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ATG Interviews Erin McKean

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Diane Kovacs Interview
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or very brief overviews or they are people's opinions and not research data. I don't understand what you mean by comprehensive Website... you asked me about collections. Google might be a comprehensive collection site for Web library resources — but in reality it is not a collection but an index. BUBL is as comprehensive within the scope of their collection policy as it is probably possible to get without a lot more funding.

ATG: In books like the Kovacs Guide to Electronic Library Collection Development most of your focus has been on harvesting Websites from the free Web. Where do recent publisher initiatives offering electronic version of their reference works fit in? Will they complement or compete with Websites from the free Web? Where does this explosive growth of digital information leave the collection of print reference materials?

DK: First, the focus is on the free stuff because I can show it to people. But the same criteria for selection should be applied to fee-based stuff. I don't know where it will leave the print reference materials, yet. The problem I see is that print is appropriate in some situations and it is not in others. I'd rather have a dictionary handy then go online just to look up a word but I sure do not want to be back using Sociological Abstracts in print again. The one thing that I think is most important for us to keep in mind though is that electricity is ultimately the controlling piece of e-libraries. If there is no electricity there is no e-library. If we have power failures we have no resources. Think California a few years ago when half my classes were cancelled because of power failures, Iraq, most of Africa, etc. We must think in terms of back-up now I believe. Print or microfilm access as a back-up to when the power is gone — or the computer crashes or the network is cut by idiots with backhoes — that sort of thing.

ATG: But can the average library afford to do "back up?" Are print and/or microfilm archives of electronic information realistic? Or are you thinking of some kind of national depository set up? Where might institutional repositories fit into this?

DK: Usually not, but I think that consortia and indeed individual libraries can make licensing arrangements for archiving. And I do think a national depository should be available at some level. The Internet Archive WaybackMachine <http://www.waybackmachine.org> is a step in the right direction vis-à-vis free Web resources.

ATG: As a consultant, you do numerous surveys on core reference collections dealing with topics ranging from general reference to law and from medical to business sources. Without giving away too much, can you tell us what you have learned? Are traditional reference works being supplanted by Websites? If so, will recent publisher attempts at developing digital reference works stem the tide? In short, is reference publishing still relevant?

DK: I will give it all away to you once I get the data compiled. I do the surveys to help me teach better and write better — the information belongs to the people I query. What I have learned in a nutshell though is that it is very easy to come up with ten or fewer *CORE* resources or type of resources that everyone agrees on as useful in a given subject area. In terms of trends... the first time I did the survey the results were mostly print resources. This time it appears (they are still being compiled) the results are mostly Web resources. I plan to get to these soon — some of them anyway.

ATG: It sounds like you will be publishing or posting to your Website the results of your surveys. When should we look for the results? And speaking of *CORE* sources, have publisher sources like Gale's Virtual Reference Library and Oxford's Online Reference Collections hit the radar screen yet?

DK: Well I got side-tracked this summer with the Infolit course I mentioned earlier so I am still sitting here with raw data. Gale yes — Oxford no — at least not in my surveys of core tools.

ATG: This is a bit off topic, but what is your take on recent Google initiatives like Google Scholar and Google Print? What do they say about the future of libraries and the library community? How can we stop from being marginalized?

DK: We can stop from being marginalized by embracing these efforts. We should have been leading them but Google is NOT replacing us — it is giving us a new set of tools. We should be embracing and teaching these

tools. We will be marginalized if we cling to the idea that we — libraries — have to be the originator of information collections or that everything has to be filtered through librarians. This has never been true. I'm trying to remember stats from last time I studied this — less than 1/3 of people using a library from my reading actually ask at the reference desk. In Use and Users of Information class in library school, I studied medical professionals and found that very few of them ever go to the library 'first' anyway — they only go to the library when they exhaust their personal collection or their collegial networks. That is our role — to be there and be obviously there and available, when people need us. And we need to stop thinking they know we are there and do a bit more marketing...

ATG: For those of us interested in pursuing the issue of library marketing and/or reaching out to users, can you suggest some further reading? Who/What has inspired you to think along these lines?

DK: Experience. Interactions with people in the community — especially the business world — who have no clue what their own public libraries offer for them. I can't think of a good marketing libraries source. There have been several good speakers on the conference circuit. I have my ideas but I've never done a formal presentation except in basic marketing of Websites.

ATG: Diane, thank you for being so forthcoming. You've given us a lot to think about. We, and our readers, appreciate it.

DK: You're welcome and thank you for asking me.

