardboard, but sometimes a hodgepodge of stamps—and it was our job to extract the loot and sort it dutifully into plastic salad bowls. A grown-up would probably have regarded our task as tedious, but we, innocent of child labor laws, had begged our parents to let us open the letters.

In my eight-year-old world, encountering just one letter containing actual money would have been a memorable event.

A pile of such magic envelopes was a postal miracle that boggled my small mind, on a par with having the tooth fairy drop by for dinner. As a matter of fact, I was beginning to have my doubts about the tooth fairy's existence, but here was solid evidence of a mail fairy out there somewhere with an apparently inexhaustible supply of sticky dimes.

To my parents, however, the dimes were simply the fruits of a good idea. My father was editor in chief of Grosset & Dunlap, a large publishing firm in New York City. Several years earlier he had begun writing a syndicated newspaper column called "Words, Wit and Wisdom," answering readers' questions about word origins and language usage, and he had learned several useful things about his readers from the questions they sent in. His readers were very insecure about the size of their vocabularies, they were similarly worried about making grammatical errors, and they were fascinated and often mystified by "teen" slang. My parents' good idea was to produce simple, helpful pamphlets on each of these topics and market them through my father's column for ten cents each. The response from readers was phenomenal, and soon my sister and I were stuffing envelopes with copies of *The Morris Self-Scoring Home Vocabulary Test*, a hipster glossary called *The Real Gone Lexicon*, and similar creations.

I was aware of my father's vocation, of course, although I tended to view his profession through the pragmatic prism of a young boy's interests. I was oblivious to the fact that Grosset published some of the most popular novels of the 1950s, but I was thrilled that my father apparently possessed the keys to a

bottomless trove of the Hardy Boys, Steve Canyon, and Tom Swift Jr. books I loved.

My parents encouraged all their children to read, and I watched relatively little television as a child. The problem my parents faced was not in getting us to read, but in getting us to stop. “No reading at the dinner table” was a frequent admonition, which we quietly subverted by memorizing the ingredients list of every condiment on the table. My sister and I argued over first crack at each new *Life*, *Look*, or *Newsweek* that arrived in the mail, and I spent many an afternoon driving my mother to distraction by following her from room to room begging her to explain the notoriously oblique cartoons in the *New Yorker* to me.

By the 1960s, my parents had branched out into writing books, creating a series of reference works that included *It’s Easy to Increase Your Vocabulary* and *The Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage* and culminated in the popular *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*. My father had accepted the position of editor in chief of the *American Heritage Dictionary*, an ambitious project that would, after nearly ten years, result in a dictionary that many authorities today regard as a revolutionary leap in American lexicography.

While my father was at the office during the week, my mother labored at home over stacks of manuscript pages. On the weekends, my father would rise by seven at the latest to work on his columns for the coming week, and I awoke each Saturday morning to the sound of his ancient Royal upright manual typewriter pounding away downstairs like thunder in the distance

(although not quite distant enough to sleep through). By the time I graduated from high school, our second-floor library/guest bedroom had been turned into a full-time office buried under stacks of manuscripts and reference materials, and when I headed off to college, my parents quickly filled my old bedroom with files, boxes of correspondence, and spare encyclopedias. By the early 1980s, my parents were both working at home, churning out six newspaper columns every week as well as producing books on English usage and word origins.

Then suddenly, in 1986, my mother died, leaving my father to carry on alone. Given the circumstances, my father carried on quite well, continuing to write his newspaper column and maintaining an active social and professional life, traveling abroad, and making new friends.

By the early 1990s, however, my father had understandably tired of writing a daily newspaper column for more than thirty-five years. He announced his intention to retire his column at the dinner table one Sunday afternoon when most of his children, now grown and with families and careers of their own, happened to be present. "Words, Wit and Wisdom," he declared, was kaput. "Unless," he added, in what had become a very quiet room, "one of you is interested in writing it."

