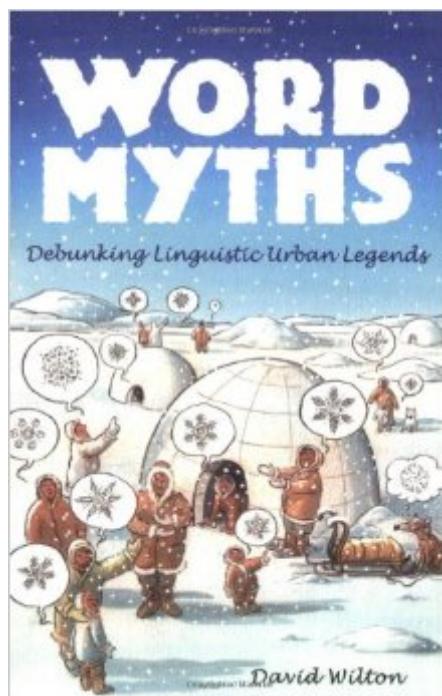


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# Word Myths: Debunking Linguistic Urban Legends



## Synopsis

Do you believe that Ring Around the Rosie refers to the Black Death? Or that Eskimos have 50 (or 500) words for "snow"? Or that "Posh" is an acronym for "Port Out, Starboard Home"? If so, you badly need this book. In *Word Myths*, David Wilton debunks some of the most spectacularly wrong word histories in common usage, giving us the real stories behind many linguistic urban legends. Readers will discover the true history behind such popular words and expressions such as "rule of thumb," "the whole nine yards," "hot dog," "raining cats and dogs," "chew the fat," "AWOL," "under the weather," "in like Flynn," "Dixie," "son of a gun," "tinker's damn," and many more. We learn that SOS was not originally an acronym for "Save Our Ship" or "Save Our Souls," but was chosen because the Morse code signal (3 dots, 3 dashes, 3 dots) was easy to send and recognize. Also, "let the cat out of the bag" does not refer to the whip (the "cat") used to punish sailors aboard ship. The term "upset" (to defeat unexpectedly) does not date from the horse race when the heavily favored Man O' War was beaten by a nag named Upset (Upset was the only horse ever to defeat Man O' War, but the word predates the race by half a century). And Thomas Crapper did not invent the flush toilet, nor do the words "crap" or "crapper" derive from his name. As Wilton quashes these word myths, he offers us the best of both worlds: not only do we learn the many wrong stories behind these words, we also learn why and how they were created--and what the real story is. "Think 'hot dog' was coined by a New York baseball vendor, or that a certain vulgarity originated as an acronym? Then you need to read this book, which shows that some of the best etymological stories are just tall tales." --Chicago Tribune (10 Best Books About Language, 2004)"Most everything you know about word and phrase origins is likely to be wrong, and David Wilton proves it with a light touch and a wealth of fascinating case histories. Absolutely everyone with an interest in language will love this book." --J.E. Lighter, Editor, *Historical Dictionary of American Slang*

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## Customer Reviews

This book deserves a wide reading. Its central lesson, as that of the more popular series on urban legends, is this: Don't believe everything you hear (or see) regarding the origins of words and phrases. I learned from this book that there were (a) false origins; things I thought I knew but didn't; (b) words whose origin I correctly understood, but about which others are mistaken, and (c) words whose origins I didn't know (and was thus unaware that others held false opinions about). Both humbling and instructive is category (a). Included here for me is "Ring around the Rosie," which I have read in countless reputable texts started its career as a sort of macabre humor for children singing and dancing their way through Europe's 14th century plague. And, equally unsettling, was the realization that the Chevy "NOVA" was not a botched marketing campaign by GM in Mexico, and that a guy named Crapper did not in fact invent the toilets we daily flush. At least, I got "google" right. This is a well-written, easily digested romp through the history of words misunderstood by many. It underscores the continuing importance of scepticism, perhaps especially in this, the information age.

Word Myths, as its title suggests, is in the debunking business. Mr. Wilton populates this book with popular explanations for the origin of common words and phrases which turn out to be wrong. For example, he argues that "SOS" never stood for anything like Save Our Ship or Save Our Souls -- "SOS", as it turns out, was just easy to tap out in Morse Code. Another example: he demonstrates that Coca Cola never translated the name for their trademark drink as "bite the wax tadpole" in China. I learned quite a few etymologies reading through this book. It's carefully researched and thoughtfully organized. If I have one criticism of the book, it's that some of the explanations drag on for much longer than they need to. Where Mr. Wilton faced a decision between academic completeness and a brief witticism, he too often decided on the former. This is a book that begs to be written playfully (the cartoons which open each chapter set the visual tone perfectly), but for some reason just isn't. Still, the book is worth a quick read to discover that the things you thought you knew turn out to be, as the author calls them, linguistic urban legends.

This book is a good collection of research on the actual origins of many words and phrases which many people only think that they know. It will be entertaining and informative to anyone who has any interest in language, so it could appeal to a rather wide audience. I would recommend it to anyone, with the following single caveat: The writing in this book is surprisingly poor. Many other reviewers have pointed this out, and I can confirm their observations. The information in the book is very good, but the way in which it is expressed is not. I don't know if it's the principal fault of the author or the editor, but most likely both of them dropped the ball here. Perhaps if you aren't overly critical about grammar you won't even notice, but if you're interested in this book in the first place, chances are good that you have at least dabbled in linguistics. The only thing stopping me from giving a more positive review is that this book is one of the worst I've ever read, not in terms of content but in terms of its language.

We have all heard stories of where different words and phrases originated. Some are quite fascinating and most are at least somewhat logical. The problem is that many of these legends are simply wrong. With a long list of word myths that include "dirt poor", "devil to pay", "under the weather", "real McCoy", "squaw", and "kangaroo" it is a fascinating read that not only debunks the traditional myths but also, where possible, supplies the correct origin of the word or phrase. *Word Myths: Debunking Linguistic Urban Legends* is hard to put down once you get started and thoroughly entertaining from beginning to end - highly recommended.

This is a great book if you need to know what NOT to believe. Wilton has done his research disproving almost every belief and internet-passed-along linguistic phrase and urban legend. The problem is, he doesn't risk making a statement about where each phrase definitively came from, or even a strong opinion pointing in that direction. It's just: "nope, less than probably, nobody knows, maybe, absolutely nope, unlikely, extremely unlikely, and laughable". Very informative, but mostly spineless and less than satisfying. I hate the thought that we will need to pay more money for a book that has real conclusions. A little more bunking would be nice.

I don't know if the title is an intentional play on words (wordsmiths in this case) but I found "Word Myths, debunking linguistic urban legends" by David Wilton a delightful and easy read. Wilson begins by explaining how word myths come about and that they are really a significant subset of all urban legends and e-mail hoaxes which themselves come from a line of tall tales and Xerox fables. He also explains that debunking word myths is a thankless task since so many of the tales we hear,

we WANT to believe and do not easily forgive those who attempt to correct our beliefs."Word Myths" covers such diverse topics as whether picnic refers to a Southern lynching party, whether pumpernickel has something to do with Napoleon's horse, and whether a tinker's damn should really be spelled ticker's dam. Most cases in the book are selected because they are wrong or highly suspect. But a few are verified as possible or even probable. Like a good scientist, Wilson doesn't like to ever conclude that something is definitely proven. He does feel that some word myths can definitely be disproven -usually because the chronology of when it first shows up in the language. This would be a fun coffee table or back of the toilet type of book. But it even makes for good armchair reading.

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