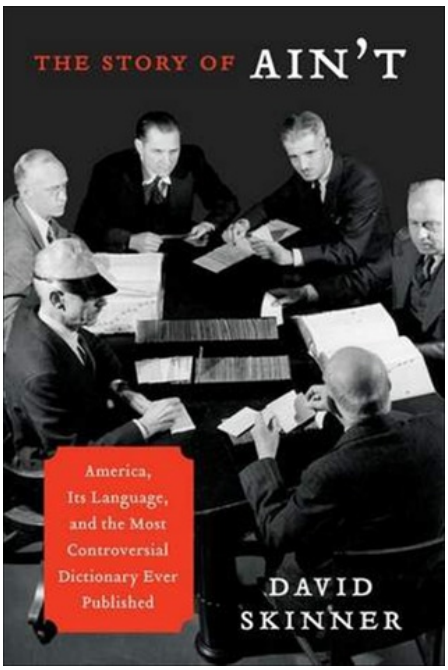

The Story of Ain't: America, Its Language, and the Most Controversial Dictionary Ever Published

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“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’t 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’t* 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.”

The Story of Ain't: America, Its Language, and the Most Controversial Dictionary Ever Published Details

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From Reader Review The Story of Ain't: America, Its Language, and the Most Controversial Dictionary Ever Published for online ebook

Gary Misch says

How interesting can a book be that recounts the history of a dictionary, and people who dote on words and language? The answer is - pretty entertaining. Dictionaries were at one point dictatorial, but they have evolved to deal with common usage. That transition hasn't been an easy one, especially in the United States. Long after the Oxford English Dictionary had based itself almost entirely on usage, American dictionaries, epitomized by Webster's, were definition based, and saw themselves as the arbiters of usage. This is the story of Webster's transition, but it's also the story of many of the major literary and language people of the early and mid twentieth century. I'll admit that I'm a long time owner of the OED, so that may have influenced my interest in the book, but it's a pretty entertaining read. It takes the reader from the stodgy period early in the twentieth century, when Websters sought endorsements from politicians, famous authors, and other leading persona, up through the dictionary's transition to modernity, and its changed position in society. This is certainly not the equal of Simon Winchester's "The Meaning of Everything," about the creation of the Oxford English Dictionary, but it's a good read.

Chrissy says

Too many tangents, too little time.

Caroline Taggart says

The subtitle says it all. The dictionary in question was Webster’s Third Edition, published in 1961, which created the most extraordinary controversy. As the blurb puts it, the dictionary eliminated artificial notions of correctness’, abandoning the use of the word ‘colloquial’ and therefore giving the impression that ‘ain’t’ was perfectly acceptable in formal usage. You can imagine the sort of thing that hit the fan.

I’d have made the book 10% shorter and left out some of the details of the private lives of the people involved, but other than that it’s a fascinating account of how a dictionary is put together and the great argument that continues to rage as to whether a dictionary should prescribe ‘correct’ language or ‘tell it like it is’.

Crystal says

I read a few chapters and lost interest. I couldn't keep straight the names and what year the story was being told in. It was written as narrative, but I would have liked the chapters to be titled and grouped. I couldn't decide how far I would have to go to get to the meat of the story so I put it down.
Maybe I'll try again another day...

Patty says

I thought this was going to be the story of how "ain't" was accepted into the dictionary, but it ended up being the story of some of the men who were involved in that decision. That in itself wouldn't be a problem but the writing is wordy, somewhat pretentious, and tedious. I couldn't get past the boredom factor. This is one of the rare books I didn't bother finishing.

Jessica Buike says

By the end of the first chapter of this smart, witty book I already knew enough to answer how the word "ain't" came to be in the dictionary! There were so many incredible gems of knowledge in this lexiturgical journey, including that many people used to eat ice cream with forks because spoons were considered vulgar - who knew? The author is an incredible wordsmith who creates an interesting glimpse into the complexity and politics involved in American English.
I almost felt that the first chapter should go later in the book, since the uncorrected review copy I received had the back story following the first chapter. The phrase "take that" was also very overused. However, this is possibly something that was fixed in the final editing.
I think this book made me more aware of my "language snobbery" because often we are expected to write a certain grammatical way but we speak a completely different way, resulting in some mixed use.
Overall, this was a superb read and I highly recommend it! :)

P D says

What is this book about?

