

A life in words

Maggie Hartford talks to former Oxford dictionary editor John Simpson about his book *The Word Detective*, which has been chosen as BBC Radio 4's book of the week

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John Simpson, at Kellogg College with his new book
Picture: Jon Lewis

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As the chief editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, John Simpson spent his working life with words, but his profoundly disabled daughter has taught him a valuable lesson – that human beings have many ways of communicating.

His book *The Word Detective* tells the story of the dictionary's transition from the world of print to computers and smartphones, and his own personal journey into the world of Ellie, now 26, who has a developmental age of 18 months.

The passages about Ellie form a relatively small, but significant part of his book, which is spliced with entertaining and erudite diversions into the origin of words as varied as "hot-dog" (it once referred to a roll with sausagemeat, perhaps feared to be dog-meat) and "subfusc" (formal dark uniform worn by Oxford students for exams).

He said: "I didn't want the book to be a formal scholarly thesis, and I wanted to convey the excitement and fascination of the work that all 75 of us editors did, researching and finding out about words.

"I have included 60 'word boxes' and I chose the words as I was writing. So when I wrote a word that seemed interesting I would stop and write a short text about the word.

"I also included whatever I was involved in at the time, in the rest of my life, and Ellie was an important part of my life. I didn't want to write too much about it, but I thought it was important to show a different side of myself, getting to grips with her lack of development."

Ellie needs 24-hour care, and lives in a special home in South Oxfordshire.

"She's fine. She's very happy, but she doesn't speak, and the fact is that I felt I really never cracked the communication barrier. Putting words aside and dealing with non-verbal communication needs a different set of skills than what I had become familiar with at work, and it brought out a different side of me.

"It's been good for me and it's good for everyone she meets. It's been good for me to realise that perhaps words are not that important. Everyone in my field has something that helps them do that. Ellie is a big part of my life."

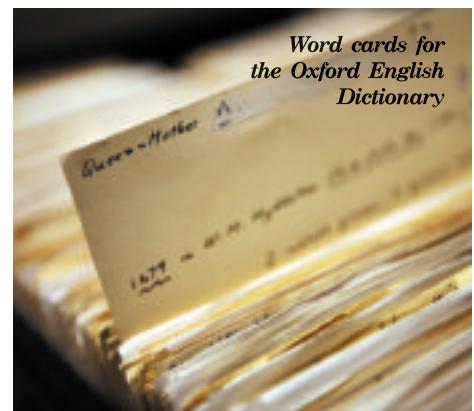
He admits that he found it very difficult to write the passages of the book that are about Ellie. "I had never had to do that sort of writing for my living. Dictionary writing was not writing about yourself."

The Word Detective is not his first book, but his other books are very different, with titles like *The Oxford Dictionary of Slang*, or *The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*.

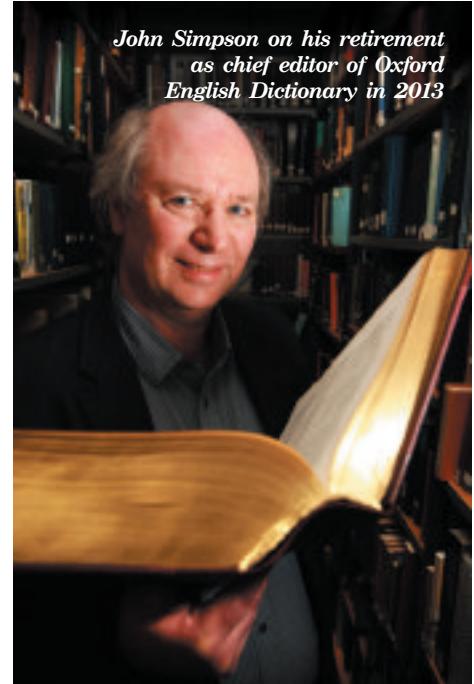
It is dedicated to his wife Hilary, a former assistant to Oxfordshire County Council's chief executive whom he met while studying York University. In the book there are admiring and funny passages about her, and she comes over as the absolute love of his life. The "word-box" associated with their meeting is "Serendipity" (a happy accidental discovery).

He writes: "Even then, 18 years to my 19, Hilary was naturally talkative, self-confident, artistic, and aware of the big picture, while I – at least to the casual observer – was self-deprecating to the point of self-effacement. She was very smart, but not depressingly intellectual.

