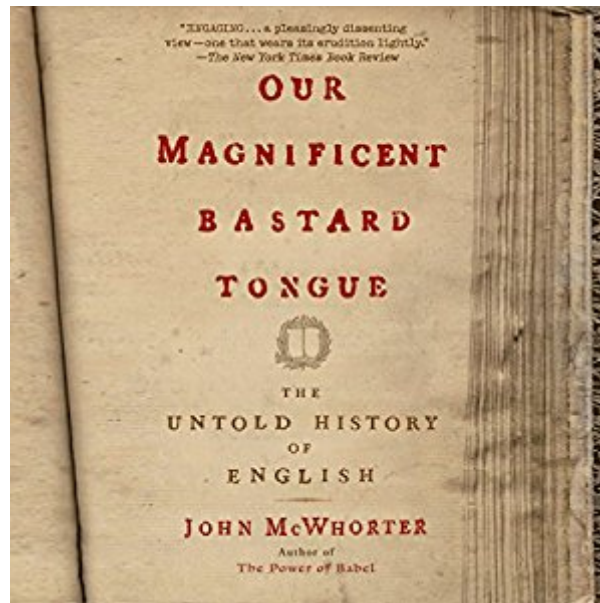


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# Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue: The Untold History Of English



## 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 "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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

McWhorter tends to delight in moments of language mixing and often would call those instances brand spankin' new languages, rather than Creoles. But in this book his impulse to expose the bastard origins of the English language are delightfully subversive. I would encourage any would-be purchasers on the merits of his "Miscegenated Grammar" chapter alone. The latter shows pretty irrefutable evidence of Celtic-language influence that shakes up many of our traditional notions of

the English language's history.

The book is well written, highly cogent, and congenial in the best sense. The arguments not only flow well, but have the perfect pieces of information to provide a solid backbone to them. A few of his analogies are a stretch and seem a tad far-flung, but the vast majority are extremely apt. He also touches on issues such as a singular "they" and comments on how language does not determine culture, rather the other way around. 4.7/5 If I had to be overly critical and specific.

Very impressive: powerful argument, powerfully made, but with humor and grace. A window on the origin of the English language's quirky simplicity and some of its other quirks. And a window, though not a sustained description, of how much linguists can infer about a language's past and about their methods of inference. A bit like how much information astronomers can extract from a dab of starlight. For a more sustained discussion of how linguists reason back to an earlier version of a word common to an earlier mother language or to an earlier common grammar, see his Teaching Company tapes. I have come to trust him after reading his work and watching and listening to him on Blogging Heads, Teaching Company Tapes, and books I've bought on this web site.

John McWhorter's fresh and engaging presentation of evolutionary English is informed by the major forces of social and cultural flows through what we now call Europe and the U.K. While he is adept at making a larger picture out of detail, as one might expect, he is also bold enough to look in the other direction, from the sweep of history to the resultant detail left in its wake. Fascinating and entertaining, as well as diligent whole-brain detective work . . . makes the most complex and important language's history more comprehensible, and its continuing evolutionary usages easier to bear! I enjoyed it thoroughly, and would recommend Bryson's "The Mother Tongue" as a companion book. Both excellent!

These 2 books are favorites of McWhorter (and mine) and he wastes no time in rehashing them. Instead he promotes several theories/topics that are different from the conventional wisdom, and for which he argues very convincingly. Namely these are that a) though most linguists argue that we inherited almost nothing from Gaelic languages, McWhorter points out that much of our grammar is Welsh and Cornish. b) that the transition from Old to Middle English did not rapidly occur in the 150 years after 1066, but that had been going on all along and was only committed to paper then when scribes started writing English again after a gap. There is very little real evidence for this, but it

is also very very plausible. Compare Mark Twain's writing when he attempts to put real speech down on paper with anything contemporary. c) some Semitic language was probably responsible for much of the weirdness of proto-Germanic in the Indo-European language family. There is a far flung theory (which he notes as such) that this was the Phoenicians. McWhorter also spends a while exploring the intricacies of how Old Norse and Old English collided, fighting the grammatical dictocrats, and far too long debunking the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. McWhorter's writing is entertaining and flawless. I would buy the Story of English as an intro, David Crystal's Cambridge if you liked that, and this book 3rd. I wish he had a longer book on English or even the evolution of the Germanic languages.

Interesting info (i'm a word freak and love etymology) but a bit dryly written.

I teach English as a Second Language and for years I've asked why English uses the auxiliaries do, does, and did in the way that it does. I thought perhaps when I went to get my Masters in TESOL, professors would be able to enlighten me. But no. Finally, this book explains the origins of the fundamental mystery of English syntax. I feel like a twenty-year-old itch has been scratched.

I'm a fan of McWhorter and this coupled with 'The Power of Babel' are mandatory must-reads for anyone at all curious about the formation and structure of English. He goes where other linguists don't go, re-examining and debunking the assumptions that have been made about our language's evolution. McWhorter renders it all with vivid and humorous exposition, as well, drawing apt analogies and boiling complex passages down into easily understood components. He goes a long way to resolving the strange inconsistencies in English that the average person has puzzled over and bandied about in casual conversation. This is an important book for grammarians who would like to know the "why" of all the rules they enforce. It's a refreshing shake-up for amateur linguists for whom prior treatises did not plumb far enough. Lastly, it's essential for anyone tired of stumbling around in the dark.

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