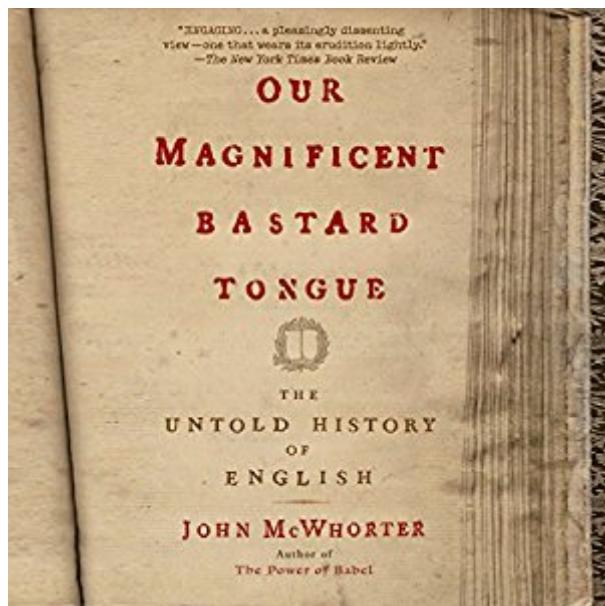


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Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue: The Untold History Of English



Synopsis

A survey of the quirks and quandaries of the English language, focusing on our strange and wonderful grammar. Why do we say "I am reading a catalog" instead of "I read a catalog"? Why do we say "I do" at all? Is the way we speak a reflection of our cultural values? Delving into these provocative topics and more, "Our Magnificent Bastard Language" distills hundreds of years of fascinating lore into one lively history. Covering such turning points as the little-known Celtic and Welsh influences on English, the impact of the Viking raids and the Norman Conquest, and the Germanic invasions that started it all during the fifth century ad, John McWhorter narrates this colorful evolution with vigor. Drawing on revolutionary genetic and linguistic research as well as a cache of remarkable trivia about the origins of English words and syntax patterns, "Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue" ultimately demonstrates the arbitrary, maddening nature of English and its ironic simplicity due to its role as a streamlined lingua franca during the early formation of Britain. This is the book that language aficionados worldwide have been waiting for (and no, it's not a sin to end a sentence with a preposition). --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

To paraphrase John McWhorter: Normal people are interested in words while linguists are interested in grammar. In "Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue", John McWhorter calls this everyday, normal-person view of the English language "the vanilla version" of the history of English. In this version Germanic tribes invaded England, pushed the Celts to the fringes of the British Isles, and eventually Old English (Beowulf) became Middle English (Chaucer) became Modern English.

(Shakespeare), with infusions of Latin and Norman French after the Conquest in 1066. In the vanilla version, English lost its case endings on its own and became the most grammatically simple Germanic language. McWhorter, a specialist in creoles and contact languages, has another theory, which gives the Celtic languages (especially Welsh and Cornish) credit for influencing the grammar of English. He pays as much attention to history as to linguistics, and presents evidence that large numbers of Celts were not exterminated by the small numbers of Vikings who invaded and eventually settled in the northern and eastern part of England, the Danelaw. He demonstrates that English (unlike every other Germanic language) has grammatical features in common with Celtic languages--for instance, the "meaningless do" ("Do we eat apples?") and using gerunds (like "using" in "I'm using a gerund") as a normal present tense. In fact, hardly any other language has these features, so it's just not reasonable to assume English and Celtic developed them coincidentally. McWhorter says we've been misled by what he calls the "post-Norman Conquest blackout of written English," the 150 years or so after the Norman invasion when French became the "scribal" language in England.

Linguist John McWhorter in his latest work advances a very well argued contrarian view of the development of the English language. The prevailing conventional view is that changes in English over time principally involve just the addition of new words from Latin, French, and, in the ages of exploration, words from everywhere. The conventional view rests centrally on the "hard evidence" reflected in surviving writings. Very adroitly, McWhorter reminds us that in early societies the written language was scribal and thus no necessary reflection of what the bulk of the non-literate population actually spoke. Nonetheless, the conventional view at its narrowest takes what merely survives in writing as a picture of the whole, imagining in doing so that it is being scientific and avoiding "airy assumptions." History, however, McWhorter reminds us, invariably involves much that is lost, requiring as well a reconstruction of events based on high levels of probability. McWhorter rests his contrarian case on such arguments as he deals with other surviving bits of circumstantial evidence. His chief argument is that the history of English may best be understood as a consequence of the mixing of languages, not merely the addition of new words from foreign sources or the consequence of changes that "just happened." He seeks to explain the principal changes, not merely and dully to document them. Starting with the invasion of the British Isles by Angles, Saxons, and Jutes after the Roman departure, McWhorter disputes the notion that these invaders completed a successful Holocaust on the native Celtic peoples.

Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue by John McWhorter (Gotham Books) is the most entertaining book about linguistics that I've read. As a teacher and writer, I love English and its quirks, but I never could get my mind around all the charts, graphs, and jargon of formal linguistics. This book gave me a nice language fix without sounding like a calculus text. It's relevant to mention that McWhorter is black, because a racial subtext runs through this book. McWhorter's linguistic specialty is Creole languages--those lilting mash-ups created by black slaves out of native tongues and European languages. In Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue, he suggests that English is a kind of Creole, and chides "traditional" linguists for ignoring the way English was "gumbo-ed" by the Celts, Vikings, and Phoenicians. First, McWhorter attempts to show that Celts had a significant effect on Old English, evident in our unique use of the "meaningless do" (we say "Do you want to go shopping" whereas all other languages say something like "Want you to go shopping?") and progressive constructions (we say "Mary is singing" whereas all other languages say something like "Mary sings."). In another chapter, McWhorter agrees that Norse invasions of Angle-land caused many of our inflectional endings to drop off but goes further and insists that Norse influence truly battered our grammar. Finally, McWhorter goes out on an intriguing limb in proposing that Phoenician influenced Proto-Germanic (he gives as evidence striking similarities in Germanic and Semitic words). In the middle of these assaults on traditional linguistics, McWhorter pops in a rant against grammar rules, insisting that all grammar is just fashion.

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