



Wickedictionary

Derek Abbott

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We all know Wikipedia, so there must be a Wikidictionary, right? Not exactly, but Derek Abbott has created *Wickedictionary*, a volume of humorous definitions in the vein of Ambrose Bierce's collection, *The Devil's Dictionary*, published one hundred years ago. As Abbott himself describes, "This is Bierce updated and contemporized."

Abbott might seem an unlikely author of such a book, being an Australia-based scientist whose other publications are presumably academic in nature. But he obviously harbors a passion for Bierce's scathing style of humor—no subject is off-limits, no cow is considered sacred.

To its credit, *Wickedictionary* pulls from a large number of sources: Bill Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes*, the works of Kurt Vonnegut, Andy Warhol, and many others, including Ambrose Bierce himself. But despite the wide breadth of sources, the majority of definitions are written by Rick Bayan, a humorist, and Derek Abbott himself.

With a project like this, one has to grant a certain level of dispensation to the author to fill the pages. However, Abbott's definitions are often long-winded or transparent, and quite the opposite of Bierce's pithiness and punch. For example, from Dorothy Parker we have, "Brevity: the soul of lingerie," while Derek Abbott contributes, "Sun: nature's nuclear fusion reactor that is at an arguably safe distance from Earth; it generously affords us 5000 times our current world energy needs and will run reliably over the next billion years with zero downtime." Still, not all of Abbott's entries are duds—his definition of "Politician" is funny, insightful, and concise: "one who delivers on the economy of the truth, rather than truth on the economy."

Wickedictionary is a book that can either be guided by the "wiki" ethos—a website where viewers cannot only contribute definitions but can also vote on which ones should be included in future volumes—or it can simply be a collection of definitions that Derek Abbott enjoys, subject to his personal point of view and tastes. It cannot be both.

However, there is definite value in the idea of a compilation of this sort. Though this first edition is a bit choppy at times, it is possible that—with more contributions from readers and other sources, and perhaps a bit of pruning—future volumes could be even better. Also, an editing staff could help create a more consistent book by broadening the spectrum of definitions beyond what any one person might come up with.

Even with its flaws, *Wickedictionary* is enjoyable to read in either small or large doses. It is easy enough to skip over a definition that doesn't resonate, and with so many entries, it is rare to find a page that does not elicit a chuckle. As a single volume, this book is a great idea, imperfectly executed. But as the first in an ongoing series of editions, it is perhaps the start of something big.

PETER DABBENE (November 8, 2011)

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