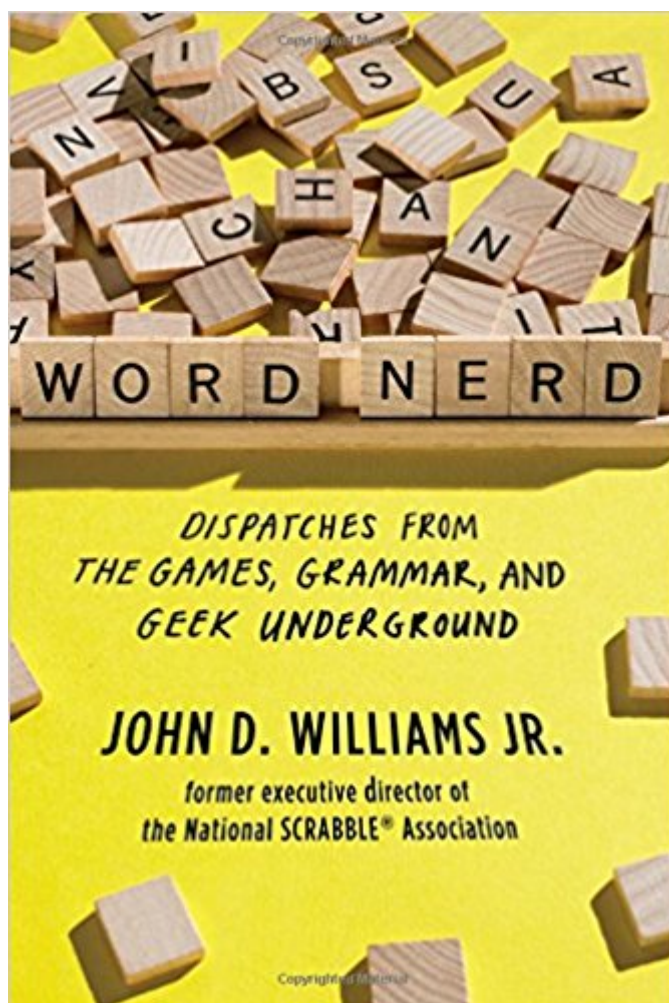


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Word Nerd: Dispatches From The Games, Grammar, And Geek Underground



Synopsis

In this zany, one-of-a-kind memoir, former executive director of the National SCRABBLE Association John D. Williams Jr. brings to life the obsessions, madness, and glory of the SCRABBLE® culture – from living-room players to world champions. Beginning his career on a lark as a freelance contributor to SCRABBLE News, John D. Williams fell down a rabbit hole inhabited by gamers, geeks, and the grammar police. For twenty-five years, as the executive director of the National SCRABBLE Association, Williams served as the official spokesperson for the game, and as the middleman between legions of fanatical word-game fans and the official brand. Now Word Nerd takes readers inside the byzantine, dog-eat-dog world of top tournament players, creating a piquant (seven-letter word, 68 points!) work that is part pop-cultural history, part anthropological study. Indeed, what Christopher Guest did for the world of dog shows in his film Best in Show, Williams does for the world of competitive word games in this funny and perfectly observed memoir. As readers will discover, Word Nerd explores anagrams, palindromes, the highest-scoring SCRABBLE plays of all time, the birth of the World SCRABBLE Championship, as well as many of the more colorful figures that inhabit this subculture. Die-hard word fans will find invaluable tips on how top players see their boards and racks to come up with the best play, how they prepare, and the psychology of tournament competition. Those uninitiated in the mysteries of SCRABBLE mania will find a delightful, madcap memoir about all the fun people have with language and how words shape our lives and culture in unexpected ways. Whether reminiscing about past national champions, detailing the controversy over efforts to purge the Official SCRABBLE Players Dictionary of all offensive words, opining on the number of vowelless words that are allowable (cmw for a Welsh deep-walled basin or nth for the ultimate degree), noting how long it takes a word to get into a dictionary, or explaining why there remain more male than female champions, Williams crafts a loving tribute to words and the games people play with them. Word Nerd will fascinate both amateurs and seasoned experts alike. 15 illustrations

