

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



This Septic Isle

Mike Barfield

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About the Book

This Septic Isle is a dictionary that redefines 21st Century Britain in the wickedest and wittiest way imaginable. In an age where Spin is King, this super-cynical, irreverent reference book finally tells it like it is, not like it isn't and never will be.

With over 2,000 entries, ranging from razor-sharp satire to the downright silly, *This Septic Isle* is the perfect antidote to our irascible era. Politics, pop culture, sport, the internet, TV, food, the environment, journalism, sex, PR, consumerism, war, religion, royalty, terrorism, traffic - no sacred cow is spared a jaunt to the slaughterhouse.

Mike Barfield's up-to-date definitions prove there's one area in which beleaguered Britons can still proudly claim to lead the world: laughing at themselves.

About the Author

MIKE BARFIELD is a writer and cartoonist who has lent his wit to some of the country's most popular TV and radio programmes, writing for performers as diverse as Chris Tarrant, Clive Anderson, Rory Bremner, and Dennis the Menace and Gnasher. His 'Apparently...' cartoon strip has been a regular feature in the pages of *Private Eye* for the last decade.

This Septic Isle

Mike Barfield



EBURY
PRESS

To Jessica, the definition of wonderful.

Note: No aardvarks were harmed in the making of this
book.

Foreword

Robert Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabetical* of 1604 is generally accepted to be the first proper English dictionary. It contains some 2,500 entries, though there are none beginning with the letters J, K, U, W, X or Y, thereby making it a second choice for most Scrabble fans.

Hidden amongst the two and a half thousand definitions are some delightful terms long since lost to us (snipperings, floscles, queach) and one joke. As far as I am aware, it is the first example in English of a humorous definition appearing in a dictionary. Your ribs are quite safe, however. For the word 'cymballe', Cawdrey supplies the comment 'an instrument of musicke, so-called'.

I like to think this was intended as a comic observation because there are no other jokes to be found elsewhere in the volume. Unless one includes Cawdrey's introduction, which claims the book will be of benefit to 'Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other unskilfull persons'.

Of course, Dr Samuel Johnson is often erroneously credited with having compiled the first English dictionary, though his great work didn't appear until 1755. Less often is Johnson correctly identified as the godfather of its considerably more entertaining evil twin, the comic dictionary.

This is an oversight. Were it not for Johnson's comic definitions ('Oats - a grain that in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people'; 'Lexicographer - a harmless drudge') few of us would - or indeed could - quote any of Johnson's dictionary nowadays.

From the point of view of a modern freelance humorist, there is also another, odder, aspect to Johnson's comic entries. Given how well-suited the dictionary form showed itself to joke-making - brevity being both the soul of wit *and* of definitions - it remains a surprise that Johnson's dictionary did not seemingly inspire comic imitations.

Instead there was a gap of some one hundred years during which time the comic lexicographical baton crossed the pond - from Doctor Sam to Uncle Sam. Or, more precisely, Uncle Am.

The work of the American columnist Ambrose Bierce remains the high water mark against which all humorous dictionaries will forever be judged.

This is thanks to *The Cynic's Word Book*, a dictionary-formatted collection of acerbic definitions penned by Bierce for various San Francisco journals over a twenty-five year period from the early 1880s onwards.

The book is better known today as *The Devil's Dictionary* - a title Bierce himself favoured but which is said to have been rejected at the time due to his publisher's religious sensibilities.

Not that Bierce cared much for religion. The book defines 'Pray' as 'to ask that the laws of the universe be annulled on behalf of a single petitioner confessedly unworthy' and a Christian as 'one who follows the teachings of Christ in so far as they are not inconsistent with a life of sin.'

Race, marriage, manners, fashion, business, warfare, the law - the whole of human life makes it into Bierce's book, and he regards it all with equal cynicism. Though perhaps his publisher *did* know best, after all. The book was published in 1906, the year of the San Francisco earthquake. Talk about divine retribution.

Bierce's dictionary inspired hundreds of imitators and spawned a vogue for daffy-nitions, deft-initions, and all manner of column-filling one-liners. Then came the radio

comedians, followed by Hollywood, then television, and their insatiable appetites for comic material. This in turn generated a demand for gag books and saw the irresistible rise of compilations of humorous quotations, and comic dictionaries with, promised one blurb, ‘... wisecracks, gags, comic proverbs, arranged laffabetically from A to Z’.

