

The Internet's Wordsmith Delves into More Word Origins

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

The Dord, the Digalot, and an Avocado or Two / Anu Garg / 180 pp. incl. index / Plume Books, a division of Penguin, 2007 / \$13.00 (small format paperback) / ISBN-9780-0-452-28861-4

Why are we so inquisitive about the heritage of words and phrases? Is it because sometimes they have no outward connection to the size or shape or sound of the things or actions they're describing? Or because they suggest something familiar and mean something else? Whatever the reasons, the genealogy of words both familiar and strange can be the basis for an obsessive curiosity about what we say and write. And, possibly the most active practitioner in seeking out origins is the founder of Wordsmith.org, the Internet home to word lovers.

Anu Garg physically lives in Seattle but his presence is felt everywhere on the globe. Through his e-mailed newsletters, thousands of addicts get their regular fix, discovering new facets about words they use—or may want to use. Right near the top of their curiosities is the matter of how and where common and not-so-common words originated. Garg has assembled a personal-choice anthology of some 300 examples in his latest book and it's apparent from his palpable enthusiasm that no one likely does it better.

Assigning his examples among 17 loosely-categorized chapters, he invites the reader to discover their parentage, usually logical but often bizarre, as he dissects a word's components or calls upon folk tales and historical characters to illuminate probable first usage. Among the chosen categories are: *Tasty Words*, *Insults*, *Words That Have Changed*, *Words About Words*, and *Words That Sound Good*. And, within a section, such as *Places That Became Words*, there's variety to be found in moving from the logical ("laconic") to a "New York minute" (technically illogical, but wonderfully appropriate). As a successful Internet scribe, Garg has mastered the art of terseness, so the listings range in size from as little as a third of a page to no more than two full pages.

You'll also find an unexpected bonus in the form of trivia quiz questions that naturally are word-related and placed at the bottom of pages here and there. For the inexperienced or cowardly, at the back of the book are the answers. These queries are like the small servings of sorbet that cleanse the palate throughout a lingering dinner. Think you're smart? What singular version of an English word spelled backwards yields a French word with the same reference, but in plural form? ("state" = "etats")—or how about identifying a six-letter word that uses just two characters of the alphabet? (Hint: the two occur sequentially in our ABCs---but if you're stumped, look for answer #16 on page 171).

All in all, it's a fun book. Best of all, you'll smile and snicker even as your IQ advances.