

*book of a  
lifetime*

**BY DAVID  
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**OXFORD ENGLISH  
DICTIONARY**

I wonder if I could cheat and go for a genre rather than an individual book? Maybe the literary editor will be too busy to notice. It has to be a dictionary: any dictionary. From as early as I can remember, I've been fascinated by dictionaries. All those senses. All those words. And in alpha order too. Oh, the holy joy of it! [Ed: I've noticed.]

Well, if it has to be one book, it's got to be the 'OED'. The

Oxford English Dictionary. In its unabridged form. None of your Concises or Shorters or Littles. The whole works. Also online. Over half a million word-stories, available at the click of a mouse. And the entire history of any word - to the extent that research has brought it to light. The extraordinary number of idioms. The unexpected spellings. The surprising etymologies. Grammar and glamour both have the same origin. How can that be?

I get dozens of emails each week from linguistic enthusiasts around the world asking me some English language question or other. Many are

about how particular words are - or were - used. The OED is my first port of call. If the answer isn't there, then I have to do my own digging. But I always check there first. I'm ferreting around in its online pages virtually every day.

Sometimes its influence has been quite specific. A few years ago, the Oxford team collaborated with the BBC to produce a series on word origins called 'Balderdash and Piffle'. I marked the event for OUP with a book called 'Words Words Words', in which the OED's influence shone through every page. You'll see the rays again in 'Begat', and in most



**Sir James Murray, the first editor of the 'OED' PA**

of my other books on English. Of course, one should never use a dictionary uncritically. All dictionaries have a policy, and reflect the values of their

compilers. For instance, OED editors have looked more at upmarket than downmarket sources for their words over the years, and some periods and authors have been surveyed more than others. Global English, in all its wondrous diversity, still has only a limited presence. So I have to be careful when using the OED to talk about English as a whole. But there's quite simply nothing else to match it. And it has enticed me into its pages, onshelf and online, more than any other book.

Its future is electronic. According to recent reports, we may never see a paper edition

of the full OED again. I can understand that. How else could one possibly keep up with the rate of lexical change, worldwide, and especially on the internet? For me, the chief fascination of linguistic study is the way a language evolves. New words and senses enter English daily, and I'm enthralled to see how they elbow their way into the lexicon, affecting other words. The OED is a living testimonial to the fact that, in language, tomorrow is always another day.

*David Crystal's 'Bogat: the King James Bible and the English Language' is published by OUP*