I ♥ Lexicons

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Book Reviewed:

Some people treat dictionaries like post offices. They visit for routine, specific activities they don’t think too much about, like looking up the spelling or definition of a word. Others approach dictionaries like museums, seeking out the deeper meanings, history, and cultural significance of words. For Ilan Stavans, dictionaries are temples, places of worship where he finds order in the complexity and chaos of language. A Jewish-Mexican-American writer who has published works of fiction and nonfiction, Stavans loves dictionaries. His personal library has an entire wall of them. The second essay in Dictionary Days, “Sleeping with my OED,” lists titles from his collection: Samuel Johnson’s A Dictionary of the English Language, The New Oxford American Dictionary, Webster’s, and other standard English language dictionaries, as well as dictionaries in Spanish, French, and German. His favorite is The Oxford English Dictionary, which as the essay’s title suggests, he reads in bed and often falls asleep with.

Dictionary Days won’t put you to sleep. It has a surprisingly light tone, not at all in accord with its brainy topics: dictionaries and the history of lexicography, the meaning and origins of words, and Stavans’ relationship to dictionaries and language. Its thirteen essays feel more like conversations than lectures. When Stavans explains why he has so many dictionaries, he writes:

One dreams of gathering in a single room a fine number of items. Their reunion might be explained metaphysically: if placed in the right proximity, these items will bring forth a sort of harmony. Plus, there is a sense of comradeship at stake as well: the conglomeration of my lexicons on a single bookshelf makes me feel at once full and complete.
In spite of the clipped sentences and simple, straightforward tone, this passage, like many others in the book, has several layers of meaning. On the surface Stavans describes his own motivations for collecting dictionaries, but he also succinctly articulates the spirit that drives dictionaries.

The allure of specific words and their definitions often attracts Stavans’ imagination and becomes his subject. One concise essay called “Ink, Inc.” meditates on the meanings of these two homonyms. From their contrasting definitions, the narrative wanders into a soft critique of capitalism when Stavans visits a chain bookstore where ink and Inc. unite. In other essays, words serve as a source of inspiration and the launching pad for expeditions into unusual territory. “The Zebra and the Swear Word” reveals chinks in the objective amour of dictionaries when it comes to good, old-fashioned cuss words. The versatile, oft-said fuck, for example, does not appear in the OED, and Stavans wonders, “Why the fuck not?” In another essay, “The Invention of Love,” Stavans compares the definitions of love in English, Spanish, French, Italian, German, and Russian dictionaries. “The French, as usual, bring in mystery to the art of love,” whereas the Germans contribute a spiritual dimension. All of these essays rely upon the seed-like quality of words: a single term in a fertile mind generates a forest of thoughts.

As Stavans investigates the significance of dictionaries, a wealth of literary voices enters the conversation, drawn from the author’s wide, peripatetic wanderings through literature. Stavans quotes or references Denis Diderot, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Dickens, Pablo Neruda, T.S. Eliot, H.L. Mencken and Saint Augustine, among others. The best quote about dictionaries, however, goes to W.H. Auden, who wrote, “For a desert island, one would choose a good dictionary rather than the greatest literary masterpiece imaginable, for in relation to its readers, a dictionary is absolutely passive and may legitimately be read in an infinite number of ways.” In a chapter called “Dr. Johnson’s Visit,” where Stavans imagines a conversation with Samuel Johnson, author of one of the first English dictionaries, he does stumble slightly. Although an interesting experiment, the essay falters in the details; it is not as colorful and polished as previous ones, where Stavans wove comments from long dead authors without having to traipse their bodies onto the stage.

These essays share an affinity with the work of Jorge Luis Borges, an
author who is rarely mentioned but whose presence lingers throughout. In an essay titled “Gladys,” Stavans recounts his friendship with an El Salvadoran immigrant family. While the mother, Gladys, has difficulty learning English, the son, Oscar, speaks Spanglish, a mix of English and Spanish. Hearing Oscar speak, Stavans envisions a universal dictionary, “that would include, in a major soup of backgrounds, words from scores of languages. Not a bilingual lexicon, not even a multilingual one, but one defined by chaos.” Compare what Borges writes about the universal library in “The Library of Babel”: “If an eternal traveler should journey in any direction, he would find after untold centuries that the same volumes repeated in the same disorder—which repeated, becomes order: the Order.” Just as libraries no longer look the same after reading Borges, dictionaries no longer look the same after reading Dictionary Days. The library and the dictionary become symbols of humanity’s quixotic and beautiful attempt to find—and impose—order on the chaos of the universe, and the reader cannot help but to share in the awe and reverence.