"If I had a criticism of her – as I came to know her better – it was that she displayed



Word cards for the Oxford English Dictionary



John Simpson on his retirement as chief editor of Oxford English Dictionary in 2013

no interest in sport."

It was Hilary who first suggested that he should apply for a job at Oxford University Press, while they were both completing research theses at Reading University. He was deep in the past, doing an MA in medieval studies, while she was bang up to date, working towards a PhD on DH Lawrence and early 20th century feminism.

He read up on the history of the Oxford dictionaries, beginning in 1857 with the Philological Society of London, who inveigled Scottish schoolmaster James Murray to work on the first dictionary. Murray never lived to see it published and it eventually stretched to 20 volumes.

John's apprenticeship involved choosing words from an esoteric French text called *Film Language*, and writing them by hand on index cards with example sentences. Eventually he was trusted to write actual definitions.

If you travel to the most remote regions of our planet, you soon find someone who has heard of Oxford – usually because of the dictionaries. The editors relied on a worldwide network of contributors who responded to regular appeals for wanted words, part of the research to trace the first mention and changes of use of each word in the English language.

Contributors included baseball enthusiasts and jazz fans as well as readers of literary classics and medieval and Latin texts.



Although impressed by the dictionary's august history, John was young enough to realise that it needed to modernise, and eventually he was put in charge of New Words (replacing, incidentally, the *Limited Edition* columnist Tony Augarde).

Nowadays, new words are one of the dictionary activities most visible to the general public, with a Word of the Year.

John gradually rose to become chief editor, helping to oversee the massive project to put the dictionary online. It was never his job to help choose the Word of the Year, but he greatly approved of the 2013 choice, "selfie".

"It told us something about the sort of people we had become. Not thoughtful and reflective, but self-obsessed, capturing views of ourselves in rear-view mirrors, like selfies on sticks," he writes. He is also pleased with the 2016 Word of the Year, "post-truth" – relating to circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public

opinion than emotions. He feels the word reflects a significant shift in world events.

After retiring three years ago at 60, he moved from Wheatley, where Ellie went to school, to Cheltenham, where he is busy contributing to an online James Joyce research website, and investigating local history. He has another daughter, Kate, who is the head of special needs at comprehensive school, and two grandchildren.

His working life was marked by vast shifts in social attitudes, reflected in a change in the use of words such as "gay" and "queer". But the big change was the shift from print to digital.

The dictionary moved from being a huge set of heavy volumes, used mainly by scholars in the hidden recesses of university libraries, to a dynamic online resource accessible to everyone. Anyone who has an Oxfordshire library card, incidentally, can get free access from their computer.

FROM THE WORD DETECTIVE

Every day while I was working on the OED, I could rediscover facts about the English language that had been forgotten for years – just little facts, but ones which need to be remembered to create an accurate picture of English. Or I could write a definition that captured precisely a meaning that had previously only shimmered uncertainly.

My colleagues working on etymologies (word derivation) or pronunciations could crack a problem that had confused scholars and researchers for ages past.

The lexicographer sees English as a mosaic – consisting of thousands of little details. Each time one of the tiny tiles of the mosaic is cleaned and polished, we see the mosaic more clearly. It's something of this excitement that I hope to convey in this book.

He writes: "I might go back to the past for some things, if I could.

"There's a romantic aspect to writing out definitions late on a cold October evening, lit only by a bright desk-light, to the accompaniment of the shuffle of paper as your colleagues sort their index cards into order, ready to attack their next word.

"The smell of the loosely folded, freshly printed galley proofs returned to your desk from the printer and waiting to be corrected is something that editors won't experience again. That has all given way to greater accuracy, more and better evidence, and a sense that the dictionary is now accessible to so many more people.

"But the old ways should be remembered, because they were essential steps to the present, which will eventually be other editors' pasts."

As for Ellie, his main worry is that something may go wrong for her in future, with nobody to fix it.

"Even if I can't communicate with her verbally, spending time with her reminds me that interaction isn't only verbal. Seeing her takes you into a corridor where communication fluctuates with the passage of time: sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker. When it's weak, it seems almost to vanish away, and you wonder if you will see it again. When it's strong, it's the most important thing there is. Wordless, but powerful."

The Word Detective: A Life in Words from Serendipity to Selfie, published by Little Brown at £18.99, will be the Radio 4 Book of the Week later this month.