The last quote comes from the cover of the *Comic Dictionary* compiled by the American Evan Esar, ‘the noted authority on humor’. He died at the age of 96, having already heard and recorded so many jokes that he now rarely laughed other than out of politeness.

Poor man. One feels genuinely sorry for him.

Few comic dictionaries get written these days. The British newspaper humorist ‘Beachcomber’ produced a great one for his collection, ‘Morton’s Folly’ – but that was back in 1933. If I can make any claim for the book you have before you now, it is that I wrote all of it myself. Good of you to take the blame, some will say. Four centuries on, it has about as many entries as Robert Cawdrey’s *Table Alphabeticall*. At the risk of sticking my neck out, I’d also contend it has easily twice as many jokes. It also shares an ambition common to all English dictionaries, comic or otherwise, from Cawdrey’s era onwards: to reflect its time.

Glancing through *This Septic Isle*, some may feel that my particular mirror has a tendency to distort, and even that it has one or two nasty cracks in places, but I’m confident we can all still recognise ourselves in it.

And remember, ultimately, that I’m hoping to make you laugh. Those people who invent terms like ‘asymmetrical warfare’, ‘friendly fire’, ‘companion animal’, ‘life partner’, ‘parallel parenting’, ‘collateral damage’, ‘differently abled’, ‘downsizing’, ‘gender realignment’, ‘attention deficit’, ‘quality time’, ‘thinking outside the box’ – *they’re* being serious.

Mike Barfield, 7th April 2008

a



'aardvark

Aardvark | South African burrowing mammal. Harmless, never hurt anyone.

Abandon, gay | Same as straight abandon, but with a lot more shrieking and hand flapping.

Abbreviation | Long word with, ironically, no obvious shorter alternative.

Ability | A modern handicap to promotion.

Able-bodied | Any person refused Invalidity Benefit is deemed to be able-bodied.

Absent-minded |

Absinthe drinker, the | Iconic French painting of a miserable person in a pub. A forerunner of the modern British TV soap.

Absolution | Religious slate-wiping. Not to be confused with AbsSolution - the trendy new gym for men!

Abuse | The motorist's greeting to his fellows.

Accident | 1. A pregnancy. 2. Any negligent or malicious behaviour performed by someone with a clever lawyer. 3. Any negligent or malicious behaviour by a member of the Establishment.

Accident prone | To fall on your front, as opposed to falling on your back ('accident supine').

Acclaimed | Marketing terminology for any book or film that fails to win awards.

Accommodating | Putting up with Lynne Truss's pickiness over grammar.

Accomplish | A very drunk criminal's partner in crime.

Accurate | Adjective used to describe a newspaper article with more than half of its facts correct.

Acid rain | Precipitate precipitation. The major British export to Scandinavia.

Acquaintance, casual | A friend who never dresses up.

Acrimonious | Word only ever attached to divorce cases. A solicitor's synonym for expensive.

Acronym | The new language of Europe.

Action-packed | Film review term meaning: 1. Noisy. 2. Nearly plot-free.



acrobat

Acupuncture | The ancient Chinese practice of owning a real Christmas tree.

Additives, food | The sole cause of bad behaviour in children whose parents have no time to cook for or look after properly.

Admirer, secret | See Stalker.

Ad nauseum | Sick of adverts.

Adolescence | Awkward period between local authority care and prison.



aerial

Advent | Popularly supposed to be a corruption of 'advert'.

A dog is for life, not just for Christmas | Message not heeded in South Korean restaurants.

Adult | Anything too dull, ridiculous or disgusting to show to children is said to be adult.

Adultery | A place where kids can leave adults while they go on holiday.

Advance, technological | Money for writing dull book about gadgets.

Adventure playground | An ironic use of the word 'adventure' in the context of some old tyres and a pit containing bark chippings.



aerial view

Aerobatics | See Heathrow, near miss.

Affordable housing | See 1. Shoebox. 2. Tent.

Afterburn | See below.

Aftershave | See above.