That's a great question, and one I'm not convinced the author himself has a clear answer to. It takes 242 pages to get to the actual controversy around 'ain't,' and I spent the first 241 pages wondering why the book alternated between biographies of about five different people (eventually focusing on Philip Gove and Dwight MacDonald; but seriously, there's a Dramatis Personae—their heading—at the end of this book), a vague and very high-level history, some stuff about communism mixed in with the biographical bits, and then a more in-depth look at linguistics.

This book raises a lot of interesting questions. I think its greatest value comes from use as a tool for discussion about language and whether or not there should be a standard. That's the closest it comes to having any kind of real theme, and it did give me an idea of why I didn't learn any English grammar in school when all the normal-level classes learned how to diagram sentences, but mostly it's a frustrating read.

Not even because of the scattered subject matter alone, but because Skinner's voice itself wavers. We get flashes of humor and strong opinions that pop out of nowhere in the middle of informative, objective stories. This makes it very hard to pull out his bias (I still can't tell if he likes MacDonald, although I'd guess he respects but disagrees with the man), and when it comes to something that's supposed to be controversial, that's a big deal.

Anyway, I wish Skinner had written this as a book about the evolution of linguistics (rather, a scientific

approach to the study of language) in the context of creating a dictionary. As it stands now it's a mishmash of topics mingled with bursts of excitement—perhaps like the Webster's Third definition of *door* he alludes to repeatedly.

Sarah says

This was kind of a slog for me - definitely one of those books where the content was interesting, but the writing left a lot to be desired. I would love to hear this story in the words of a different author -- I double majored in English and linguistics, and as such I've long been interested in the concept of prescriptive versus descriptive linguistics. This topic had such potential in that department -- but really fell flat.

Jeff Kelleher says

If you are part of that quirky minority who entertain themselves by staying up until 2 a.m. reading "Fowler's Modern English Usage," then you should place this book on your "must read" list.

This is the story of "Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged", issued in 1961 and triggering the greatest linguistic war in American history. Its incendiary premise was that dictionaries should reflect, not the ex cathedra pronouncements of haughty "experts", but the actual usages of ordinary people. "Descriptive, not prescriptive" as chief editor Philip Gove said.

The "Ain't" in the title refers to the Dictionary's then-astonishing pronouncement that the word is "used orally in most parts of the U.S. by cultivated speakers." The uproar was humorously caught in a New Yorker cartoon in which the receptionist at G. & C. Merriam Company tells a visitor, "Sorry. Dr. Gove ain't in."

The uproar was overdone and in many respects misguided. Gove's dictionary did not endorse "ain't", or "due to" or "different than" or "galore" or "scads" or "scrumptious" or "knowed" or any of a thousand other common locutions that pompous pendants like (no, I mean "as") Dwight MacDonald claimed portended the end of civilization just by being listed. What it DID do was restrain judgment by eliminating the Webster's Second practice of attaching "vulgar" or "colloq." to disfavored words and instead substituting, sometimes, "not standard."

What makes this book so fascinating is that it shows how passionate people can be about the trivialities of usage. One commentator called W-3 "Bolshevist."

The subject will not captivate everyone. But if you are one who happily ends sentences with prepositions, splits infinitives, uses "none" as plural, and insists (correctly) that "I ain't home yet" is proper English, you will have fun with this tale of linguistic pettiness, told with wit, irony, and flair.

Melissa says

This ain't an easy read.

Sorry. Couldn't resist.

I'm not going to mince words here: this book is tedious.

I know. You're probably thinking, "Well, what did you expect from a book about the writing of Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged? Of course it's going to be tedious."

True that. But I've come to like my nonfiction a little bit on the entertaining side, and with the exception of a few portions of a couple chapters, The Story of Ain't is rather dry.

Let's start with the positives. I found the premise of the book kind of fascinating - and I think anyone who is a word nerd would too. Skinner traces American culture and history through the decades between the time of the publication of Webster's Second (in 1934) and Webster's Third (1961). The idea is that historical events (the World Wars, namely) as well as pop culture, demographics, and lifestyle changes during those decades all produced new words and phrases. Webster's Third would include "100,000 new words and senses, a massive amount that Merriam called 'the greatest vocabulary explosion in history.'" (pg. 241)

By the 1960s, this meant that the dictionary needed to be a much larger book than before - which required considerable debate and discussion by an Editorial Board about what, exactly constituted a dictionary. In those days, the dictionary was akin to an encyclopedia - with lists and tables and facts.