I don't think my father actually expected any one of us to take him up on his offer. All three of my sisters had done editorial work on my parents' books, and all six of us had long become accustomed to being tapped as sources for current slang. But none of us had ever, to my knowledge, entertained the thought of stepping into our parents' professional shoes. To me,

certainly, the very expertise and erudition that had made my father successful and famous also precluded any such fantasies on my part. My father had worked with H. L. Mencken, had been a professional lexicographer for fifty years, and counted among his friends a constellation of intellectual luminaries. So I was as surprised as anyone at the table when, in the awkward silence that followed my father's momentous announcement, I heard myself say, "I'll give it a shot," ignoring the voice in the back of my head shouting, "Whaddayou, nuts or something? You can't write a daily newspaper column!" Almost as soon as I opened my mouth, I began to wish I'd kept it shut, but it was too late.

I spent the next few months poring over stacks of my parents' back columns and studying books on word origins and the evolution of English, and in the process I made two important discoveries: first, that I was absolutely fascinated by the subject itself, and second, that I knew much more about the English language than I had thought I did. The combination of my own grounding in English, my somewhat dusty but sound grasp of Latin, and more than thirty years of incidental linguistic knowledge gleaned from my parents via dinner table osmosis, combined to allay my initial terror at the thought of writing about etymology. My father and I worked out a collaborative arrangement that allowed me to write one or two columns per week, which he would then review and tune up, if necessary, before tossing them into the mix with his own columns. To my surprise, my father did very little fiddling with my writing, and "Words, Wit and Wisdom" soon began appearing in newspapers around the world under the byline of William and Evan Morris.

Almost as soon as I began writing the column with my father, I discovered that I was far from being alone in my fascination with the stories behind words. Mentioning the column in casual conversation with nearly anyone, from my dentist to the proprietor of the corner newsstand, would be certain to elicit either a favorite word-origin story to share or a question about an obscure term that had been simmering unanswered in the back of that person's mind for years.

Early on in my apprenticeship, I came across a series of word-origin books by the poet and lexicographer John Ciardi (*A Browser's Dictionary*, *A Second Browser's Dictionary*, and *Good Words to You*, now all, sadly, out of print). The more words I traced back through time for our readers, the more I appreciated Ciardi's observation that each word, no matter how humble, was "a small fossil poem written by the race itself." The evolution of words, in many ways, is an organic process akin to the evolution of animal and plant species. Words grow and prosper for a time, often spawning new words, but eventually they age and in many cases even become extinct. Now that English is in many senses a global language, words travel from country to country and mutate in both their forms and meanings, often changing their connotations entirely or combining in idiomatic uses that would have struck listeners just a century earlier as nonsensical. I would not, for instance, wish to be the one to try to explain *rock and roll* or *pushing the envelope* to Noah Webster.

Words don't do all this on their own, of course. The words and language we speak today are the product (more a work in

progress, actually) of an enormous committee consisting of nearly every person who ever lived; most of these people never spoke our modern English, and it shows. If our words, metaphors, and idioms sometimes make no sense to a logical mind, or if it seems as though there ought to be a happy *gruntled* to accompany the cranky *disgruntled*, we have only ourselves to blame. (There actually used to be a *gruntled*, but it meant “grunting like a pig” or “cranky,” and it faded away as *disgruntled*, which simply added the intensifier *dis-* and meant exactly the same thing, became popular.)

The good news about our unruly, intensely democratic way of making and using words is that the lack of any central planning and administration authority, the absence of a Ministry of Proper English, makes our language one of the most energetic, flexible, and just plain fun tongues on earth. This vitality and unpredictability of English as it is actually spoken drives the prissy Language Cops of the world absolutely bananas, of course, but it warms the cockles of any true word lover’s heart.