ATG Interviews Erin McKean

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ATG: Erin, is it really true that you have wanted to be a lexicographer since you were eight years old? I doubt I knew what the word meant at that age. What triggered this amazing interest?

EM: When I was eight I would read anything that came into the house — including my dad's *Wall St. Journal*. And one day the "floating" column on the front page was about **Robert Burchfield** and the editing of the second edition of the *OED*. I thought it was so cool — I'd never really considered how dictionaries were made before — and thought, "hey, I'd like to do that!" And nobody ever tried to talk me out of it, so here I am.

I actually have a copy of the article. I had cut it out and saved it, and when I went away to college it turned up again. A few years ago I was in touch with a reporter from the *WSJ* who

knew the reporter who had written the article; he said he'd let her know that she had been responsible for my whole life, basically!

ATG: What made you think that making dictionaries would be a "cool job"?

EM: I think, even at eight, I really liked words: the nuts and bolts of them. I liked the idea of being a word cataloguer, if not a word curator. The more I learned about lexicography, the more I was interested in it. There's a wonderful quote about lexicography that I have hanging in my office, by the lexicographer **James R. Hulbert**:

"I know of no more enjoyable intellectual activity than working on a dictionary. Unlike most research, lexicography rarely sends one in fruitless quests; one does not devote days, months, or

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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. Every day 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 unsolvable. 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 *Thorndike Barnhart* children's dictionaries? Why did you switch to editing works intended for adults?

EM: I loved working at *Scott Foresman*. It's a great company and the *Thorndike 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'd 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 prelimi-

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against the grain

people profile

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Erin (Margaret) McKean

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 at **Dystel and Goderich Literary Management**.

EDUCATION: AB/AM in Linguistics from the **University of Chicago**, 1993. Thesis was on the treatment of phrasal verbs in children's dictionaries.

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 **Thorndike 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. 🍌

nary filters before something hits the lexicographer's eyes. There's always the temptation to look for one more "hit," one more citation, that you think might add a little more light to what a word is. (I say "is" instead of "means," because a dictionary entry has so much more than just the meaning of a word!)

For *NOAD 2e*, we were able to use a lot of targeted searching to identify words that were really on their way up — we wanted to catch them just before apogee, if you will. I would like to think that someday we could be just a teeny bit ahead of the curve and could enter new words just a little while before you knew you needed them. They would already be there waiting for you!

ATG: When you say things like "one more hit" and "targeted searching" it makes us think you are referring to some master database that you use. Are we correct? Or are you speaking more broadly?

EM: Much more broadly. We do have access to the **American National Corpus**, and **OUP's** big (200+ million words) database, as well as (of course) the entire Internet. There are also smaller databases that we use, such as **ProQuest** and others, which almost everyone can access through their public libraries.

ATG: Do you think a good dictionary should be proscriptive or descriptive? Should it promote "correct usage" or be more reflective of language as it is spoken? What did you strive for in editing the *New Oxford American Dictionary*?

EM: A good dictionary is like a map of the language. We have to show the features that are there, or people will get lost. However, unlike any map I've ever seen, dictionaries can also tell you where the bad parts of town are, parts you might want to avoid. Telling you whether or not a word is part of Standard English, and, if it's not, how far afield it is, is and should be part of every dictionary's job. We have to report not only what people are saying,

but what people say about what people are saying, if that makes any sense.

In *NOAD2* we really strove for as complete and as useful a description of American English as possible. That includes information about usage as well as meaning.

ATG: We notice that there are 2000 new entries in the *New Oxford American Dictionary*. Is that standard for a new edition of a dictionary with a quarter million total definitions? Besides these new definitions, what else separates the *NOAD* from the competition?

EM: Well, since this is only our second edition, 2000 new words is standard for us. We hope to start doing quarterly new word releases online, much as the *OED* does.

Besides new words, *NOAD* has a completely different defining style — no other American dictionary is arranged the way *NOAD* is. Entries in *NOAD* have a core sense/subsense arrangement. Instead of having each meaning of a word arranged in the order meanings developed, or by order of frequency of use, *NOAD* entries are arranged by core senses. A core sense might have one sub-sense, or several, or a dozen. However, what's really important is that you can read the entry as little groups of meaning constellations. You can trace the developments in meaning in an organic and connected way. This works really well with a word like:

mystery n. (pl. -teries)

1. something that is difficult or impossible to understand or explain: *the mysteries of outer space* | *hoping that the inquest would solve the mystery*. See note at **riddle**.

