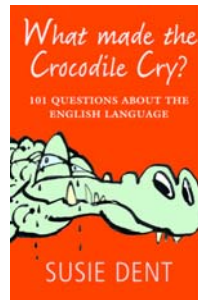


“Is it true that the words *housewife* and *hussy* are connected? Can I tell my wife that?”

“*Serendipity* often tops the polls of the nation’s favourite words. But where does it come from?”

“Why do we call false sentiment *crocodile tears*? Can crocodiles really cry?”



Countdown’s Susie Dent answers these and many other fascinating questions about the English language in her new book *What Made the Crocodile Cry? 101 questions about the English language*, which is published by Oxford University Press on October 15th.

What word would you vote as the most useless word in the English language? Just how many words are there for a **remote control**? (channel-panel, clicky, doofer, pinger, turner-upper...) Did you know that goats played a role in the first Greek tragedies, explaining why the very word **tragedy** means ‘goat-song’? Or that some men were once considered **buxom**? Or indeed that **housewife** and **hussy** once meant one and the same? (One husband wrote in and asked Susie asking if this was the case – and whether he could use either term for his wife. Indeed, the two words have been closely linked since as far back as the 13th century, though Susie advises him to proceed with caution...)

This entertaining collection covers a wide range of intriguing linguistic conundrums (or is it ‘conundra’?), from word origins (‘Why are **spare ribs** ‘spare’ in the first place?’) and spelling (‘Why is **lisp** so hard to say if you have one?’) to grammar and usage (‘The band Vampire Weekend has recorded a song called “Oxford Comma“. I’ve always wondered what an **Oxford comma** really is?’).

The questions in the book have been submitted by Susie’s *Countdown* viewers, by readers of her weekly *Radio Times* column, and also from the many visitors to the popular *Ask Oxford* language query site at www.askoxford.com. Supported by Oxford’s extensive dictionary research programme, Susie has set about researching a selection of some of the hundreds of questions posed, even if for some there is no definitive conclusion.

'So many of the questions put to linguists are, as yet, unanswerable,' say Susie. 'That applies particularly to the origins of words, which are sadly often lost over time. We may never discover, for example, the identity for the prototype of **happy Larry**, nor who **the real Real McCoy** was. Or why **mustard** is so good when it's **cut**. But the fun is often in the guessing. And the guessing (and research) will most definitely go on.'

Some of the questions posed in the book:

Men, Women, and A Few Things In-Between

- As a fan of Errol Flynn movies from the 30s and 40s, I've often wondered about the word **swashbuckler**: was it someone who 'swashed' a 'buckle', and if so what on earth were they doing?
- Why is the adjective **hysterical** usually applied only to women?
- Is it true that the modern **gym** has something to do with naked men?

The Birds and the Bees

- Does being ostracized have anything to do with the behaviour of **ostriches**?
- Why is something that is the very best known as the **bee's knees**?
- Where does the idea of a **white elephant** come from?

I'm a Celebrity (Get Me In The Dictionary)

- Who was the first **Smart Alec**?
- I've heard that the original **peeping Tom** spied on Lady Godiva. Is that true?
- Who was **Billy No Mates** and did he know **Jack the Lad**?

Written with authority and good humour, this is a wonderfully accessible and endlessly entertaining exploration of the English language, and the perfect gift for language lovers everywhere.

'I always wanted to be one of those people at parties who had the answer to random questions that crop up about the origin of words and phrases, and often fantasized about slinging out perfectly formed, witty answers to people's questions, garnering admiration wherever I went. Alas, it was never like that. Like everyone else, I turned a blank questioning face to the enquiry and wished that there was a little book I could keep at home, study it before I went out and impress everyone wherever I went. And now there is such a book.'

- from the Introduction by Jo Brand

Susie Dent is a writer, columnist, and broadcaster. She is the resident word expert on Channel 4's *Countdown*, and contributes regularly to radio and television discussions of topical language issues. She will be announcing her 'Words of the Year' on 26 November, 2009.

What Made the Crocodile Cry? 101 questions about the English language is publishing on October 15th, £8.99 paperback.

To interview Susie Dent or for more information please call Juliet Evans at Oxford University Press on 01865 353911 or email Juliet.evans@oup.com