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Customer Reviews

“Williams, the first and only executive director of the National Scrabble Association, joyfully and enthusiastically recounts his unlikely 25-year tenure as the official national spokesman for the world-famous word game. Casual gamers will find this light read to be a fun escape, while avid grammarians and fellow word nerds will devour it in a single sitting.” - Publishers

Weekly “Word Nerd is full of insights and stories about SCRABBLE® from John Williams’s unique perspective as former head of the National SCRABBLE Association. Informative, eye-opening, often funny. Word nerds everywhere will eat this up.” - Will Shortz, crossword editor, New York Times “I love words. I grew up in a SCRABBLE-playing family that loved words so much that they would mark in red the misspelled ones on my papers before I turned them in to my teachers. John D. Williams had similarly sadistic parents, which is probably why he’s been able to write such a word-worthy book. If you love words, you’ll love this book. If you love

SCRABBLE as much as I do, you’ll really love this book. In fact, if you can read, period, then this is the book for you!” - Morgan Spurlock “For twenty-five years, John Williams oversaw the passionate eccentrics, petty controversies, corporate battles, and linguistic genius that make SCRABBLE one of America’s quirkiest and most compelling subcultures. He’s got some great

stories to tell the fight over dirty words is a doozy and I’m glad he’s telling them.” - Stefan Fatsis, author of Word Freak: Heartbreak, Triumph, Genius, and Obsession in the World of Competitive SCRABBLE Players “For Scrabble fans and they are everywhere, young and old, male and female this walk down memory lane with the former National Scrabble Association (NSA) executive director is informative, funny, anecdotal, and bittersweet. [A] aficionados will treasure this book for its appendixes:

– offensive words; short Q, J, X, and Z words; – Important Vowel Dumps and more.” - Eloise Kinney, Booklist

John D. Williams Jr. served as the executive director of the National SCRABBLE Association, acting

as the official national spokesman for the game, and is the coauthor of the best-selling Everything SCRABBLE™. He lives in Greenpoint, Long Island.

Interesting back-story and inside scoop on how a stodgy, old-school board game became an international obsession. Full disclosure: my spouse is one of those competitive scrabble types--though not on a tournament level--so it was fun to see how that world works. Just the right amount of gossip. And it's not just for fans of word games...it's a fun, fast read that shows how smart marketing can reinvent any product. I found myself thoroughly engaged despite the havoc that Scrabble occasionally brings to our family life

Speaking as a true "word nerd" and devoted Scrabble player, I can honestly say that this book is the real deal! Super fun to read, especially for someone like me who can relate so much to the world of competitive Scrabble. Witty and fun reading for anyone.

Very interesting to anyone familiar with the world of tournament Scrabble. John has a nice writing style. A pleasant and easy read. Jim Cassidy

A very interesting book, but the author is rather dry in his telling of the story. I enjoyed it, especially the parts about the history of the game.

Very well written and insightful into the world of SCRABBLE. Enjoyed the book very much, author is an interesting man.

One can hardly expect good things from an author who early on writes that JIAO is an alternative spelling of CIAO. This appears in a discussion of "foreign" words that are found in the official Scrabble dictionary. His discussion does not include even one example of numerous Scrabble words marked foreign in any of the various dictionaries underlying the official word list. But things get better. There's a longish, intriguing, and accurate discussion about how Merriam-Webster produces its standard dictionaries, although the author says nothing about how vastly that differs from the way the Scrabble dictionary is produced. Many items therein have never appeared in any standard Merriam dictionary. The progress Merriam has made in lexicography over the last fifty years, and changes in standard English, are often not reflected in the Scrabble lexicon, which has proved to be a toxic waste dump for the game. On page 129 the author mentions that he lives 45 minutes from

