People Profile: Erin McKean

Editor
Erin McKean Interview

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even years to testing an hypothesis only to decide that it is not tenable, or to attempting to collect evidence to prove a theory only to have to conclude that sufficient facts are no longer in existence to clinch it. It does not make one’s life anxious, nor build up hopes only to have them collapse. Everyday one is confronted by new problems, usually small but absorbingly interesting: at the end of the day one feels healthily tired, but content in the thought that one has accomplished something and advanced the whole work towards its completion.

Lexicography is full of problems that are complicated, interesting, important — yet (and this is the key part) not insolvable. And, for the most part, not irreversible — there’s always the next printing, or the next edition.

ATG: When you were at Scott Foresman, you worked on Thordike Barnhart children’s dictionaries. Why did you switch to creating works intended for adults?

EM: I loved working at Scott Foresman. It’s a great company and the Thordike Barnhart books have a wonderful tradition. Working on children’s dictionaries, or any children’s books, encourages you to think laterally, and that was fun. By the time I left, though, I’d worked on every lexical title the company made, and there was just nothing else for me to do (except work on the other textbook lines). So OUP called, and said “Hey, how about coming to us?” It was just the right time.

ATG: What are the biggest challenges to dictionary making in this world of high speed communication and the Internet? What opportunities does it afford? How did these challenges and opportunities play out in the development of the recently published second edition of the New Oxford American Dictionary?

EM: The biggest challenge and biggest opportunity is that there is so much more language data available to us now, not only online writing but also digitized print that’s now searchable online. More data means better descriptions of the language, for the most part. However, you have to be really discriminating. You have to know when enough is enough, and that’s hard. There are fewer prelims...

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people profile

Erin (Margaret) McKean

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BORN & LIVED: Charlotte, NC (born); have lived in Jacksonville, Florida (2x); Marshfield, Massachusetts; Medina, Ohio; Winston-Salem, NC (2x); and now Chicago (since 1989).

EARLY LIFE: Moved often (see above). Spent most of my time in the local public library, checking out as many books as I could carry (after wheedling extra checkout privileges from the very tolerant librarians).

FAMILY: Father, Thomas McKean, lives in central Florida and works in sales; mother Devon McKean lives in Chicago. I’m the eldest: brother Matt makes the computers run on time and lives in Charlotte with his wife Kim; sister Kate lives in Brooklyn and works as a literary agent.


FIRST JOB: First non-babysitting job was working in a dry cleaners in Winston-Salem, NC. Was so bored I read through five years of “American Drycleaner” magazine and begged to learn how to operate industrial pressing machinery (illegally, as I was only 16). First lexicographical job was at Scott Foresman in Glenview, Illinois, working on the Thordike Barnhart children’s dictionaries.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: At Scott Foresman from 1992-2000; I started as an intern and left as the Editorial Manager for the dictionaries. At OUP since 2000; Editor in Chief of the American dictionaries since 2004.

Member of the Dictionary Society of North America, American Dialect Society, American Name Society, Linguistic Society of America, Canadian Society for the Study of Names, MLA, NCTE, and Euralex. Have served on the board of the DSNA and am on the editorial board of American Speech, the journal of the American Dialect Society.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO: Read, especially novels (mostly genre), magazines, and blogs. I spend a lot of time sewing from vintage patterns, and I like to roller skate (with the old-fashioned, four-wheel skates).

FAVORITE BOOKS: For pure, totally-immersed, don’t-bother-me-I’m-reading! pleasure, nothing beats Lois McMaster Bujold and Dorothy Dunnett. I’ve also become really fond of Cory Doctorow lately — I’ve been reading his books on my Treo phone! I love Anthony Trollope, especially the Barsetshire books, and Kipling, especially Stalky & Co. and Kim. The non-Oxford reference books I can’t live without include Glazier’s Word Menu, the Encyclopedia of Associations, and an ancient 1860s edition of Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable. Also, nobody should go through life without having looked into the Dictionary of American Regional English at least once.

PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD: If you throw a lit cigarette out of a car window, I will honk at you (and don’t pretend you don’t know why I honked!) I dislike it when people cast me in the role of the disapproving grammar maven and hypercorrect themselves around me. I also have trouble understanding why some people don’t love computers!

PHILOSOPHY: I think it’s a combination of these two quotes: “I can imagine no more comfortable frame of mind for the conduct of life than a humorous resignation.” — W.S. Maugham. and “Anyone can do any amount of work provided it isn’t the work he’s supposed to be doing at the moment.” — Robert Benchley.

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Well, to date it would have to be the 2nd edition of the New Oxford American Dictionary.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: I hope that by 2010 I can make the New Oxford American Dictionary the preferred dictionary of serious readers and writers.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Easy access to dictionary content will, I hope, make consumers more discriminating about which dictionaries they use. Now that comparing entries is as easy as opening another tab in your browser, I hope more people do just that — and figure out which dictionary suits their needs and their way of working. I see dictionaries becoming deeper and broader as we outgrow print-only versions and move to augmented print and electronic versions.

against the grain / September 2005

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