

FIRST PERSON

# Keep your online dictionary. I want the 20-volume Oxford set

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CONTRIBUTED TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 9, 2020

This article was published more than 1 year ago. Some information may no longer be current.





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In 1974, a friend paid \$90 for a dictionary. While the flies were going in and out of my cranked jaw, he confided more than the price. He said his two-volume set of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) was the “condensed version.” His treasure weighed 12 pounds with its magnifying glass stashed in a little drawer above the books shimmied into their royal blue case. He told me there was also a 20-volume set, and it was “the best dictionary in the world.”

I was 16 then, and have wanted that book booty ever since.

Almost 40 years later, as I was quietly slipping out of my new lover’s arms at 4 a.m. to head to the local annual book sale – a fundraiser for literacy projects – Daryl whispered, “Why on earth would you leave so early when they only open the doors at 9?”

“Hoping to find a very special dictionary,” I whispered.

I wiggled into spooning for a few more cozy minutes to describe my decadent dream of finding a second-hand, 20-volume set of the OED. If I found one, I planned to have a square coffee table built for it. The top would be a sheet of tempered glass and I would line up 10 books on either side with spines facing up, so they could be read from above. I would place my dictionary-coffee table in the centre of my living room as a focal point. It would be the biggest of dictionaries in the smallest of houses – and I would use it all the time. I whispered a description of my imaginary find, as though it were appearing right in front of us; Daryl could see my old dream too.

I would have invited him along, but waiting hours in a pre-dawn lineup for a book sale was too much to ask of a new beau. I slipped away and left him in his own dreams.

With my Thermos of tea, covered bowl of oatmeal, folding chair and a book in hand, I

headed to the sale where I'm usually close to first in line. If the set was there, I was getting it. I had repeated this plan many times.

For years, I checked used bookstores and book sales hoping to find the edition I had only ever seen in a public library. I had searched vigorously since the start of the internet era, hoping someone might be trendily de-cluttering tomes.

I could have bought a new one for \$1,200, but had come to enjoy the chase – a bit of a reflection of the enjoyment I felt as a single woman over the past decade. One marriage down, I had decided if I ever had another, it would be rooted in a healthy relationship with a kindred spirit – or I would live happily detached.

Don't laugh, but "Scrabble player" was one of the qualities on my list for the ideal man. Within a year, my new guy learned to play and became an impressive Scrabble partner. Let's just say he's the best I have ever had. Our growing relationship was beginning to feel like one of those comfortable and exciting surprises in life.

I worried when I learned he had lost his little sister to sudden infant death syndrome, his mother to a brain tumour, his aunt to a sudden aneurysm, his grandmother to natural causes and his first girlfriend to a terrible car accident – all before he turned 19. I wondered, what was the emotional impact of losing so many women in his young life?

In my volunteer years at a hospice, I had never heard of anyone who faced so much grief at such an early age. No wonder the most memorable poem from Daryl's youth was *The Raven* by Edgar Allan Poe.

I found that out when we were doing The Globe crossword together one morning. "Three-letter word for the sound a raven makes," I said. I expected him to say "caw," but Daryl kept repeating the word "nevermore." When he described the classic poem, I searched YouTube for a brilliant audio rendition.

It was hauntingly beautiful but, I was certain, I could never have appreciated the nuances of the powerful lament for lost love – when I was only 13. Maybe he was captivated by the name of Poe's subject, Lenore, so close to Lorraine, Daryl's own lost mother.

I wondered if this gentle, funny, respected economist, with his three degrees and thoughtful eyes, could ever be able to risk giving himself deeply to a loving, emotional relationship.

relationship.

Over the years, Daryl and I have talked and listened and learned about each other. His early grief had given him unusual capacities for accepting life on its doled-out terms. “We have to play the cards we are dealt in life,” his remaining grandmother had gently coached him as a boy.

On Christmas morning, three years into our relationship, Daryl gave me a beautiful card with a note: “There is a gift downstairs. It is as unique as you are.”

I opened the door and there was a fluffy, snow-white wool blanket draped over a box, a few feet high and wide. A red bow lay on top.

What could it be, I wondered.

I slowly pulled away the blanket, and there it was. Daryl had had the dictionary-coffee table built exactly as I described it in the early morning hours of our new relationship. He had bought a new set of the Oxford English Dictionary and taken it to Andrew M. Charlton, a local furniture-maker. The two men mulled over Daryl’s sketch and added thoughtful features, including a glass overhang to protect the precious books nestled snugly inside.

Every detail of my ancient dream had materialized before my eyes.

I could hardly take it in. I put my hand on my chest and my mouth fell open. I couldn’t find any words, though there were half a million of them right in front of me. I kept looking from the books in their case to Daryl’s smile. I started to cry.

A few minutes later, I wiped my eyes and slowly pulled out a hefty B-volume and looked up “borborygmi.” Borborygmi isn’t the kind of word you find in just any dictionary. But it was in my OED. “To have rumbling in the bowels,” or as most of us know it: “stomach growling.” I’ve always loved that crazy word.

A few days later, I made a big pot of sweet-potato chowder and a tomato-soup cake and invited friends and family to see my new dictionary. Everyone had a favourite word to look up.

The OED was the life of the party, sharing word etymologies like bountiful seeds from a

treasured tree.

The stunning surprise represented the gift of being listened to in a world where listening is rare. Daryl remembered every detail of my dream described back when we were beginning to love each other.

Nine years in, the relationship continues to grow. Being heard is a gift of a large volume.

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