Soon after I began writing the column, I discovered that I possessed another tool that would prove immensely valuable in untangling the histories of words and phrases: a healthy skepticism. Many of the questions my father and I received from readers asked about the truth of a story the reader had heard about the origin of a word or phrase. Was *cop* actually an acronym for *constable on patrol*? Did *hooker* really spring from the fondness of Civil War general Joseph Hooker and his men for camp followers? (The answer is a resounding no in both cases.) I quickly came to regard every “remarkable” word-origin story I

encountered with the jaundiced eye and prove-it-buddy attitude I had honed on the streets of New York City, and I was rarely disappointed in my quest for linguistic balderdash to debunk. One of the lessons I have learned over the past decade is that the more interesting or heartwarming or unusual or “cool” a word-origin story is, the less likely it is to reside in the same ballpark as the truth. And I have learned the hard way that entertaining but unsubstantiated etymologies have a distressing tendency to make their way into print, so I do my best never to accept and promulgate popular word stories without making darn sure that I either solidly verify them or label them as only possibilities.

Unfortunately, my determination not to endorse etymological fables has sometimes been distressingly at odds with the apparent prevailing public desire to believe all sorts of nonsense about word origins, and some of my readers are not shy about making their wishes, and delusions, quite clear. “You say that the origin of *the whole nine yards* is unknown,” goes a typical letter of a certain sort, “but some simple research conducted even by a boob such as yourself would reveal that the phrase was invented by my uncle Floyd in 1957, when he successfully escaped from a Venusian spacecraft using a ladder exactly nine yards long constructed from dental floss. Somewhere in my attic I have a letter from Ed Sullivan confirming this fact. Why won’t you print the truth?”

Occasionally an especially emphatic reader letter prompts me to reconsider my decision, years ago, not to pursue my first career choice, dog grooming. “Your claim that the word *thug*

originally came from *thuggee*, ritual strangulation and robbery supposedly practiced by followers of the Hindu goddess Kali (whom you describe as possessing ‘huge glowing red eyes, fangs, and a necklace of human skulls’), is ridiculous,” wrote one reader a few years ago, who then went on to helpfully inform me that “the many modern followers of the great goddess Kali have no use for the slanderous antics of mouth-breathing morons like you. I’d be careful whose goddess you offend, especially since Kali liked to drink the blood of her opponents in battle! Be warned: we are not amused.” After I emerged a few weeks later from meditating on this letter in my coat closet, I spent the next several months checking for glowing red eyes on every subway train I boarded. Eventually I concluded that it was impossible to distinguish between disgruntled Kali fans and disgruntled Mets fans, so I gradually relaxed. I recalled that my father had spawned similar outrage in the mid-1960s when he dared to suggest in print that Ringo Starr was not exactly the world’s greatest drummer, a parallel that comforted me (although the bit about Kali drinking the blood of her enemies seemed a bit more serious than the wrath of a few thousand irate Beatles fans).

After a few weeks of laboriously hunting-and-pecking my columns on an old Underwood manual typewriter, I reluctantly broke down, dipped my bruised digits into my bank account, and bought my first computer. Within a few months I was collecting the columns I wrote for newspapers into a bimonthly illustrated newsletter, which I offered to readers for the princely sum of ten dollars per year, an amount scientifically calculated

to land me in the poorhouse as quickly as possible. In considering possible names for my new project, I decided to recycle the name of a radio program my father had produced years earlier, *The Word Detective*. (This name seemed so appropriate, in fact, that in 1996 I also changed the name of my newspaper column from “Words, Wit and Wisdom” to “The Word Detective.”)

The Word Detective newsletter was an immediate success with its hundreds of subscribers, but each month saw an increasing number of copies returned to me in small plastic bags after having been stomped, shredded, and often apparently chewed in transit by unknown parties. Just as I was about to throw in the towel, however, the Internet arrived to save my bacon.

Early 1995 saw the debut of *The Word Detective on the Web* (www.word-detective.com), a site where readers could browse current and past columns and, more important, send in their questions via e-mail. Over the past five years, readership of the Web *Word Detective* has jumped from dozens to thousands per week, and the site has been the recipient of numerous prestigious (but inexplicably cash-free) awards. And while the column “The Word Detective” currently appears in newspapers all over the United States, as well as in Mexico and Japan, the growing popularity of the Internet has broadened its global audience by millions of readers, from small towns in Iowa to small towns in China. Reader mail, the real index of any columnist’s success, currently runs about five hundred questions per week.

