

Book review: 'The Story of Ain't'

Why Americans in 1961 become so upset over a dictionary and claimed it represented the end of Western Civilization (at best)

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In 1961, G. & C. Merriam & Co. released *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, a \$3.5 million and 27-year investment that prompted what the late author David Foster Wallace called "the Fort Sumter of the Usage Wars."

Critics clamored to condemn the work as overly permissive. *The New York Times* demanded it's recall and Dwight Macdonald went so far as to describe it as a "massacre" that "made a sop of the solid structure of English" in his essay for *The New Yorker*.

In just 308 pages, *Humanities* editor David Skinner's *The Story of Ain't* actually addresses everything listed in its ambitious subtitle: "America, Its Language, and the Most Controversial Dictionary Ever."

It covers an amazing amount of ground, beginning at a 1934 banquet celebrating the publication of Webster's Second and skipping through time to Winston Churchill's WWII office, Smith College during the Roaring Twenties, and New York's Bohemian literary scene during the Great Depression.

Along the way, Skinner presents a slew of linguistic, academic, and cultural debates surrounding the most controversial dictionary in American history. Although there is enough information about colloquial versus formal grammar and British versus American pronunciation to draw in the most emphatic lexicomanes, the book neatly avoids the sort of technicalities that would bore more casual aficionados of the written word.

The rapid changes of scene may leave the reader unsure of where, exactly, the story is going or how it plans on getting there, but Skinner's easy prose style and richly detailed presentation of characters carry the narrative along anyways.

Skinner skillfully handles an expansive cast of characters, proving himself a master of the one-sentence character sketch in the process.

Refined Americans of the late 19th century are described as a gaggle of grammatical Puritans who "wrote in a fancy Spenserian hand, and used forks to

eat ice cream because spoons were considered vulgar."

Even Friedrich Nietzsche, who is only mentioned once, gets an incisive word-portrait: "philosophy's love poet to those tormented souls waiting to be hailed by a world they despise."

But these descriptions still serve the general question that Skinner poses in his preface: Why did Americans in 1961 become so upset over a dictionary, claiming that it represented the end of the world (at the worst) and Western Civilization (at the best).

Webster's Third, and *The Story of Ain't* by extension, catalogue the way that America's national identity changed over the course of 60 years. Words like *hot dog*, *pinup*, and *A-bomb* reflected a shift in the national character and a legitimization of common American English.

And, according to the firestorm of opposition, a complete loss of standards.

Although *Webster's Second* – the uncontroversial predecessor – claimed to be an "interpreter of culture and civilization of today," it was really more of a picture of what culture and civilization ought to be, as seen by a committee of

cultural elites with impressive moustaches.

Which side is right? Is the purpose of a dictionary to catalogue the way we speak or determine how we should speak?

Skinner occasionally appears to favor the editors of *Webster's Third*, but avoids making a definitive statement in favor of either side by constructing his narrative around the loudest voices for each argument – editor Philip Gove for his dictionary, and Dwight Macdonald for the traditionalists.

Instead, Skinner leaves the readers to make up their own minds from the stunning amount of information he condenses in a conversational and exceptionally readable fashion.

The Story of Ain't is a book about words, the national character, and the inevitability of change. And it's so fun, you might not even realize that you're joining the debate.

David Skinner
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