



Origins of the Specious: Myths and Misconceptions of the English Language

By Patricia T. O'Conner, Stewart Kellerman



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Do you cringe when a talking head pronounces “niche” as NITCH? Do you get bent out of shape when your teenager begins a sentence with “and”? Do you think British spellings are more “civilised” than the American versions? If you answered yes to any of those questions, you’re myth-informed.

In **Origins of the Specious**, word mavens Patricia T. O’Conner and Stewart Kellerman reveal why some of grammar’s best-known “rules” aren’t—and never were—rules at all. This playfully witty, rigorously researched book sets the record straight about bogus word origins, politically correct fictions, phony français, fake acronyms, and more. Here are some shockers: “They” was once commonly used for both singular and plural, much the way “you” is today. And an eighteenth-century female grammarian, of all people, is largely responsible for the all-purpose “he.” From the Queen’s English to street slang, this eye-opening romp will be the toast of grammarphiles and the salvation of grammarphobes. Take our word for it.

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- Sales Rank: #569512 in Books
- Brand: Random House Trade Paperbacks
- Published on: 2010-08-24
- Released on: 2010-08-24
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x .60" w x 5.20" l, .47 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 288 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Bestselling word maven O'Conner (*Woe Is I*) is that rare grammarian who values clear, natural expression over the mindless application of rules. In her latest compendium, she debunks the hoariest of false strictures, many of them concocted by evil latter-day pedants seeking to bind the supple English tongue with the fetters of Latinate grammar. A preposition, she proclaims, is a fine thing to end a sentence with. To deftly split an infinitive is no crime to her. And starting a sentence with a conjunction gets her approval, as well as Shakespeare's. Other misconceptions she targets include the idea that woman has a sexist etymology and that the British speak a purer form of English than do Americans. Ranging through the history of English from *Beowulf* to the latest neologisms, the author accepts change in a democratic spirit; proper English, she contends, is what the majority of us say it is (though she can't resist making a traditionalist plea to preserve favored words like unique and ironic from corruption). Writers will appreciate O'Conner's liberating, common-sense approach to the language, and readers the entertaining sprightliness of her prose. (May 5) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From School Library Journal

Inspired by answering language questions on talk radio and through email, journalists and grammar book authors O'Conner and Kellerman keep explaining the English language in ten topical chapters. While some grammar and etymology questions are familiar, other topics are happily fresh. An example of this is the first chapter, which considers authenticity, namely, whether American or British English retained more original vocabulary and pronunciation. Skillfully drawing on the *Oxford English Dictionary* and other research tools, the writers always present conversational prose with different kinds of wordplays. For instance, regarding using pronouns, they write, "But one word is missing...the word that I would have used instead of 'he or she' in the last sentence." Because the work aims to explain even more than guide, it emphasizes historical background more than other recently published books such as June Casagrande's *Mortal Syntax* and Paul Yeager's *Literally, the Best Language Book Ever*. With an accessible tone and full of information, this work is recommended for public libraries.—Marianne Orme, Des Plaines P.L., IL Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From [Booklist](#)

Readers describing the opening chapters of this trove of linguistic lore may consider surprising an apt word. But then O'Conner and Kellerman will school them in the historical distinction between surprising and astonishing. Still, most readers will welcome the corrective schooling. After all, the authors assault illusions about language with such élan that the whole process entertains and even amuses. True, it may hurt to part with cherished but apocryphal anecdotes and folk etymologies. (Alas, we must bid farewell to the endearing story about Churchill skewering pedants who opposed sentence-ending prepositions.) But most readers will cherish the gains, as real understanding replaces the semantic superstitions obscuring common expressions ("rule of thumb") and constructions (the double negative). But besides opening up a lexical treasury, the authors teach substantive linguistic lessons. Readers learn, for example, why Americans should shed their unwarranted sense of linguistic inferiority to the British and why the guardians of correctness must recognize the inevitability of language change. No one has ever coaxed more fun out of dictionaries. --Bryce Christensen

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Robert Haas:

Why don't make it to be your habit? Right now, try to prepare your time to do the important action, like looking for your favorite reserve and reading a publication. Beside you can solve your condition; you can add your knowledge by the book entitled Origins of the Specious: Myths and Misconceptions of the English Language. Try to make the book Origins of the Specious: Myths and Misconceptions of the English Language as your good friend. It means that it can to become your friend when you feel alone and beside associated with course make you smarter than ever before. Yeah, it is very fortunated for you personally. The book makes you a lot more confidence because you can know every little thing by the book. So , let's make new experience and knowledge with this book.

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