



# Inventing English: A Portable History of the Language

*Seth Lerer*

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## **Inventing English: A Portable History of the Language** Seth Lerer

Why is there such a striking difference between English spelling and English pronunciation? How did our seemingly relatively simple grammar rules develop? What are the origins of regional dialect, literary language, and everyday speech, and what do they have to do with you?

Seth Lerer's *Inventing English* is a masterful, engaging history of the English language from the age of *Beowulf* to the rap of Eminem. Many have written about the evolution of our grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, but only Lerer situates these developments in the larger history of English, America, and literature.

Lerer begins in the seventh century with the poet Caedmon learning to sing what would become the earliest poem in English. He then looks at the medieval scribes and poets who gave shape to Middle English. He finds the traces of the Great Vowel Shift in the spelling choices of letter writers of the fifteenth century and explores the achievements of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* of 1755 and *The Oxford English Dictionary* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He describes the differences between English and American usage and, through the example of Mark Twain, the link between regional dialect and race, class, and gender. Finally, he muses on the ways in which contact with foreign languages, popular culture, advertising, the Internet, and e-mail continue to shape English for future generations.

Each concise chapter illuminates a moment of invention—a time when people discovered a new form of expression or changed the way they spoke or wrote. In conclusion, Lerer wonders whether globalization and technology have turned English into a world language and reflects on what has been preserved and what has been lost. A unique blend of historical and personal narrative, *Inventing English* is the surprising tale of a language that is as dynamic as the people to whom it belongs.

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