any Scrabble club. Too bad he didn't count the number of bridge clubs he could reach within that time -- it won't surprise me if there are at least a half dozen. Polls show that Scrabble is slightly more popular than bridge, so why the paucity of clubs? You can read between the lines of this well-written book and discover for yourself answers that eluded the author, who appears to have been somewhat miffed when the manufacturer belatedly decided they should be selling more sets, so his services would no longer be required. Nonetheless, the book can be read as the life and times of a publicist, and there are lots of engaging anecdotes that transcend the travails of Scrabble. If only most Scrabble books were as superbly written as this one. The author admits "I knew virtually nothing about Scrabble when I began this adventure." This means that everything he thinks he knows about Scrabble is based on the 1976 rule changes engineered by elite players of the organization he ran for a quarter century. The game rocketed to popularity in the 1950s based on the pre-1976 rules, and those are the rules most people have in mind when they think of Scrabble. The two games are mathematically equivalent, indistinguishable by a mere computer. For the humans who could be buying sets, the two games are vastly different. And that's why it takes 45 minutes or more for most people to find a Scrabble club when they can get to a bridge club in half that time or less. There are more bridge clubs in North America than individual members of the organization the author ran. The elite players deserve much of the blame, but from the book we can discern that Hasbro (the manufacturer) gets the lion's share. If they had directed John D. Williams, Jr., to sell more sets way back when, everything might have turned out much better, as he was very resourceful in futile attempts to promote damaged goods. In any case, we can be grateful to him for the behind-the-scenes glimpses he provides in this book. Thank you!

I love to play SCRABBLE, though I am no expert, so I was intrigued by the idea of this book! I learned a lot about the game, the company, and the tournaments. My favorite parts were the side stories - like how the author met Jack Black, or about some of the more colorful personalities in the SCRABBLE culture. At times, though, it read more like history than memoir, and I would have loved more stories.

*** PLEASE READ THE FULL BOOK REPORT AT***

www.donaldsauter.com/scrabble-word-nerd-john-williams.htm*** I HAD TO CUT ABOUT 30 PERCENT FOR .*** PLEASE COME BACK HERE WITH YOUR COMMENTS. I enjoyed this book immensely. "Big deal, so what?" you might be thinking. Well, the "so what?" is that I went into it fully convinced I would hate every page of it. I was actually looking forward to trashing it in a review for ,

and I told the librarian that when I checked it out. Here's the background. I love Scrabble -- as a word game drawing on nice, big, fat words from my vocabulary. On the other hand, I'm convinced modern tournament-style Scrabble, based on the smallest, weirdest words in the language and with a revolting poker-style bluffing component, is totally "broke". Think, people, how long would crossword puzzles and other word games and activities last if they were based on Scrabble word lists? Not two days. I was sure Word Nerd would be another glowing paean, like Word Freak before it, to the tournament-style "strategy" game. I had contacted the author several times in the past, and the closest I come to appearing in the book is on p187, in the list of the types of communications handled by the NSA, specifically, "new ideas for improving SCRABBLE." Yes, I was (still am) naive enough to think the world is big enough for a Scrabble option for "word lovers", as distinct from point lovers jumping each other with their strange, little "game pieces". I emerged from my communications with John convinced that he was what you might call a "stooge" for the tournament players. Notice the irony here. A recurring theme in the book is the lack of trust the players had for John and the NSA. Whew. I assure you guys that John was your Grand Champion and Defender, rigidly programmed to reject or straight-arm any idea deviating in the least from what modern, North American, tournament Scrabble has become. For example, Scrabble News #227 has John blowing off a woman caller fuming over the idiotic word ZITIS (something like NOODLESES, if you're wondering.) John calmly assured her DEERS was good, too, and she could go jump in a... I mean, go and call Merriam-Webster. Which she did. And even the senior editor there couldn't find it in any dictionary. But real Scrabble players can't be bothered with details like that... My first major experience with John involved trying to get a hearing for Scrabble II For Word Lovers, which is in every way just regular Scrabble opened up to much longer words, and using a regular dictionary. I guess I was tenacious enough that John figured he might as well give me a call and get it over with. He came out of his corner swinging. "Oh, I know, you play 'swap for the blank,' don't you? I've heard it all before. There's nothing I haven't heard." Well, no, that's kid's stuff; it's got nothing to do with Scrabble II. (Since then I've come to realize "swap for the blank", suggested by Scrabble itself in 1953, is so fantastic it should have been an original box top rule.) I quickly realized John hadn't thoroughly read my emails or visited my web pages on Scrabble II. At one point he asked, "Do you make nines?" Heck, yeah, John. That's what I'm trying to tell you; here in the Dover Scrabble Club, without a single tournament player or word list studier, we play the longest Scrabble words on the planet. "And who are you? You're not even in the NASPA tournament database!" Well, I'm guessing Alfred Butts, the game's inventor, wasn't either. And, apparently, NASPA statistics don't go back to 1987, when I was a "long shot qualifier" for being invited to the national finals. (That miserable