Approximately one hundred of those questions are really one particular question, about perhaps the most obnoxious riddle ever invented: “There are three common words in the En-

glish language that end with *gry*. *Angry* is one and *hungry* is another. What is the third word? Everyone uses it every day and everyone knows what it means. If you have been listening, I have already told you what the word is.”

When I received this question for the first time about four years ago, I spent a good deal of time trying to figure out the answer and, after pounding my head against the wall for a week or two, did some serious research and arrived at the following realizations: first, we can all stop looking for that third *gry* word. There is no other “common English word” ending in *gry*, although there are a few obscure ones, such as *aggry* (a type of bead) and *gry* itself (meaning “a very small amount”).

Second, no word ending in *gry* was ever the proper answer to this insipid, annoying riddle. The wording of the riddle itself has been badly mangled as it was passed from person to person over the years, but the original form was evidently a trick question (as many riddles are) that used double-talk to send the listener off on a wild-goose chase looking for a third *gry* word. Depending on the form of the riddle, the proper answer may actually have been *it*, *language*, or some other tricky answer. No one knows for sure because the original form of the riddle has long since been lost in the mists of time, rendering the whole mess unsolvable. Trying to untangle the *gry* riddle today is right up there on the Pointlessness Scale with deconstructing the *Sergeant Pepper* album cover or assessing the structural dynamics of Donald Trump’s hairdo. No one knows, no one will ever know, so please get over it.

I explained all this to my readers, of course. Still the letters

and e-mails came by the bucketful pleading for “the third *gry* word.” I explained it all again and even wrote a long essay on the subject, which I posted on my Web page. And still every morning brought a fresh crop of dozens of earnest *gry* queries. By now I was getting cranky. (Correction: I was already cranky. I was becoming homicidal.) I created a giant flashing chartreuse banner for my Web page that warned visitors that all further *gry* seekers would have their names forwarded directly to a group of crazed Kali cultists I happened to know. It didn’t work, of course; nothing does, and I have finally given up. This *gry* business will outlast us all, a fact that, while depressing, did supply me with a good idea for the inscription on my tombstone: “There are three words ending in *gry*: *angry*, *hungry*, and? . . . Wake me up, and I’ll tell you the third.”

Most questions I receive, thankfully, have nothing to do with *gry* and often provide entertaining (and occasionally disquieting) insight into who actually reads my column. I am approached, for instance, to settle an inordinate number of drunken “bar bets” born in taverns all over the world, as well as arguments between husbands and wives or workers and their bosses, situations requiring the sort of delicacy and tact I would have thought it amply evident that I lack. Luckily, so far I know of only one divorce in which my column can fairly be said to have been a causative factor.

Many letters come from young people impertinently questioning the sanity of a grandparent who uses antiquated phrases such as *mean as gar broth* (an apparently vile soup made from the apparently vile garfish) or plaintively begging for help with

their homework. To such academically delinquent pleas, usually sent late on Sunday nights, I turn a righteously deaf ear, pointing the wayward youngsters toward their school libraries (probably thus ensuring myself at least one more generation of disgruntled Kali worshipers).

By far the largest category of questions I receive are those that arrive during the workday from office workers who are, to put it bluntly, wasting eons of company time arguing among themselves about the origin of *dead as a doornail* or the logic of "Feed a cold, starve a fever." If no one answers when you call customer service for your computer, or your accountant puts you on hold for twenty minutes, or the telephone company service rep seems to be arguing with a co-worker while you try to explain that you did not call Tahiti for forty-five minutes on New Year's Eve, there's a pretty good chance that my column is ultimately to blame. The easy access to the Internet many companies inexplicably grant their employees (what's next? cable TV on every desk?) has apparently made my Web site a major factor in the declining productivity of workers all over the world.

Not bad for a newspaper column that began way back in 1954. Sadly, my father died in January 1994, too soon to see the new direction his creation had taken, but gratified, I am sure, by the knowledge that his work would continue. For my part, I am deeply grateful to my father for my apprenticeship, and to both my father and mother for investing me with the ability to continue the column on my own. That this book is dedicated to my parents is no mere formality. To them I owe everything that I have accomplished and may, in the future, dream to do.