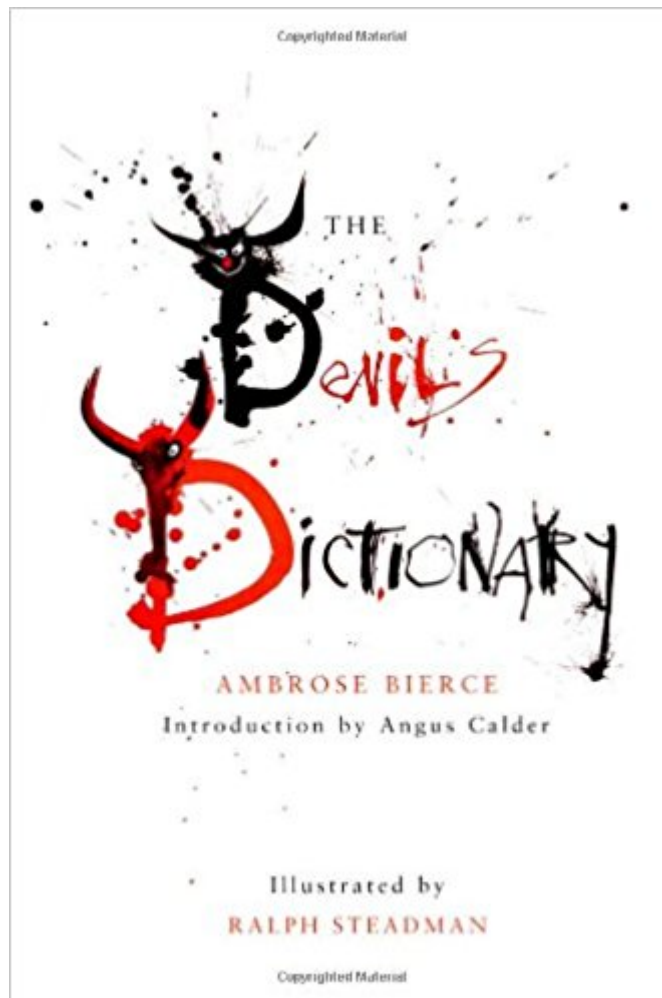


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The Devil's Dictionary



Synopsis

Bierce's classic work of satirical wit and Steadman's pointed pen redefine the way we see even the seemingly simplest of terms. Acquaintance, n.: A person whom we know well enough to borrow from but not well enough to lend to. Bride, n.: A woman with a great future behind her. Consult, v: To seek another's approval of a course already decided on. Ambrose Bierce's "dictionary" of epigrams, essays, verses, and vignettes targets the religious, the romantic, the political, and the economic, in equal measure. The book you need to define both friends and enemies, *The Devil's Dictionary* is also the perfect gift, showcasing Bierce's razor-sharp wit and Ralph Steadman's incisive pen to their best advantage.

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Customer Reviews

Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914), friend and rival of Mark Twain, was one of nineteenth-century America's most renowned satirists. A Union veteran of the Civil War, he became one of the best-known writers and journalists in the country. In 1913 he set off for Mexico, then in the throes of revolution, and was never seen again. Ralph Steadman, artist, writer, sculptor, political cartoonist, and designer of labels for vintage wines, is the author/illustrator of, most recently, the novel *Doodaaa*, as well as the illustrator of Lewis Carroll's *Alice*, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and Hunter Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. His work appears regularly in such publications as the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, *GQ*, *Esquire*, and the *Los Angeles Times*.

Like all dictionaries, it's a collection of words and meanings, but this one is much

more fun to read. Before it was compiled into a book, these entries were serialized in newspapers from 1881 to 1906. As might be expected, some of the definitions / jokes didn't age well. However, a great many of them are as amusing as ever. In fact, because so many of the definitions revolve around people's narcissism and self-serving biases, they may be more accurate and apropos than ever. (And lawyers and politicians continue to be fair game as the butt of a joke.) Let me give a few examples of the aforementioned narcissism:

ABSURDITY, n. A statement or belief manifestly inconsistent with one's own opinion.

ACQUAINTANCE, n. A person whom one knows well enough to borrow from, but not well enough to lend to.

ADMIRATION, n. Our polite recognition of another's resemblance to ourselves.

Not all of the definitions revolve around humanity's narcissistic worldview. While subjects like politics, economics, and religion are widespread, the entries cover the wide range of subjects one might see in your regular dictionary. e.g.:

CLARINET, n. An instrument of torture operated by a person with cotton in his ears. There are two instruments that are worse than a clarinet: two clarinets.

CORPORATION, n. An ingenious device for obtaining individual profit without individual responsibility.

ECONOMY, n. Purchasing the barrel of whiskey that you do not need for the price of the cow that you cannot afford.

EDUCATION, n. That which discloses to the wise and disguises from the foolish their lack of understanding.

LOVE, n. A temporary insanity curable by marriage.

TELEPHONE, n. An invention of the devil which abrogates some of the advantages of making a disagreeable person keep his distance.

