

MERRY AM WEBSTER!

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What makes a word interesting? I ask this rhetorically, not inviting specific response. One has only to scan Word Ways articles to realize that some logophiles fancy word length, while others prefer word construction, word sounds, geographical names, and so forth. Chacun à son gout! The charm of any word obviously lies in the eye of the beholder.

Yet I'll warrant that each of us, consciously or unconsciously, has a favorite word, one that has an indefinable subtle personal appeal. For instance, Ross Eckler is enthralled by UCALEGON (Webster's Second), which means, roughly, "a neighbor whose house is on fire". Now, there is a word to conjure with!

I share his fondness for this gem and, while recognizing his as a prior claim, would like a vested interest in it. To compensate, I hereby earmark for my own NOSARIAN (Webster's Second) which means "one who argues that there is no limit to the possible largeness of a nose". How often can you wedge that little beauty into cocktail conversation?

Webster's Second Edition is unparalleled as a mother-lode of interesting words. Let me share with you some that have intrigued me. There are factors that are common to most of those that I have set forth below: the word has at least one definition which runs contrary to normal reckoning and usage, or it has two or more definitions which seemingly contradict each other, or the definition is intriguingly worded.

Keeping in mind that all words are from the Second Edition, I append the numbers of the definitions in those instances where I deem it necessary in order to quickly pinpoint them.

ACIDITY means 'alkalinity'

AFFECTION means 'animosity'

BENT means 'leveled' (2)

BLEACH means 'blacking'

BLESS means 'curse'

BLUEFISH means 'greenfish'

BOSOM means 'depression' Raquel Welch sure had me fooled!

BRIDE means 'a spouse of either sex'

BUDGE means both 'jocund' as well as 'solemn'

DRIZZLE means rain having a 'velocity of between 144 feet per hour and 2-1/4 feet per second' I think it's the specificity that attracts me here.

EFFIGIES means 'effigy' How many other plural forms do you know that are defined specifically by the singular form?

EMANCIPATE means to 'enslave' (4)

FILL means 'to pour out' (8)

GENERAL means 'admiral' (7)

GROCERY means 'barroom' This should produce a lot of volunteers for shopping.

HAIRSBREADTH means 'forty-eighth part of an inch' With such exacting parameters, I'll be more careful in its use.

HAND means 'foot' (4a) Admittedly, this is a cheap shot on my part -- we're speaking of an ape.

HARLOT means 'entertainer' or 'male menial' This greatly expands my list of harlots I have known, and adds respectability to it.

HEIGHT means 'depth' To fishes, of course.

HELP means 'hinder' (4b)

HOG means 'sheep' (2)

HOST means 'guest'

INEQUALITARIAN means 'one who believes that men are not born equal' What if they had been the majority party in 1787?

INFANTRY means 'a body of children'

INFATUATE means 'frustrate' Come to think of it, it usually turned out that way for me, too.

INFINITESIMALISM means 'the doctrine that the more a drug is diluted, the more potent it becomes' How's that again? This ranks #5 on my list of those worthy of a second thought.

INHABITED means 'uninhabited'

INROAD means 'raid' So does OUTROAD.

INVALESCENCE means both 'ill health' and 'health'

INVALUABLE means both 'priceless' and 'worthless'

JACK means '1/4 pint' but also '1/2 pint'

JUROR means 'false witness'

KING means 'queen bee'

KNEE means 'throat' Of a frog, that is, at least on the railroad.

LAP means 'bosom' (2)

LAW means 'thieving' (7c)

LET means 'prevent' All tennis players know this, but it's worth listing.

MAHOUND means 'Mohammed', but also 'the Devil'

MANESS means 'woman' Let's don't shre this one with the Women's Lib movement!

MANKIND (adj) means both 'mad' and 'savage' Uh-huh.

MIDMORN means '9 AM' My office staff is apparently aware of this.

MOODY means 'brave'

MOSES means both 'leader' and 'meek man'

MYTHOMETER means 'a measure for judging myths' Now this I'd like to see! It ranks #4 on my list.

