



Wordwatching: Field Notes of an Amateur Philologist

Julian Burnside

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We live in a torrent of words—from radio and television, books and newspapers, and now from the Internet. But, as Julian Burnside reminds us in this witty and erudite collection, words are a source both of pleasure and power, and can be deployed for good or for ill.

Some of these essays explore curiosities in odd corners of the language simply to remind us of the extraordinary richness of the English language. We learn, for example, that the word "pedigree" refers to the shape of a crane's foot, and that "halcyon" recalls an early Greek love story. Other pieces use small matters of language to illustrate larger processes of cultural borrowing and change. Burnside's musings remind us that we should not be alarmed at the instability of English; rather, we should view its borrowings as a source of its strength and vitality.

Wordwatching also highlights the misuse of language in the service of sinister purposes—whether political, ideological, social, or personal. An ear well-tuned to the nuances of vocabulary inoculates the hearer against this epidemic of deception. This book truly gives us a fascinating demonstration of the power and the pleasure of the English language.

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