I felt myself wanting to yell back in time at them that they were wasting their time, that we really won't give a damn by 2014 whether tables of archery rounds were included in the dictionary. That - hate to break it to you - things are reeeaallllllly gonna change and it ain't gonna matter too much.

Also, there was way too much detail on the biographical information on the Editorial Board members and the various other players involved in the dictionaries. That's where The Story of Ain't lost me, because I was simply not interested in these people. They annoyed me. Maybe I've sat in too many of these kinds of meetings or dealt with too many of these sort of people.

"But the board also slowed down the works. The minutes of the Editorial Board's meetings stretched to two thousand pages, filling eleven volumes.

'To me,' Gove told the current eight members of the board, 'that represents a stupendous, if not stultifying, waste of time.' In one instance, he said, the Webster's Second board had spent at least an hour discussing whether hot dog should be in the dictionary." (pg. 175

Anyone who has ever sat in any kind of committee meeting can relate to these sort of goings-on.

But here's the thing (and another thing I found intriguing from a marketing and sales perspective): back then, all this really was important because there were also commercial and marketing considerations to think about, too. The dictionary was a very important money-maker.

"Sales of dictionaries in 1958 totaled $25 million [and] were, according to some, second only to Bibles among all-time bestsellers, but they were more expensive to make. The American College Dictionary had reportedly cost Random House $2 million to make from scratch. The Webster's New World had reportedly cost $1 million in 1950." (pg. 236-238).

It's kind of funny in a time when we're so accustomed to SpellCheck and dictionary.com, but there really was once upon a time when the dictionary was iconic, truly a coffee table book, a treasured centerpiece in the living room, the source of all knowledge.

Now, it's a relic and the controversy that surrounded the publication of Webster's Third - starting with its own press release touting the inclusion of the word ain't in the dictionary- is all but forgotten. The discussion

of such, which is one of the tenets of the book, seems to come almost too late for the reader to be fully invested, because of the ... um, wordiness, of the previous pages. I found myself almost skimming over this section, wanting to just be finished.

Skinner's book is a reminder of when language mattered in a way that is different than the politically correct form in which we've come to know it. The Story of Ain't is, ultimately, America's story about the evolution of our history and culture - and the words and phrases that live on today as part of that history and culture.

2.5 stars out of 5

Dawn Ashenbrenner says

I was excited by the prospect of this book--grammar nerd's paradise! However, I agree with the other reviews. It was slow- moving and not terribly interesting.

Korri says

Before picking up this book I had not known of ‘the bitter history of dictionary criticism’ (p. 243). I’ve used dictionaries without ever stopping to think about the editorial vision and philosophy behind their production. It is a bit startling to realize that the grammar and word choices I take for granted as correct and proper were looked down upon as substandard a mere half century ago. *Webster’s Third* was published in 1961 in the midst of great social and cultural upheaval, making it a target of criticism for the role its perceived permissiveness played in unraveling civilization. Half the fun of this book is the hyperbolic and hysterical denunciations of *Webster’s Third*. The other half comes from the wonderful statements by linguists and editors.

Examples: ‘The sentence *The man was very amused* was rebuked for its gratuitous *very*, with a linguist commenting, “There seems to be a touch of shadowy elegance about that which can be justified no more than the carrying of a stick or the wearing of spats.”’ (p. 73) and “The phantasmagoric world of antecedentless pronouns is full of potential narrative distraction.” (p. 206)

The story is a bit disjointed due to* the author’s way of weaving together the different strands of history and biographical sketches of key players to illustrate the changing times, but it is an interesting tale nonetheless.

*Dear Wilson Follett, please forgive me for using *due to* as a preposition. It’s, like, totally not cool of me to abuse language like that.

Cathy DuPont says

Dear Friends: Please don't hate me because this is so long. I hope that it's readable and informative.

Ours, the American language, is a hospitable language composed of so many influences from outside the

United States of America. Hopefully, we welcome with open arms people from other freedom loving counties and their languages. We have been incorporating their influence and their words into our own version of English for hundreds of years. I've read more than one time that our language is always evolving but until the 1961 publication of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* by G. & C. Merriam Company we just took the fact for granted without seeing it in black and white, bound and in our schools and libraries. That changed with the publication of only the third edition of the famous *Webster's Dictionary.*

Webster's Third, W3 as it was called, was immediately lambasted by scholars, linguists and specifically The New York Times which stated it should be immediately withdrawn and replaced by *Webster's New International Dictionary,* Second Edition, Unabridged, now referred to as W2. W2 which was published in 1934, during The Depression contained among other words, **ain't*** although in W3 it was the rallying cry for the critics of the newest Webster edition. The word had even been published in other lesser known dictionaries previous to 1961.