Despite being a work of the 19th century, Bierce held a more rational and scientific outlook than typical, and this can be seen in many definitions--some of which were probably considered outlandishly irreverent in the day. This helps to keep "The Devil's Dictionary" relevant. e.g.:

FAITH, n. Belief without evidence in what is told by one who speaks without knowledge, of things without parallel.

FEAST, n. A festival. A religious celebration usually signalized by gluttony and drunkenness, frequently in honor of some holy person distinguished for abstemiousness.

GHOST, n. The outward and visible sign of an inward fear.

MIND, n. A mysterious form of matter secreted by the brain. Its chief activity consists in the endeavor to ascertain its own nature.

MONKEY, n. An arboreal animal which makes itself at home in genealogical trees.

MULATTO, n. A child of two races, ashamed of both.

OCEAN, n. A body of water occupying two-thirds of a world made for man who has no gills.

PRAY, n. To ask that the laws of the universe be annulled in behalf of a single petitioner confessedly unworthy.

In addition to the definitions, there are many segments of verse or prose used to elaborate on the definitions. These excerpts are usually clever,

humorous, or both. There are no graphics and so these snippets are the only use of examples and clarification provided. e.g.:re: EPIGRAM: "In each human are a tiger, a pig, an ass, and a nightingale. Diversity of character is due to their unequal activity." I would highly recommend this book for those who like humor with language.

While some of the entries are badly dated, others remain as true as the day they were written by the brilliantly cynical Bierce. For example: Idiot -- A member of a large and powerful tribe whose influence in human affairs has always been dominant and controlling. The Idiot's activity is not confined to any special field of thought or action, but "pervades and regulates the whole." He has the last word in everything; his decision is unappealable. He sets the fashions and opinion of taste, dictates the limitations of speech and circumscribes conduct with a dead-line. Required reading for anyone with a sense of humor.

Warning: This dictionary isn't for the faint of heart or for those easily offended. If you can get past that, you're in for a real treat. Ambrose "Bitter" Bierce has constructed a dictionary from a particularly nefarious point-of-view, and it is hilarious! His word choices for his dictionary are clever and idiosyncratic, as are his uses of archaic words (even in his own time), his actual neologisms, and his accompanying poetry for words, all written by different, mysterious pseudonyms. He completely dismisses the letter "X" and refuses to put down any word beginning with that letter. Why? You'll see. But it is his definitions for his words that make this little volume a classic. A typical definition of one of the words in this dictionary usually begins with a staggeringly trenchant one-liner that, in just a few words, is as funny and cutting as any political cartoon you could see in any paper or any routine delivered by a comedian. These one-liners are the real gems of the book; they will stick in your head and make you laugh, often laughing at yourself or some cherished notion of yours. That is truly great satire, and folks, that is hard to find anywhere. These lines are so pithy and clever that they are much more effective than an op-ed in any publication that drones on about some group or idea the journalist hates. Sometimes, you may have to read Bierce's definitions a few times to get the joke, but when you get it, it's always worth it. Some of these definitions are only pithy one-liners because to add anything more to them would be to try to improve on perfection. But if you want more, sometimes Bierce gives it to you in a wry, brief description of the word's origins (he has fun with etymologies, for sure) and history. And many times he will then slide into some wise and funny poetry using the word. This style of writing suits all types of readers; if you are of the "I only read the first line and then check my cell phone" generation, you'll be plenty happy with the first part

of the definition. If you are not of that generation and enjoy further reading, it's often there as an added bonus. Another facet of the book that makes it stupendous to read even in our day is that Bierce shied away from talking about topical issues limited to his day in most cases and instead wrote definitions for humankind in general, and that makes this dictionary timeless. Humanity takes it in the shorts in this book, often in a sardonic yet funny way. And as with all truly great satire, the ones who take the punishment the most and hardest are the most powerful people in society (or the ones who think they are the most powerful in society). As a result, Bierce attacks with special bile politicians, financiers, bankers, titans of industry, and theologians. If you happen to be in one of these groups, chances are you may not like this book. But the rest of the 99% will. In terms of hilarious and cutting satire from great American writers, I can think only of Twain who was as mean, funny, and wise all at the same time. Bierce is an underappreciated writer. If you can get past that initial warning I gave you, please give this one a try.

"Corporation, n. An ingenious device for obtaining individual profit without individual responsibility." Just this line alone is worth the price of admission. Bierce is a cynical SOB, which I respect, and he offers both insights and chuckles for when I'm procrastinating at night when I should be working (like right now). Some of his references are a little bit dated, although that's to be expected for a book written in the age of steam. All in all, cute, smart, and witty, best in small doses. Makes for great quotes, though unless you have exceptional friends I doubt anyone will know what you're talking about.

Ambrose Bierce. A wickedly clever man of pointed perception, who was waaaay ahead of his time. He fearlessly compiled our human foibles, and then verbally illustrated them in "The Devil's Dictionary." And then "poof!" He vanished -- never to be seen again! Hasta la vista, A.B. ...

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