tournament experience was my first and last ever, you better bet.) When I asked about the change to the challenge rule which introduced bluffing in 1976, John testily replied, "I don't know; I wasn't director then!" When John charged me with being the only one who objects to the bloated Scrabble word set, I mentioned a certain Scrabble expert. "Well he's a nut!" Things got more frictional and John was moved to hang up on me. Certainly not all his fault, understand. Then I suppose what happened was, he felt a little bad about our call, and offered to devote one of his Executive Director's Report columns to Scrabble II. Fine by me! But when that appeared, every statement about Scrabble II in it was incorrect in some way or another. At the time I was devastated, although I will admit when I just revisited it, it wasn't bad at all, and the inaccuracies which loomed so large in my eyes wouldn't have made a hill of beans of difference to anyone who actually read it. Perhaps my disappointment was really rooted in the column just touching on a few of the Scrabble II rule adjustments, not the thrills in store for anyone who gives it a try. Anyhow, please accept a big belated thanks for the column, John! John once wrote a fun column for Scrabble News in which he responded to an interviewer's question he had never heard before, "How many Scrabble games do you own?" I had just worked up my page laying out the evolution of the standard Scrabble set and was excited to invite John to have a look. No response. :(In 1999 someone at Hasbro "fixed" the Scrabble box top rules to allow for multiple, unconnected words in the same row in one play(!) No one, of course, has actually read the box top rules since 1953, and I'm the only nut on earth who would catch something like that, but still, a blunder of that magnitude needs to be corrected. I couldn't elicit much more than a "What?" from John, and the goof survived for ten or more years. So I hope I may be forgiven for developing the notion that John's sole reason for being was as Grand Protector of modern, North American tournament-style Scrabble, with no brain wave activity left over for anything else. But hold on...In Word Freak, Stefan Fatsis poses this question in regard to Scrabble's inventor, "I want to know, in short, if he was one of us." What Stefan means, as I understand it, and if I may put my own spin on it, is, did Alfred envision Scrabble as the sort of checkers-with-alphabet-blocks strategy exercise it would become for a few thousand players several decades down the line? No way. Now let me pose the same question with respect to John, and from my own vantage point. I want to know, in short, if John is "one of THEM." Again, all I can conclude is, no way. Although he has excuses for his scant participation in the tournament scene - other obligations at the events, 45 minutes from a club, wanting weekends to chill - they couldn't have stymied anyone athirst for the modern Scrabble "strategy game." In some places, John is very explicit about this. On p50 he comes right out and admits, "With the exception of my first tournament, I never took studying words very seriously." No, that can't be "one of them". On p45 he

