

Egads! A Book on Spelling?

A New Book on Spelling Matched Only by Library Edition Dictionaries

Reviewed by Carolyn Howard-Johnson

Most of us—even those of us who love etymology—aren't that crazy about reading dictionaries. That is only part of the reason that we find spelling and its history dull, dull, dull! The other part is the getting of the history of words with a dictionary is haphazard at best.

Along comes *Righting the Mother Tongue: From Olde English to Email, the Tangled Story of English Spelling* by David Wolman. I know of no other book quite like it. I love June Casagrande's [Mortal Syntax: 101 Language Choices That Will Get You Clobbered by the Grammar Snobs—Even If You're Right](#) and her [Grammar Snobs Are Great Big Meanies: A Guide to Language for Fun and Spite](#) and even Lynn Truss's British hardass take on punctuation, [Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation](#). I remember reading a book on the origins of the alphabet back in the early 60s. This, however, is the only book I know that capsulates the history of spelling.

I found it funny and disturbing (I don't suppose one expects a book on spelling to be disturbing), but take the word "e-mail." As an editor, I've been fighting to keep the hyphen because the "e" in e-mail is short for electronic and the hyphen preserves that origin. *But, There!* There on the cover is "e-mail" spelled "email." Guess I'm fighting a losing battle. Which, after all, is the point of this book.

Don't let the fact that you now know the premise of this book keep you from reading it. Wolman has lots of other points to make, too. So, if you love words and history, you'll be entertained. If you're reading it to make a better speller of yourself, it may or may not work in your favor.

Reviewed by Carolyn Howard-Johnson, author of the multi award-winning *The Frugal Editor: Put Your Best Book Forward to Avoid Humiliation and Ensure Success*. Find it at <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0978515870/>. Learn more about the author, her fiction poetry and other helps for writers at www.howtodoitfrugally.com.