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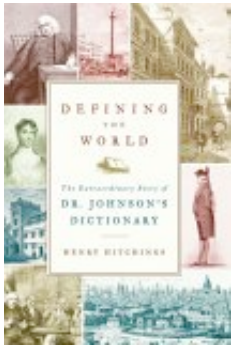
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Defining the World: The Extraordinary Story of Dr. Johnson's Dictionary by Henry Hitchings



A biography of Samuel Johnson, creator of the Oxford English Dictionary, seems low on the list of important books to read. Perhaps that is true and you should be getting to the dusty copy of *War and Peace* that's been sitting on the bookshelf since a rash collegiate purchase, but before you brush off any weighty tome, read Henry Hitchings's *Defining the World: The Extraordinary Story of Dr. Johnson's Dictionary*. Your brain will thank you.

It's not that *Defining the World* is hard to read, or that it puts forth any arguments that require serious pondering in a solemn pose, it's that this book will present you with so many exciting words, so much history and so many avenues for further research that your mind could be occupied with Johnson, or even just the OED, for as long as you wanted to be.

Johnson was born in 1709 in small-town Lichfield, England and moved to London to seek his fortune in 1737. His move to the big city and his brushes with sin, madness and efforts to work furiously in the face of his own perceived failure are all related through Johnson's own pre-dictionary writings in the newly created medium of magazines, and put into historical context that doesn't just fix the time and place of Johnson, but makes it come alive. Hitchings is so good at weaving setting with insights into Johnson's character that the chronology of Johnson's life is never at the forefront, drying up the bishop (a favorite drink of the lexicographer -- a mixture of wine, sugar and oranges), but leaks in through details.

Surprisingly, Johnson's dictionary is a great biographical tool for Hitchings to draw on. Hitchings has done an amazingly close reading of the OED, and uses his findings to illuminate everything from Johnson's views on patronage (a patron is "one who countenances, supports and protects. Commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery") to chess ("a nice, abstruse game" which Hitchings imagines Johnson may have seen once or twice, but likely never played) and uses his excellent historical imagination to figure how those views were come by. Hitchings makes the argument that the OED is the document it is because of the man that Johnson was. This is backed up an almost relentless flow of definitions, quotes and passages from Johnson's previous biographers that show how modern English was shaped by one man. Johnson's biases and

deficiencies in knowledge are reflected in the book, as are his vices and desires. Johnsonisms, such as the infamous definition of oats, "a grain, which in England is given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people," are mentioned in passing, but it's the lyrical definitions of words known and unknown, like imp, "a puny devil," or desquamated, "the act of scaling foul bones," that keep the pages turning.

One delight of *Defining the World* is the attention Hitchings gives books as objects. In the chapter entitled Publication, Hitchings gives a loving description of a first edition folio of the OED he examines in the British Library -- he describes the book as having the same poundage as a "very big Christmas turkey," the text as being crisp "without quite attaining elegance" and the paper as being "almost luxurious." A basketball player, a Latin phrase and the first Professor of Practical Astronomy at Glasgow University all show up in the folio's description as well, and seem as natural inclusions as the name of the printer or the price of the printing. That, in essence, is why *Defining the World* is likely to be lying on many shelves in the future, begging for a second (or third) dust-off.

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