says, "The whole issue of playing phonies is both nuanced and controversial." In my never-ending campaign to get Scrabble back to "good words only", I can't think of a single instance of sympathy from a tournament player. So I have to believe that John calling phonies "controversial" here is an indication of his own true, inner aversion to this aspect of the tournament game. On p131 John sounds very much in tune with living room players when he says, "It was my opinion at the time that most NSA players--and casual players at home--felt there were too many words already." This sounds something like me when I argue, if a regular college dictionary already goes way beyond the working vocabulary of even the most "wordy" person, why on earth would anybody need or want to go further out than that? And I was surprised to see tournament players pulled in there because I could have sworn this was the slimmest of minority positions among them. Was John projecting his distaste for the bloated Scrabble word set on NSA players as well? (Am I projecting mine on John?) It's a darn shame the "one question" in his survey didn't include the third option: "Did members want the expanded dictionary, or were they happy with things as they were," or 3) did they want a more sensible and refined word set? On p132 John really starts to sound like me: "For me personally, [the World Scrabble word set] would just be adding another [40,000] words to the sixty or seventy thousand I already didn't know." Of course, John is much more diplomatic than I, and omits such descriptors as "absurd", "ridiculous", "idiotic", etc. On p18 he did refer to the "crazy stuff" on tournament boards. I claim John shows more sympathy than you'd expect from "one of them" when addressing specific cases that bother word lovers: junky interjections, foreign words, and, more specifically, foreign currency. And while he's obligated to defend all these Scrabble words to the teeth, his discussion of specific cases suggests he has even less of a grip on familiar, little Scrabble words than you'd expect from "one of them" -- who are already infamous for not giving a hoot about meanings. See examples in my page-by-page comments below. Likewise, in his discussion of the removal of offensive words for the off-the-shelf OSPD, I claim John shows more sympathy than you'd expect from "one of them". Reviews of Word Nerd had me expecting some good merry-making over comical old fossils who would rather play the game without offensive words, even at the detriment of maybe .002 points per turn in their scoring, oh my. What is it about Scrabble, among word games and activities, and the need for "bad words"? Was there any outrage over Password not using bad words? Even now, in our enlightened times, is there any campaign for bad words in crossword puzzles or Jeopardy categories or on the Wheel Of Fortune? Never mind that Scrabble has always been naturally bound up with Grandma, apple pie, and everything good and old-fashioned, to start with. So, thanks, John, for your part in producing an OSPD without the offensive and vulgar words. Another scuffle John and I had was over School Scrabble. Whose heart

could not be warmed by John's chapters on that subject? Mine certainly was. But, but, but...My claim is that foisting the expert game on school children is a high crime. Fifth graders do NOT need to learn that the only English Q-words are QI, QAT, or, in a terrible pinch, QAID or QADI. They do NOT need to waste brain space on DOX, EME, MEM, MIB, NOM, OBE, OHA, TAE, ULU, VAR, VAU, VIG, WUD, AA, AE, BA, JO, KA, KI, NA, OE (Table 1 words from 2011) and bushels of other Scrabble game pieces they will never encounter in real life, or even their school career, when there are tens of thousands of life-enhancing words yet to learn. My understanding is that today's student has a vocabulary about half as big as that of his counterpart 50 years ago. And they do NOT need to learn that bluffing your fellow man is the good and proper way to get through life. John tells us they made a rule change, putting a ceiling on the margin of victory to slightly counteract the big rewards of throwing down phony words. Ok, but wouldn't the perfect, and very simple, solution be to only award points for an acceptable play? That would put Scrabble in line with virtually all other games and sports. And it wouldn't even involve a rule change, just a restoration of the original challenge rule, which worked just fine for Scrabble's first quarter of a century. In 2011 the School Scrabble champions won \$10,000 at least in part by playing a phony word, CARNATE, in the championship round. Ten thousand dollars. I had to act fast, but I got a letter off to Jimmy Kimmel before his show with the kids. When John showed up at the studio, I imagine Jimmy waving my note in a mild state of perplexity: Re: National School Scrabble Championship aka National Misspelling Bee Dear Jimmy, \$10,000 for making up CARNATE??? The trash Scrabble played at the National School Scrabble Championship took a long-overdue and well-deserved beating in the press and among the public this year. Besides the game-winning CARNATE, here are some other eyeball-rollers played in the 8 featured tournament games: BESEIGES ENTOLLED INGESTER NOTATERS OUTGAENS AURIATE DEMOTER GRIEFED ABOUTS BIRON And don't forget the wonderful Q-words played in those games: QADI QAT QAT QAT QUA QIS QI QI QI And these fine beauties no one can live without: AA AE AL BA DE JO KA KI MO NA NE OE OI ZA Maybe you could have some fun with School Scrabble as vocabulary and character builder? Thanks. Donald Sauter I think the note had an effect; that if the 2011 episode with Jimmy Kimmel is still on YouTube, you'll detect something of a pall hanging over the proceedings. I believe everyone was sweating bricks over the kids playing a bogus word on national tv. Jimmy himself brought up phony words a few times. Actually, I know the note had an effect. A few days later I got an email from John telling me how I had "jeopardized Hasbro's and the NSA's relationship with the Jimmy Kimmel Show." John sent my letter to the Hasbro legal department and enjoined me from "contacting Hasbro, the NSA, the Jimmy Kimmel Show or the young NSSC Champions again." With impressive equanimity, I replied: Hi John, There's