• the condition or quality of being secret, strange, or difficult to explain: *much of her past is shrouded in mystery*. • a person or thing whose identity or nature is puzzling or unknown: "*He's a bit of a mystery*," said Nina | [as adj.] *a mystery guest*.

2. a novel, play, or movie dealing with a puzzling crime, esp. a murder.

3. (**mysteries**) the secret rites of Greek and Roman pagan religion, or of any

ancient or tribal religion, to which only initiates are admitted.

• the practices, skills, or lore peculiar to a particular trade or activity and regarded as baffling to those without specialized knowledge: *the mysteries of analytical psychology*. • the Christian Eucharist.

4. (*chiefly Christian Theology*) a religious belief based on divine revelation, esp. one regarded as beyond human understanding: *the mystery of Christ*.

• an incident in the life of Jesus or of a saint as a focus of devotion in the Roman Catholic Church, esp. each of those commemorated during recitation of successive decades of the rosary.¹

As you can see, grouping the related meanings together lets you make interesting connections. If you look at 'mystery' in a historically-arranged dictionary, the first definition is something like "a religious truth" which is not what most people think of when they think of 'mystery' — that's not their core meaning for the word. Core meanings with subsenses let you work outwards from the known to the unknown, or from the familiar to the unfamiliar, for the most part — which is, in fact, how quite a lot of people believe that learning happens! This has been called a "revolutionary" change in how dictionaries are made, and I have to say that it can make a huge difference in how you approach an entry, both as a reader and as a lexicographer. History and frequency are both imposed arrangements — they're outside the word. Core sense and subsense just make sense. We're wired to make connections, put similar things together — why wouldn't we make reference books that reflect that tendency?

ATG: This second edition of the *NOAD* is available in print, on the Web and for downloading on to PDA's and smart phones. With the ever increasing move to electronic information, why a print edition? Is there a real and viable market for print dictionaries? What is the proportion of sales among the various formats?

EM: I'm not sure of the sales proportion, as we don't sell the PDA version separately ourselves, and of course the Web version is bundled with other titles in **Oxford Reference Online**. I do think there will always be a market for print dictionaries; lots of people like the tactile nature of print books, the browsability, and the random serendipitous words they find. However, I find I use the electronic versions (especially the **Handmark PDA** version, that I installed on my **Treo 600**) about 90% of the time. That's because I know what I want and want the fastest way to get it.

There is nothing like the feeling of having 250,000 words at your fingertips, in your pocket! I've used the cellphone version in restaurants to figure out what something is on the menu; I've used it on the train, looking up a word in the magazine I'm reading; I've used it while giving talks when somebody asked me exactly how *NOAD* defined something! I would rather give up the phone part of my cellphone than the dictionary part, honestly.

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Sidebar

singularity

■ n. (pl. -ties)

1. the state, fact, quality, or condition of being singular: he believed in the singularity of all cultures.

■ a peculiarity or odd trait.

2. (Physics & Mathematics) a point at which a function takes an infinite value, esp. in space-time when matter is infinitely dense, as at the center of a black hole.

■ (**the Singularity**) a point in the future (often set at or around 2030 A.D.) beyond which overwhelming technological changes (esp. the development of superhuman artificial intelligence) make reliable predictions impossible.

• **ORIGIN** Middle English: from Old French *singularite*, from late Latin *singularitas*, from *singularis* 'unique' (see *singular*).

DRAFT ENTRY, *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2005.

(Suggestions for improvements, comments, new words, etc. are always welcome at dictionaries@oup.com)

Another interesting thing about electronic dictionaries — the more ubiquitous and easier to use they are, the more people expect from the experience of using them. If you have a tiny crappy paper dictionary you use only one or two times a year, you don't care about user experience — and probably you aren't too concerned about the quality of the information, either. But if you have, for example, the **Apple OS X Dictionary** widget (which uses *NOAD* and the *Oxford American Writer's Thesaurus*, by the way) open on your desktop all day long, you care more about how it feels to use. You become a better consumer of information, just through repeated exposure. You're more likely to look things up that are just a little unfamiliar, and you'll start to notice if the information is bad. That's why we were so eager to work with **Apple** — they really understand user experience, and we understand the importance of good information — it was just a perfect match!

ATG: If you were to look into your crystal ball, what would the third edition of the *New Oxford American Dictionary* look like?

