

Making Sense of Peculiar Words and Expressions

This is yet another review in an irregular series devoted to books and Internet sites that are popularly classified as reference source material.

By Richard L. Eastline

I Didn't Know That / Karlen Evins / 156 pp. plus introduction / Scribner, rev. 2007 / \$11.00 (small format paperback) / ISBN-13: 978-1-4165-32387-5.

We treat them as friends, even though we may not know much about them. And we sometimes put them in awkward situations, thinking we're doing the right thing. Who are these reliable, if somewhat not-definable companions? They're all of those peculiar expressions—or odd words—that are so often used when making emphasis in comparisons or standing in for more commonplace terms. You've adopted many of them in both your writing and speech: “dressed to the nines,” “make no bones about it,” “loophole,” “side kick,” “dark horse,” “windfall,” and dozens of others. Ever thought about where they come from? Karlen Evins did and then gathered together her findings on the origins of things we say.

Previously published as two separate volumes in the early '90s, the contents have been updated to include many contemporary sayings. Altogether, she's compiled a wandering collection of some 300 examples, all colorful in purpose whether friendly or otherwise. In some instances, there's an historical link to the expression and in other cases, the phrase or word resulted from a mistake in reading or listening. Evins devotes a paragraph (sometimes nearly a page) to her explanations, but steers away from citing specific sources for most entries. Her prose is workmanlike and fits the informal approach probably better than a “scholarly” descriptive style.

Take, for example, the terse but vivid entry for “lollypop” (pg. 73). In England, even today, “lolly” is an alternate for “tongue,” so when a piece of candy pops in and out of your mouth as you suck on it, you have added the name of a resulting sound to the word identifying its location. As for phrases, here's a lively one that remains popular: “ball park numbers” (pg. 8). Just before the 19th century, ball parks became popular for more than just sports events. Political candidates chose them as venues for speeches because of their seating capacity. Inasmuch tickets were rarely used for such programs, reporters resorted to getting estimates of crowd size. Aided by optimistic guesses by a candidate's party leaders, these figures tended to be approximate at best and, more often, exaggerated.

Even the visual appearance of the pages contributes to an inviting environment for a casual and comfortable sampling as the mood strikes. No more than two entries occupies every small page, each being placed in a display panel and often accompanied by a simply-drawn line illustration. For most writers, this is a book that would not qualify as an ongoing reference, but on the other hand, who but writers would have the innate curiosity to delve into the real meanings of phrases and odd words that lend themselves so well to non-technical communication? More than simply providing the origin answers, Karlen Evins' venture into this sidebar of language also helps all of us as we create prose by clarifying the conventionally-understood meanings with the real stuff.

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