The book begins with a biographical sketch (some longer than others) of the 'who's who' in the book, those important players. The *Dramatis Personae* (Latin, of course, which I thought odd) is a short bio sketch of the persons referenced in the book and was located at the back of the book with notes and an index. I referred to the Dramatis Personae frequently. (It occurred to me that James Lee Burke might consider doing the same because of the high number of characters in his books.)

The brouhaha arose after the book was published in 1961 with the editor, Dr. Philip Gove considered mostly responsible for the new edition. He (with the support of Gordon Gallan, president of Merriam when W3 was published) along with their already 'in-house' scholars, kept all changes prior to publication very secretive in "Black Books" which were never to leave the premises.

It was unfortunate that the PR firm which Merriam hired to announce the new edition had inaccurate information in their first press release. It was soon corrected; the inaccurate information was that the word 'ain't' was seen for the first time in a dictionary in W3. The word was also listed in W2 as a colloquialism but this time colloquialism was dropped from the definition which to linguists, high school English teachers and college English professors (including their respective national organizations) made a big difference.

Photo on cover of book which was contributed by Merriam but no one was identified

In W3 one-quarter million words were dropped from the 1934 edition with "all remaining entries …revised" for a total of 450,000 words and 100,000 quotations "from more than 14,000 authors." Had there not been any words and/or entries dropped, Merriam would have had to print two volumes which was not considered cost effective much less the bulk of two volumes. I can recall the sturdy stand at the inside the door of our high school library. The dictionary was huge and needed a sturdy stand.

As stated, W3 was attacked and extolled by various college professors in history and the humanities, language scholars, editors of literature reviews, TV hosts (TV and TV dinners were both new listings), newspapers and their columnists, grammarians, intellectuals, magazine editors and published authors with all stating their varied positions.

The New York Times stated W3 should be immediately withdrawn and W2 republished. Further, the international newspaper was not going to use W3 as the last word for spelling usage and information (who was the 31 president of the U.S.?) and that they would continue to use W2. The NYTimes considered their highfalutin opinion basically the end of the story. It would single handedly be the catalyst for putting W3 away forever. (Remember strong peronalities and egos were involved here.) Unfortunately, their first story on W3 contained inaccuracies which they later had to publicly correct and/or retract. Not off to a great start,

NYT.

Take that! (I was tickled that author David Skinner said that numerous times throughout the book when opposing opinions shot back with a zinger.)

Some newspapers and opponents of W3 said its publication was the end of the English language as we knew it. English, our language, was going to hell in a handbag because of its publication. And well respected newspapers across the nation offered their opinion. They were mostly detractors of the newer edition of Webster's Dictionary some repeating the inaccuracies stated by other newspapers, without researching the facts themselves.

Well, yes, English, the proper use of the English language in America was changing due in part to a changing culture in America. America was no longer an elitist society where the common, average, middle American was still somewhat illiterate and uneducated.

Without going into all the cultural changes America went through from 1932 to 1961, of course our language would change; W3 was based on our speaking language NOT how we should say things, but how we DO say things. (A study was made using mostly handwritten letters to the U. S. Army with words written by a broad spectrum of Americans about their benefits from the government. The study was used and referred to by Dr. Gove and his core group at Merriam to support decisions made in the Black Book.)

Gove's small group, who looked at each and every entry of W3, was always quiet working, not speaking to each other within their work area. He strongly encouraged them to look at the words as becoming more pedestrian, looking at the writings of Mickey Spillane, Gypsy R. Lee, Fred Allen, Walter Winchell and Al Capp. They all used standard English. Of Webster's Second, the 1934 edition, Gove said it "represents a luxury of a bygone age." We were fully in and embracing the 20th Century.

Think how America, after World War II, how the G.I. Bill allowed returning soldiers the opportunity to graduate with a college degree. College professors didn't teach the now worldly and older (24, not 18-19 years old) soldiers to speak the "Kings English." They spoke American English using words normally spoken in normal conversations. Clearly English speaking terms such as "whilst" was considered snobbish and elitist and the language spoken by a more English society where there was a more clear delineation of classes. Here in America, we were more democratic, with "all men created equal" attitude…so, professor, "don't get uppity with me."

