September 2005

People Profile: Erin McKean

Editor

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Recommended Citation
Editor (2005) "People Profile: Erin McKean," Against the Grain: Vol. 17: Iss. 4, Article 16.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4519

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Erin McKeen 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. 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...