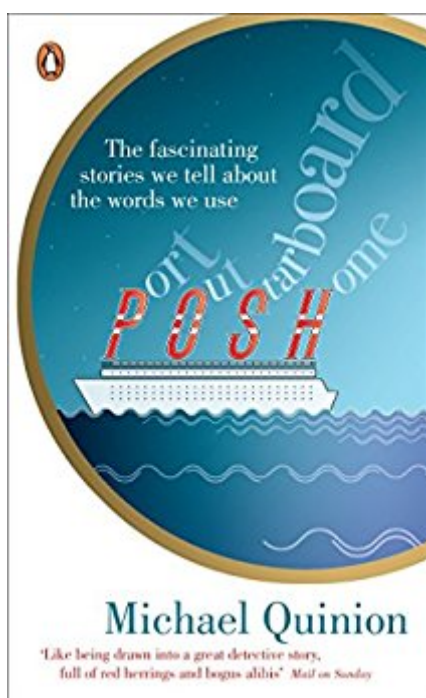


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Port Out, Starboard Home: The Fascinating Stories We Tell About The Words We Use



Synopsis

Can it really be true that 'golf' stands for 'Gentlemen Only Ladies Forbidden'? Or that 'rule of thumb' comes from an archaic legal principle that a man may chastise his wife, but only with a rod no thicker than his thumb? These and hundreds of other stories are commonly told and retold whenever people meet. They grow up in part because expressions are often genuinely mysterious. Why, for example, are satisfying meals 'square' rather than any other shape? And how did anyone ever come up with the idea that if you're competent at something you can 'cut the mustard'? Michael Quinion here retells many of the more bizarre tales, and explains their real origins where they're known. This is a fascinating treasure-trove of fiction and fact for anyone interested in language.

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Customer Reviews

Chances are you've received via e-mail one of the many lists of the etymological origins of words and phrases. As you have probably learned from more respected sources than your e-mail buddy, most of these putative origins, although interesting and clever, are nevertheless false. One of the most vibrant and entertaining of the respected sources is Michael Quinion, researcher and

contributor to the Oxford English Dictionary and writer on words. In *Port Out, Starboard Home and Other Language Myths*, Quinion reveals the true origins of some well-known words and phrases, as well as the not-so-obvious associations between one common word and another (for example, "barbecue" and "buccaneer"). Quinion tracks the trail wherever it may lead, and we are happy to follow along. From the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer to Irving Berlin, Quinion finds the gem. He manages to locate the most obscure texts ever written (Where does he find these things - and how does he know to look in that particular text?) to unearth the very first instance of publication of a given word or phrase. Then he brings us back to our modern-day term with a better understanding of how it came to be. Conjecture, speculation, and personal opinion are all clearly stated. Been "called on the carpet"? Is your car "on the fritz"? Got a "bug" in your computer program? Find out the origins of these terms and learn why it's likely that most of the explanations you've heard are probably false. This is an absorbing book that would be of interest to anyone with a curiosity about the origins of words and phrases. The only problem is that it's too short - and Quinion never tells us how much wood a woodchuck would chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood.

People often wonder what is - or rather, what may be - the origin of certain words and phrases; and some of the answers to these questions are as various and as ingenious as they are wrong. More often than not, Quinion is not certain of the correct answer himself, and then engages in his own speculations while making it clear that there is no hard evidence for them. (One of the few phrases of whose strange origin he is certain is to "curry favour".) But what he does do regularly is to dismiss false attributions - what he calls "folk etymology" - for one reason or another, quite often because the date of the phrase's first appearance does not tally with the explanation. He writes, for instance, that there is "absolutely no evidence" for the popular idea that the origin of the word "posh" was that wealthy passengers travelling by boat to India booked their cabins on the cooler and therefore more expensive Port side for the Outward journey and the Starboard side on the journey Home. Disproving attributions, even if they figure in some dictionaries, seems to be the main purpose of the book, so that if you read it straight through, the impression it leaves of the author is one of a scholarly but a distinctively fault-finding character. But whether they are right or wrong, attributions of origin are fun to read, we learn some interesting bits of history, and the book will entertain many readers.

I have two shelves full of books about the English language. Each is different, each has its own

strengths, weaknesses and quirks. Michael Quinion's book is one of those to which I turn if I'm looking for some insight into common language myths. The issue of accuracy and authenticity is one I'll leave for the experts. I don't need to be as definitive as they would prefer to be. For me, words are tools to be enjoyed, considered and used. There is, of course, one shattered myth that has caused me personal discomfort. That relates to the origin of CABAL (cabal). Imagine my momentary distress at learning that this was not (as I'd long thought) an acronym formed from the names of the five preeminent leaders in Charles II's government of 1667-1673. Still, it is of little consequence: I'll consider it a mnemonic instead. Clifford, Arlington, Buckingham, Ashley and Lauderdale may have even had a far greater impact on language than they did on Charles II's government. And the real origin of cabal? Well, apparently, it came into English via the French 'cabale' from the medieval Latin 'cabbala'. And there's more ... Enjoy. Jennifer Cameron-Smith

The concept was better than the execution. A lot more of debunking myths than actual explanations.

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