Aga | A writing tool.

Agamemnon | An ancient Mycenaean stove.

Ageless | Dead.

Agitator | A nervous potato.

Agnus dei | Like Doris Dei, but more sinister.

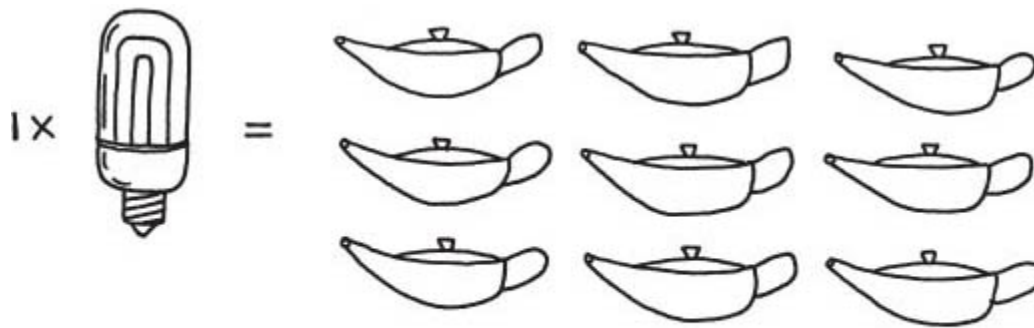
Agony column | The *Daily Mail* leader.

Agrochemical | 1. Alcohol. 2. Testosterone.

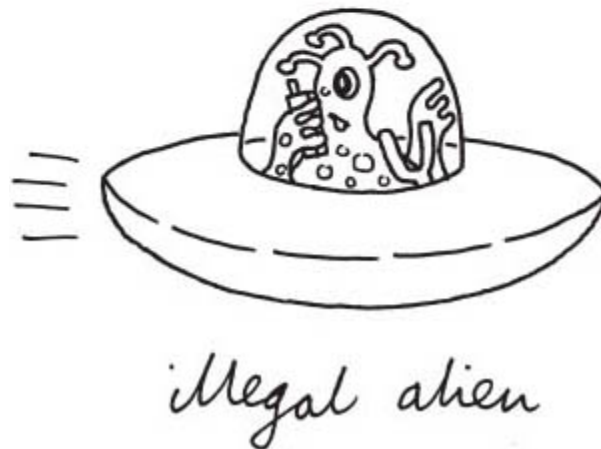
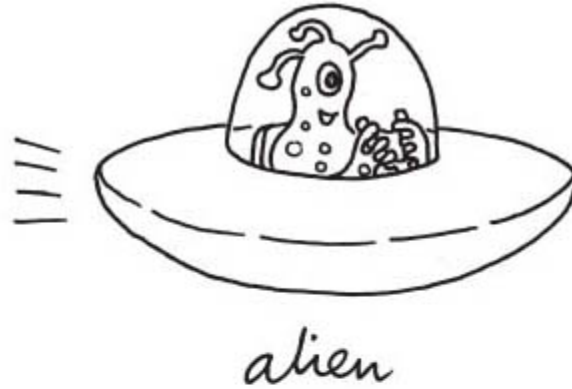
Airbrush | A cockney hairbrush.

Airhead | See Sex doll.

Aladdin's cave | Iraqi criminal's hiding place still to be unearthed by US forces.



aladdin: the update



Alarmist | A realist blessed with the gift of prophecy.

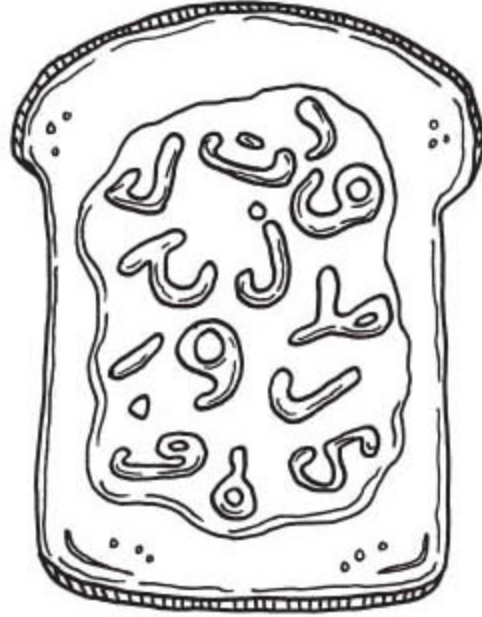
Albion, perfidious | Football team noted for cheating.