Take that!

The discussion went on for years with Merriam actively responding to criticism. They said such things as "the King's English was going democratic." Other supporters praised the foresight and courage of Merriam for the printing of W3. The support, of course, received Gove and Gallan's blessings.

Why American English?

"In 1905, Henry James, after years of living in England, had lectured at Bryn Mawr on "The Question of Our Speech." That Americans lacked 'good breeding' and "American circumstances had imposed on the mother tongue in general…" Mark Twain, no surprise here, took the opposite view of our language and used "hain't" freely in his writing, (that's how those guys talked, eh?) and out the window went double negatives…"he never not minded" that rule and American loved and embraced Twain.

Old Beatnik, Old Stoner

Where, Oh Where, Would We Be Without W3?

Take the word beatnik which comes from the Russian word Sputnik which was launched in 1957. Beatnik, which is defined as “a person, especially a member or follower of the Beat Generation, whose behavior, views, and often style of dress is pointedly unconventional.” Visions of Kerouac dancing in your head? Of course. And we can thank Herb Caen of the San Francisco Chronicle when he coined the word Beatnik in 1958. San Francisco, no surprise there, eh? Harks back to Jack Kerouac, too, who that same year published The Dharma Bums and “helped popularize Zen, as in Zen Buddhism.” Zen which was also a new entry in W3.

I always thought vulgar English was just four letter words in English, those words not usually used in public. Linguists would know, of course, that it’s the English used by the semi-illiterate, the uneducated. I received a great education reading this book learned something new about every page. (No discussion here on “dirty words” in W3, just let me say there are plenty in W3 and a discussion on just that topic would be again, the length of this review.)

The definition of journalistic in W2 embarrassing states “characteristic of journalism…hence of a style characterized by evidence of haste, superficiality of thought, inaccuracies of detail. Colloquialisms and sensationalism, journalese. “ I believe Edward R. Murrow would be (perhaps was) offended by that definition and characterization.

It took me more time than usual to read this average sized book and not because I was busy either. I found myself getting side-lined, looking up words I was not familiar with, looking through bookshelves seeing what dictionaries I had (and I have a lot), and browsing through books on words, going off on all kinds of tangents related to words and dictionaries and the English language in general.

Obviously, based on the dictionaries and books that I have around, I have loved our written word, our spoken word, our language which I now hope to refer to as American English.

As an aside, having family in the Smokey Mountains, I recall reading an article that inhabitants of the Smokies and the Appalachian Mountains spoke more the “Kings English” than those of us who live scattered over America. The article went on to say that was because they were secluded and did not have the outside influences those of us who engaged with others. Makes more sense to me now than it did when I read it years ago.

Glancing through other reviews, I see where some said it was boring, sluggish…well, if you have no curiosity about our language and the written word, pass this by. However, if you’re curious, as I am, about words in general, you would either like this or love it like me.

And lastly, when I began the book, it occurred to me that I wished that I had had a more ‘classy’ maybe, literary education from Harvard, Yale, one of those uppity universities where when students graduate they freely use words which I now have to look up in a dictionary (on-line but mostly on my Kindle). But after reading the book which I so thoroughly enjoyed to the nth degree, I’m happy with my education. It’ mine, it’s a basic, run of the mill, average education in journalism and political science from a basic state university, all American, nothing English, our Mother Land English about it.

Take that.

*My own spell check shows this is not a word and offers corrections. Now odd to me after reading the book because ain’t is a word.

Rachel Salzano says

Non-fiction is not my genre of choice, but this year I am trying to read at least one non-fiction book per month. The Story of Ain't is an interesting title, which follows the story of the Webster's Dictionary Third Edition and the controversy that surrounded that dictionary. One of the most interesting bits about this book in my opinion was the way it demonstrated human nature as fickle, willing to believe anything written in the media, and how quickly we agree with "experts" without doing further research. This is not to disparage experts, because I know I'm not one, but this book truly captures the danger of not thinking critically and listening to all sides of a story before making a judgment. This book was less about the story of the word "ain't" and more of the glimpse taken by an omnipotent narrator into what humans do when controversies arise.

Patricia says

I really like linguistics and books about linguistics. I like books about the history of language (and history in general). I like "dry" non-fiction books. Unfortunately, this book was overall BORING. Too many dry facts presented without color or wit, not enough of a 'plot' to keep me turning pages, and just overall boring. Such promise in this one... yet so disappointing.
