



The Secret Life of Words: How English Became English

Henry Hitchings

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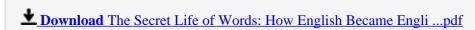
AN ECONOMIST BOOK OF THE YEAR

The Secret Life of Words is a wide-ranging account of the transplanted, stolen, bastardized words we've come to know as the English languag. It's a history of English as a whole, and of the thousands of individual words, from more than 350 foreign tongues, that trickled in gradually over hundreds of years of trade, colonization, and diplomacy. Henry Hitchings narrates the story from the Norman Conquest to the present day, chronicling the English language as a living archive of human experience.

A SAMPLE OF THE THOUSANDS OF STORIES BEHIND THE WORDS:

- Alcatraz Island was named by a Spanish explorer who arrived in 1775 to find the island covered with pelicans, or *alcatraces*. And "alcatraces"? The word goes back to the Arabic *al-qadus*, which was a bucket used in irrigation that resembled the bucket beaks of pelicans.
- What does a walnut have to do with walls? The word comes from the Old English walhnutu, meaning foreign nut. They were originally grown in Italy and imported, and the northern Europeans named them to distinguish them from the native hazelnut.
- A crayfish is not a fish. The name comes from the old French word *crevice*, through the Old German *crebiz* and the modern French *ecrevisse*. The "fish" part is just the result of a mishearing."

The Secret Life of Words is a wide-ranging chronicle of how words witness history, reflect social change, and remind us of our past.



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Carmelita Ratliff:

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Linda Justice:

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