EM: Well, I can't get too futuristic, as I know the 3rd edition isn't too far off! In other words, I'm not expecting the Singularity to happen before then. (For those of you who, like us don't know the precise meaning of "singularity" see the sidebar.) We're always

trying to make the front matter and back matter more helpful — this edition includes not only an essay on the sounds of American speech, but also a very thoughtful and practical essay on understanding and reading etymologies. Next edition I'd like to add a grammar essay; something that makes the sometimes cryptic grammatical information really come alive (a tall order, I know!).

Revising a dictionary is much like keeping a very large stately manor in repair. You replace the carpet and then it's time to repaint. You repaint and then you need a new roof! Every aspect of the dictionary is always undergoing cyclical revision. Subject-area experts get drafts to look at and revise. Etymologies are compared to new research and information (the independent researcher **Barry Popik** alone is responsible for new information on hundreds of words every year!). Pronunciations are scanned — are they still right? What's changed? It's never-ending.

ATG: That sounds like the near future. What about the long term?

EM: In the further future, with any luck, at least while I'm still working on dictionaries, and I figure I have another fifty years, tops, if I'm lucky — I hope we have books with electronic paper, so that they look and feel like books but hold exponentially more information. I get so excited whenever I read about advances in digital paper in *Wired* or *New Scientist*! I'd like to have dictionaries that were multilayered, so that you could drill down to deeper levels of information — more

detailed grammatical or collocational information, or more and more and more example sentences. And, of course, better cross-referencing — not just obvious cross references, but oblique ones. Looking at the word "loonie"? Then you could link to other words that are Canadianisms, like "pogey." If you look up a plant, you could be directed to other plants that are biologically related, or related in medicinal use or culinary use. You could look up a particular verb and get verbs that had similar patterns of use ... it would be kind of a sideways dictionary. It would make it easier to triangulate the location of those words that are on the tip of your tongue but that you can't quite articulate ... it's all very exciting! I know the words "exciting" and "dictionary" don't appear together too often, but I'm trying to change that ...

ATG: Well it looks like you're succeeding. You make dictionary making sound fun and interesting. Thank you so much for taking time out of your schedule to talk to us.

EM: You're very welcome. I love any chance to be a dictionary evangelist.

Endnotes

1. "mystery1 n." *The New Oxford American Dictionary*, second edition. Ed. Erin McKean. Oxford University Press, 2005. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. Oxford Online OUP-USA. 3 August 2005 <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t183.e50544>

Library Marketplace Interview — "Shakespeare-upon-iPod" Edward de Vere and the Shakespeare Question Updated

An interview with Mark Anderson, author of *Shakespeare by Another Name: The Biography of Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, the Man Who Was Shakespeare*. (Gotham/Penguin 2005. ISBN 1-592-40103-1. \$30.00) <http://shakespearebyanothername.com/media>

by John Riley (National Sales Manager, Eastern Book Company) <jdriley@comcast.net>

JR: Mark, you and I have been carrying on a number of conversations for the last ten years, but we always seem to come back to two subjects: the technology of publishing and the authorship of the Shakespeare plays, two subjects that have occupied your writing at Harper's and *Wired* for nearly ten years. Now you have moved ahead with these two interests and the result is your new book: *Shakespeare by Another Name: The Biography of Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, the Man who Was Shakespeare* due out August 2005 from Gotham Books/Penguin. It is the definitive argument for the de Vere/Oxford authorship of the Shakespeare canon. It should really shake up the scholarly world and encourage further research following the lines you have laid out in the book. Along with your ground breaking effort on de Vere's biography you have also used innovative technologies in the research and dissemination of your scholarship. We'll cover both areas in the next few pages.

To get started, I'd like to quote a passage from your "author's note"

at the end of the book and then you can bring us up to date:

"In the summer of 1993, I first learned about an underground of dissent among accomplished scholars and writers who, over the past two and half centuries, have doubted the conventional biography of "Shakespeare." I was astonished. Here was perhaps the greatest author who ever had lived and legendary figures in their own right say he actually wrote nothing? Was this the biggest case of mistaken identity in history? What had haunted the likes of Henry James, Sigmund Freud, Mark Twain and Walt Whitman so much? Why had I never heard of this before?"

How did you make that leap from interested bystander to dedicated scholar? What motivated you to take on such a daunting subject as questioning the authorship of Shakespeare?

MA: I started as, I suspect, many people in this field started: First having my curiosity piqued — in my case in the summer of 1993 on an NPR program — which then led to checking out as many books as I could find on the subject from my local library, **The Forbes Library** in Northampton, Massachusetts. I was a reporter for the *Valley Advocate* at

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