NEPHEW means 'niece' (2b)

NICE means all the following: 'foolish', 'silly', 'stupid', 'simple', 'ignorant', 'lewd', 'lascivious', 'wanton', 'strange', 'uncommon', 'weak' I slandered several people just yesterday.

NOON means 'midnight' (3a)

NOVANTIQUE means 'new but yet old' This ranks #7 on my list.

NUTTY means 'fascinating' (3a)

ORIENT means both 'blue' and 'bright red'

PALACE is a 'cellar'

PECULIAR means 'wife' (1d) Because my wife does not read Word Ways, I can say boldly that I've long suspected this.

PHILEMATOLOGY means 'the science of kissing' Now, wouldn't you really prefer a Master's degree in that rather than Civil Engineering?

PIKER means either 'second-rater' or 'third-rater'

POLITICIAN means 'schemer' So, what's new?

POSTGLACIAL means 'recent' Somehow it doesn't sound recent.

PRACTICAL means 'unscrupulous' (6b) It follows that most politicians must be practical.

PRECIOUS means 'worthless', 'poor' and 'bad'

RAT means 'cat' (5)

RAVEL means both 'entangle' and 'disentangle'

REANSWER means 'answer'

RESOLUTE means 'firm', but also 'infirm'

RESTIVE means 'inactive', but also 'fidgety'

REVERSE (v) means 'face' (8b)

RIDDLE means 'unriddle'

ROUT means 'assemble'

RUFFIAN means 'paramour'

SAD means both 'satisfied' (1) and 'bad' (9)

SCOT means 'Irishman' But don't let either the Scots or Irish learn of this!

SEDGELEY CURSE is too long to present here; take a look at it.

There's an inner satisfaction knowing that Merriam-Webster recognizes a good curse when it sees one! I wonder who Sedgeley was, to have deserved this.

SEVENBARK means 'ninebark'

SEVERAL means 'single', 'an item' and 'an individual'

SHE means 'he' (3)

SHEND means 'ruin' and 'destroy' but also 'protect' and 'defend'

SHOWER means drops 'about 1/25 inch in diameter and fall at the velocity of 10-25 feet per second' I'll think twice before commenting on the next rainfall.

SINOPE means both 'blood red' and 'green'

SINUS means 'bosom'

SHREWSTRUCK means 'struck by a shrew' This is definitely #2 on my list. A shrew, of course, is a tiny mammal which lives on insects and worms. When, and by whom, would this word ever be used? Do you dare to return to your spouse in the wee hours, disheveled, with dented fenders, and claim to be shrewstruck?

SIT means 'stand' (6a)

SLEEVELESS means 'bootless'

SNOB means 'one not an aristocrat'

SNUG means 'sizable'

SQUARE means 'agree' but also 'differ'

STAND means 'lie flat' (17)

START (n) means 'end' (2)

STARVE means 'die of cold'

STIFF means both 'certain to win' and 'certain not to win' Mull on that one for awhile!

SUPERMUSCAN means 'above the power of a fly' This is #6 on my personal list.

SWEAT means 'dry thoroughly'

TAKE means 'give' (22)

TEEM means both 'empty' and 'fill'

TEN means 'many' -- but, so does TWENTY

THRILL means 'bore' I was not thrilled to learn that.

TICKLE means 'whip' and 'chastise'

TONIGHT means 'last night'

TWOSOME means 'single'

UNDERCOOL means 'supercool'

UNDERCREEP means 'overreach'

UNDERTAKE means 'overtake'

UNDOCTOR means 'to make unlike a doctor' This holds #3 on my personal list. Come to think of it, I spent the major part of last week undocoring.

UNIVERSAL means 'local'

UNRELENTLESS means 'relentless'

UNREMORSELESS means 'remorseless'

UNRUDE means 'rude'

UNSLIP means 'slip'

UNSTRIP means 'strip'

UPRIGHT means 'supine'

VILE means 'great'

WAN means 'pale' of course but also 'dark black'

WIDOW means 'widower'

WOLD not only means 'wood' but also 'region without woods'

WONDER means 'admiration', but also 'evil'

WORTHING means 'mire', 'filth', 'manure' but also 'reverence' and 'glory'

WRIST means 'ankle'