Alderman | Superhero with the amazing ability to turn into a riverside tree.

Alien, illegal | Alien with no professional skills such as plumbing or medicine.

Also-ran | A British athlete.

Altar ego | A show-off vicar.



*alphabeti spaghetti,
Saudi Arabia*

Amalgamation | A gathering of dentists.

Amateur | A person too stupid to profit from the talent they possess.

Angel | Tabloid newspaper term for any nurse not on a picket line.

Apology | The smallest size of type used in a newspaper.

Arbitrary | Loser's assessment of any ruling made against them by a High Court judge.

Army | Collective noun for British sports fans overseas.



American



Afro-American



Aroma | Advertisers' term for the faint smell possessed by instant coffee.

Art, modern | Any painting or sculpture executed according to principles developed over 100 years ago.

Arthritis | Chronic condition soon to be the subject of a Joint Working Party.

Assembly | Frustrating period for all home-build furniture purchasers.

Assets | A model's breasts.

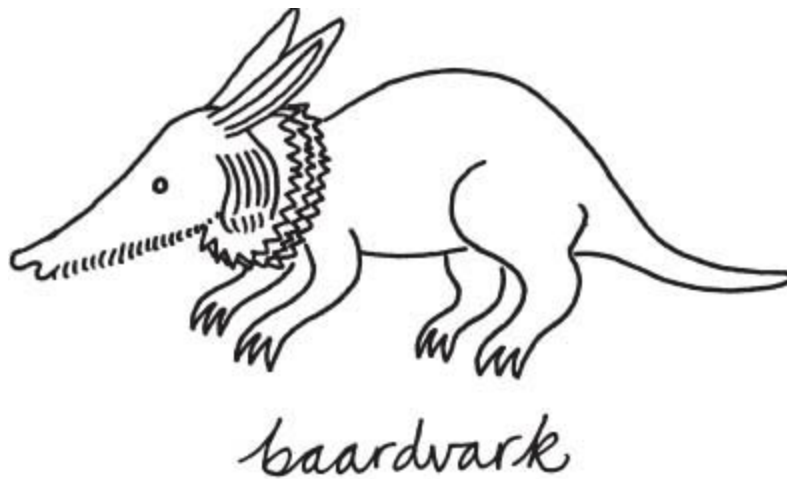
Assistant, shop | A paid observer.

Astrology | Archaic pseudoscience in which people who don't understand how a microwave oven works seriously believe that distant lumps of rock control their lives.

Atheist | Person who worships Richard Dawkins.

Avocado | A lavatory-coloured fruit.

b



B | An obsolete A level exam grade.

Baardvark | South African anteater with a gift for poetry.

Babyhood | The smallest size of hoodie available.

Baby monitor | The modern child's introduction to surveillance society.

Babysitter | Any 14 year-old-girl paid to look after children not her own.



baby bouncer

Baccalaureate | Tobacco industry poet in residence.

Bachelor, confirmed | Any as-yet-unconfirmed heterosexual male.

Bachelor of arts | Stephen Fry, Sir Ian McKellen, Gilbert, George, etc.

Backbencher | Any obscure MP with a handy view of the gap between their leader's shoulder blades should their party start to slip in the polls.

Backdoor | Term beloved of anti-immigrationists: the Polish tradesman's entrance.

Backgammon | Bacon owed in arrears.

Backhand | A stroke in tennis.

Backhander | A stroke of luck.

Backlash | Three letters to *The Times* complaining about something.

