

A mystery at a dictionary publisher offers a peek into the world of words

“The Broken Teaglass” by Emily Arsenault. Bantam Books, 2009. \$24.95, 384 pages.

Have you ever wondered who decides what words are added to a dictionary? Billy Webb, a recent college graduate, has just landed a job as a lexicographer at the Samuelson Company, one of the oldest dictionary publishers in the country, a job that will allow him to make some of those decisions about adding words to the dictionary.

When a new word is coined, it doesn't always get added to the dictionary. Lexicographers search for new words in magazines, books, newspapers and other materials to determine how widespread the usage of a word actually is. These instances of the words are copied down and put into the citation files along with the bibliographic information of where the word was found.

Part of Billy's job requires him to respond to queries about definitions, and it is his first such assignment that brings him to examine the enormous citation files. Working with his coworker, Mona Minot, Billy pulls several citations for the word “editrix” (a female editor), finding one from a book entitled “The Broken Teaglass” that seems to be set at a dictionary publisher like Samuelson.

Intrigued by the possibility of a book about lexicographers, Billy and Mona are surprised to find that no book titled “The Broken Teaglass” has ever been published. Who would have referenced unpublished material in the citation files and why?

As Billy and Mona dig deeper into the citation files they find more and more references to this nonexistent book, and even more curious, the citations tell a story. A story that is seemingly set right there in their office with characters that closely resemble co-workers and mentions of a corpse. It seems that the explanation behind an unsolved murder from years before had been written down, broken into pieces and hidden in the citation files at Samuelson.

Determined to discover the truth behind “The Broken Teaglass”, Mona and Billy, along with Mr. Phillips, a retired Samuelson editor, work to find the rest of the citations and to piece together the mystery of what happened so long ago.

Emily Arsenault, a former lexicographer herself, tells a compelling story in “The Broken Teaglass.” Revealing just bits of the mystery at a time, Arsenault lures the reader through the narrative with skill. “The Broken Teaglass” is a unique and intriguing tale that is thoroughly enjoyable.

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