
**THE MEANING OF EVERYTHING:
*The Story of the Oxford
English Dictionary.***

By Simon Winchester. Oxford Univ.
Press. 360 pp. \$25

Admirers of Simon Winchester's work will know that he has ventured onto this terrain before. In *The Professor and the Madman* (1998), known to British readers as *The Surgeon of Crowthorne*, he achieved bestsellerdom with an account of the peculiar working relationship between John Murray, editor of the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and William Chester Minor, a conscientious lexicographer who also happened to be an inmate of the asylum for the criminally insane at Broadmoor. Having told that very odd tale, Winchester now turns his attention to the making of the OED itself.

Ever since the success of Dava Sobel's navigational history *Longitude* (1995), the publishing world has been awash with all manner of ripping nonfiction yarns. It can't be long before some lucky author lands a million-dollar deal to write @: *The Symbol That Built the Internet*. But Winchester's unobtrusive erudition and droll turn of phrase set him apart from the rest of the journalistic pack.

Like *Longitude*, *The Meaning of Everything* is a story of extraordinary endurance. When the idea of compiling a definitive survey of the English language was first mooted at a meeting of the Philological Society in 1857, nobody can have realized quite how taxing an endeavor it would become. Even by the all-conquering standards of the Victorian era, the multivolume work would be a colossal project. Seventy years would pass before it was complete.

After all the optimism of the inaugural speeches, the researchers soon became mired in the Sisyphean task of collating what Murray later termed "the multitudinous ramifications of meaning." (As Winchester makes clear in his crisp overview of the dictionary maker's art, it was no coincidence that Dr. Johnson defined a lexicographer as "a harmless drudge.") In spite of the prodigious energy of the early overseers, the project soon fell far behind schedule. The staff—who were eventually augmented by volunteer readers around the globe—struggled to keep track of the thousands of paper slips

that formed the basis of the ever-expanding work in progress. One set of slips, abandoned by a contributor, eventually turned up in a stable in County Cavan, Ireland; another was found in a villa in Tuscany.

The advent of Murray, one of those near-mythical polymaths of a lost era, proved the turning point. The son of a linen draper, he was working as a schoolmaster when formally appointed editor in 1879. It was not long before he brought the chaotic venture back on track. Even so, he was not to live to see it to fruition; he died in 1915, 13 years before the final pages were handed to the printers.

Although Oxford University Press is the publisher of Winchester's book, the firm's reputation does not emerge unscathed. After signing up for the dictionary around the time of Murray's arrival, the company adopted a stingy approach to the finances. It took Murray enormous effort to convince the Victorian bean counters that the dictionary should be treated as a monument for the ages.

Even then, the relationship between publisher and editor was frequently uneasy. During one moment of frustration, Murray considered resigning and taking up one of the many professorships being dangled before him by American universities. There was, as Winchester dryly notes, a certain prescience to Murray's observation: "The future of English scholarship lies in the United States. The language is studied with an enthusiasm unknown here."

—CLIVE DAVIS

**THE ART OF BURNING BRIDGES:
*A Life of John O'Hara.***

By Geoffrey Wolff. Knopf. 373 pp. \$30

The epitaph on the gravestone of novelist John O'Hara was a postmortem provocation to his critics: "Better than anyone else, he told the truth about his time. He was a professional. He wrote honestly and well." It didn't help that the words were his own.

O'Hara (1905–70) was the son of a prominent Irish physician in the coal-wealthy town of Pottsville, Pennsylvania (Gibbsville in his fiction). He was raised Catholic when Protestant was the socially preferable thing to be. A change in the family's fortunes kept him from attending Yale, and he never got over the exclusion. And he was a sucker all his life for the

presumed insignia of status—the right schools, the right clubs (and club ties), the right suits and shoes and cars.

Wonderfully attuned to the calibration of social codes in America, O'Hara holds the record for the number of short stories published in *The New Yorker*, and his books have sold millions of copies. But the bloated best sellers that made him rich in the 1950s and 1960s lost him the favor of critics, who insisted that his best work was either in his short stories or, worse, in his earliest novels, *Appointment in Samarra* (1934) and *Butterfield 8* (1935). Though O'Hara loved money, he desperately needed the respect of his peers too. And sometimes he got it—as when, in 1964, he received the Award of Merit for the Novel from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, an honor bestowed previously on Theodore Dreiser, Thomas Mann, and Ernest Hemingway. But the prize he thought he deserved, the big one, always eluded him. When John Steinbeck won the Nobel in 1962, O'Hara telegraphed his congratulations and said that he could “think of only one other author I'd rather see get it.”

The once-famous O'Hara has now fallen low. In part, that may be because manners no longer matter in America. When cellphones foul the air and flip-flops grace the workplace, and when any self, no matter how puny, qualifies as imperial, who can be anxious about the wrong tie? But O'Hara's reputation may be down as well because the man gave his critics so much reason to do him in. He was an obnoxious drunk, an insecure snob, a boastful and insufferable son of a bitch. That some folks suffered him nonetheless, and were his friends, is the mystery Geoffrey Wolff sets out to solve in this new biography: “The specifics of why a cherished friend was cherished—I had the hubris to believe I could name.” In the event, he doesn't quite succeed in naming them, though he brings a novelist's finesse and a wisened-up adult's jauntiness to the task. And unlike biographers who pretend to be omniscient, he is always ready to concede that we can't know what really happened.

There have been several earlier biographies of O'Hara. Do we need another? Maybe, if it gets his name before the public again. But shake the facts of the life as dexterously as Wolff does, they still roll out

snake eyes. To know the petty details of O'Hara's behavior—such as that he wanted a friend to steal matchbooks from New York's tony Racquet and Tennis Club so that he could leave them around his Princeton home for guests to see—is painful if you admire the fiction.

But if reading *about* O'Hara is a chore, reading *O'Hara* can be addictive. Though a fan, Wolff is insufficiently persuasive about the merits of the fiction. In four decades of novels and short stories, O'Hara created, mostly out of the doings of the Pennsylvania gentry in and around Pottsville, an entire fictional universe, immediately recognizable as his, where the painstakingly recounted personal and institutional histories seem to bleed together into a single vast chronicle of decline and disappointment. Yes, the multigenerational novels lumber from moment to moment, and always have years to go, but you keep turning the pages. And dozens of the short stories are flat-out, dead-on perfect (see *Selected Short Stories of John O'Hara*, with an introduction by novelist Louis Begley, published earlier this year). If O'Hara didn't tell *the* truth about his time, at least he told truths, and better than most of the competition.

—JAMES M. MORRIS

**GOOD MORNING,
MR. ZIP ZIP ZIP:
Movies, Memory, and World War II.**

By Richard Schickel. Ivan R. Dee. 329 pp.
\$27.50

Good Morning, Mr. Zip, Zip, Zip (the title comes from a children's song) is Richard Schickel's engrossing memoir of a “silly, hopeful boy” growing up in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, in the 1930s and '40s. He dreams of literary fame until discovering the world of the movies, a world more “immediate and potent,” and ambiguously illuminating, too, than the sun-dappled suburban streets and sandlots around him. The author, an only child, looks back at his family's “sad failures of ambition, more subtle failures of love” with clear-eyed honesty and not a hint of “false nostalgia.”

We have come to expect sophisticated and articulate plain speaking from Schickel in his long tenure as film critic for *Time*. He