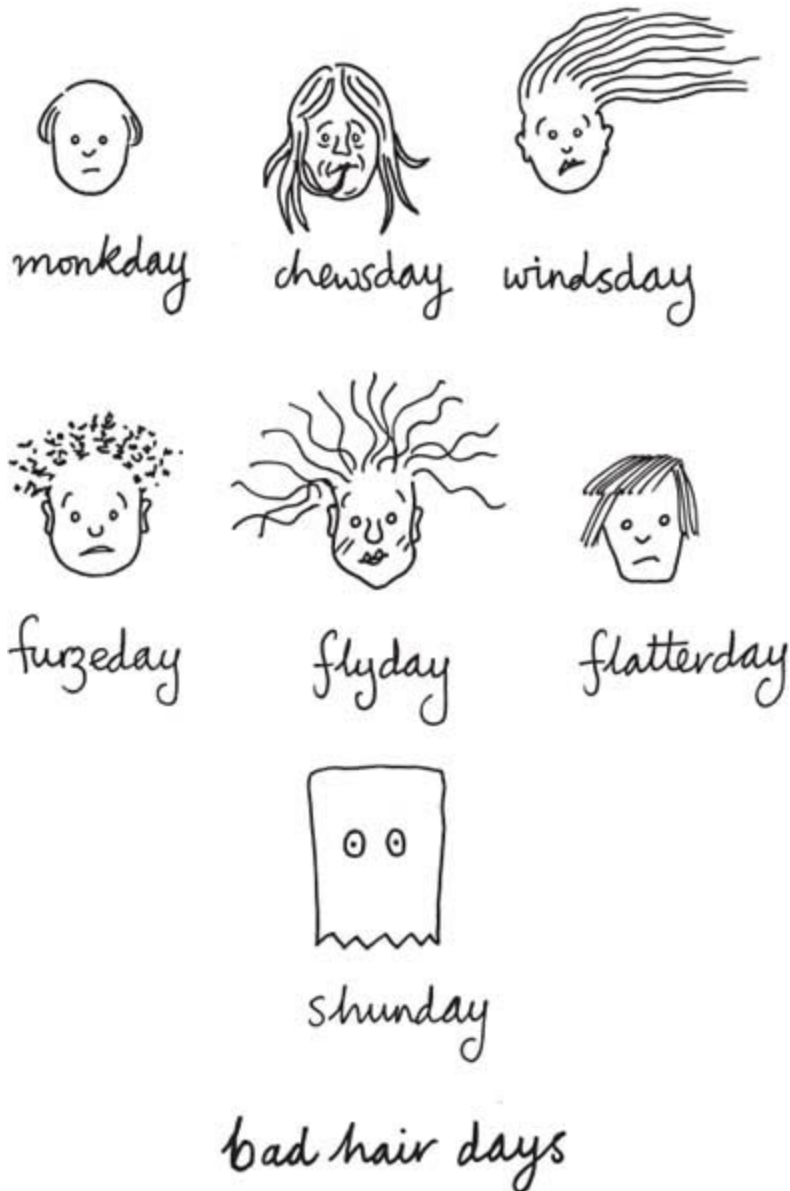
Back out | Commonest cause of workplace absence.

Backpack | An ergonomically designed high-performance rucksack, now best avoided by the olive-skinned and bearded.

Backroom boy | 1. A boffin. 2. A kidnap victim.

Backyard, not in my | Principle exercised over housing developments, but equally valid for barbecues, decking, and squirrels.

Bad hair day | A national holiday in many of the former Soviet Bloc countries.



Badly off | Without digital television.

Badmouth | Result of no longer being able to afford dental treatment.

Bag, brown paper | Recyclable, environmentally-responsible wrapper for pornography

Bagatelle | A French bag lady.

Bag lady | Anya Hindmarch, Lulu Guinness, etc.

Bail | The small charge that criminals must pay to the court in order to get to re-offend prior to trial.

Bail, to jump | A cricketing victory celebration.

Bairn | 1. *Scots*. A child. 2. *Scouse*. A wound caused by heat.

Baked Alaska | Likely consequence of climate change.

Balderdash | 1. Rubbish 2. What hairless men think they possess. (See 1.)

Ballot box | Zimbabwean wastepaper basket.

Ban, blanket | Dastardly EU proposal to spread the use of duvets.

Bandit | What the government did to public smoking.

Banger, old | Sausage past use-by date.

Bhangra | An Indian sausage.

Banish | The language of Bain.

Bank holiday | A national automobile rally.

Bank note | A multi-denominational cocaine delivery unit.