

Nonfiction Summary – Exemplar

in Mr. Hall's Stuffy Teacher Voice

Word by Word: The Secret Life of Dictionaries is Kory Stamper's memoir of her career as an editor/lexicographer at Merriam-Webster, famed publishers of American dictionaries. On the way to explaining how she landed in the job, the first chapter, *Hrafnkell*, touches on her bibliophilic childhood and her transition in college from a parent-approved pre-med program to a medieval studies major. Stamper's gateway experience, as she tells it, came when navigating the vicissitudes of the pronunciation of Old Norse consonants. It's a relatable moment for anyone who remembers scratching the surface of some deep, esoteric field of knowledge and feeling a completely impractical, career-agnostic pull to immerse oneself in it entirely. Stamper did, and the rest was serendipity.

The chapters that follow are a mixture of amusing anecdotes from Stamper's experiences learning the lexicographical ropes and brief historical and theoretical overviews. Each chapter title has a "headword," to repurpose some dictionary lingo, that cleverly frames its topic. The chapters *But* and *It's* neatly divide questions of standard usage into those that are grammatical in the *linguistic* sense and those that are "grammatical" in the colloquial sense of "all the rules you're supposed to follow." *But* covers the thorny questions that arise when endeavoring to assign parts of speech to the ubiquitous and usually monosyllabic building blocks of English (*as, but, that, etc.*). A brief, but fair, history of the emergence of linguistic prescriptivism in English appears in the second chapter, dubbed *It's*: the distinction between this titular word and its homophone (*its*) serves as the exemplar for just how capricious the foundations for Standard Written English often are.

In *Surfboard*, Stamper differentiates philosophical ("real") defining from lexical defining, the bailiwick of the lexicographer. In *Corpus*, she relates the struggle of deciding which bits of (usually written) language are good exemplars, and how that selection process has evolved over time – a questions as old as (edited) dictionaries, but one that is complicated substantially by the internet.

Perhaps the most fascinating account comes in the chapter *Irregardless: On Wrong Words*. Long decried as a particularly egregious affront to the English language's proscription of double negatives, the word is a favorite whipping boy and candidate for expurgation from dictionaries, at least among prescriptivist sticklers. Stamper confesses her own bias against the word, which remained even after she attained a more enlightened descriptivist view of linguistics. Nevertheless, her due diligence in testing a hypothesis that this word originated as a "superlative form of *regardless*" culminates in the thrilling discovery of a 19th century writer who uses both *regardless* and *irregardless* in the span of a few sentences. It *had* to be intentional *and* reflective of a semantic difference, reasons Stamper, although it seems to her more intensive than superlative, a quibble you're likely capable of appreciating if you're still with her at this point. Which you really should be.

Nonfiction Summary – Exemplar

in Mr. Hall's Approximated Student Voice

Word by Word: The Secret Life of Dictionaries is a memoir written by Kory Stamper. She works for Merriam-Webster as a lexicographer, which means she writes dictionaries. In the first fifty pages, she tells a lot of stories from the beginning of her career and also tells how she became interested in language as a teenager and even more interested in college. For example, she talks about no one in her class on Icelandic folklore being able to pronounce the word *hrafnkell*, which she uses as the title for a chapter.

After that, she talks about grammar, and what most people mean by the term: a collection of rules about the "right" way to write everything. She relates this to her own job by noting that many people expect dictionaries and lexicographers to be the enforcers, or at least supporters, of these rules. On the one hand, she has to be able to think very deeply about grammar in the linguistic sense because she needs to be able to tell when words have more than one meaning (if they are used as a different part of speech, they are likely changing meaning). On the other hand, she is very aware that the historical reasons behind many of the rules about what is "right" are arbitrary (one person just made it up) or, at best, conventions that came from a particular group of people with power. Stamper decides that the lexicographer's role is mostly to "tell the truth about" (p. 50) what language *is* and not worry about what it *should be*.

Later on, she talks about another challenge that has become even more of an issue in recent years, which is how to deal with examples of writing from the internet. Part of what lexicographers have to do is read to collect examples of usage (p. 65-66). In the past, a set of texts and publications used for this purpose was called a *corpus* (for body, also the title of this chapter). On the internet, though, there is rarely an editor looking over the shoulder of a writer. And, when there is, it is often after publication. A text might change several times, meaning a usage might disappear after a lexicographer takes note of it. How to manage this problem is a question Stamper doesn't resolve (p. 81-85).