ForeWord Reviews

REFERENCE

Word Catcher
Phil Cousineau
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Wordcatcher is not a typical text on etymology. With a sharp, yet conversational, tone, Phil Cousineau whisks readers through a dissection of 250 words, each accompanied by an array of anecdotes, quotes, and "companion" words. He notes in the introduction that "every 'headword' that is explored here evoked in me an 'Aha!' when I first encountered it." This book stirs up similar feelings in the reader: the delight that comes with finding the unexpected embedded within the familiar.

A writer, Cousineau is also a filmmaker, teacher, editor, scholar, and traveler, among other things. This is his 27th book of nonfiction, and his experience shows—his writing flows easily on every page. A self-professed "wordcatcher," Cousineau's fascination with words began in childhood, and he remembers, "We must have been the only family in America to actually carry a dictionary in the car with us when we went on vacations." But many of the entries in this book can't be found in an everyday dictionary. For example, "arachibutyrophobia," is "the fear of peanut butter sticking to the roof of your mouth."

Unafraid to tackle the strange, Cousineau also includes a smattering of foreign words, for which there are no direct English translations. For instance, the French "esprit de l'escalier," is "a brilliant comeback, witty response, quick rejoinder—that comes to mind too late." It comes, perhaps, while ascending the stairs, at the end of the day, or after an encounter in which one failed to summon one's wits quickly enough. Then, there are those words that just sound made up—like "flizzen," which means, "to laugh with every muscle in the face." It sounds made up, and yet, how apt it seems. Among the clever and zany, Cousineau weaves in words so poignant one wonders how he's gone until now without knowing them. For example, "petrichor," which is "the smell of rain rising from the earth," denotes a scent that indeed deserves a word all its own.

Cousineau writes that "to *derive* a word is to explore it, track it back to its earliest reference, story or citation, the place from which it flows, a place of immense energy, history, and mystery." This is precisely what *Wordcatcher* does. With great care, and a flair for making

the well-known wholly new, Cousineau's book takes the reader on a tour of a word-filled world, a journey bound to result in an abundance of fresh items for anyone's word-catching cache.

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