a simple solution to all of this which makes everyone a winner, Hasbro most of all. Hasbro gives its backing to a Scrabble II game site; I call the dogs off modern tournament-style Scrabble. Donald No, they didn't take me up on this eminently fair and square deal. The world still has no option for a longer, more natural word Scrabble. And in 2012 the School Scrabble champions won \$10,000 with the phony bingo ROTUNDER. And in 2013 the champs won \$10,000 with the phony bingo ELOPEES. There were two spots in the book that stopped me dead in my tracks. John discusses (p96) the battle between Maven, a Scrabble computer program, and two human players. He recalls one of "the most amazing plays I've ever seen." I'm thinking, wow, this is going to be good! Maven plays TIRAMISU, and I'm wild with anticipation of the incredible play the humans will come storming back with. But that was it! John was referring to Maven's TIRAMISU! John, we've played TIRAMISU in the Dover Scrabble Club. And we're not even computers. You can see it about 4900 lines down in my page of all the words we've ever played, nestled in the eights somewhere between TINNITUS and TITULARY. Wow, I had no idea of the extent to which Scrabble players are starved for real words. John, I swear, we've got to get together and play Scrabble as a "word game" sometime! The other spot (p158) was where John tells of Joe Edley's conviction that "an anagramming-based game could someday be as popular as Scrabble [or] Monopoly." Say what? Things have fallen so low that Scrabble players don't even think of Scrabble as an anagramming game at all??? I know the basic dump-dump-dump-dump-dump-dump-bingo strategy doesn't really let you spread your wings, but at least you have to put together something on that seventh play, like RAINIER or RATIONS or SLAINTE or something. The other thing about this that threw me for a loop is that it was Joe Edley himself calling for an anagram game. I once sent Joe a photo of a Dover Scrabble board streaked with long words, and he wrote back that he "would find that game very boring without all of the twos and the strategy required for the current regular game." So, if there's been a change of heart, Joe, please let's get together for some anagramming Scrabble! Bring along John and Stefan. I was expecting the chapter on "How a Word Gets into the Dictionary" to get my blood boiling. I deplore the dictionary makers' shift, starting back in the 1960s, from word use "prescription" to "description". I feel the word authorities should help us to use words properly, as experts in any other field would be glad to help us get things right in their field. John Morse, president of Merriam-Webster, once explained the modern mindset to Scrabble News: "A more serious misconception is that we can influence the way the language develops. The fact is that speakers of the English language are fiercely independent and will use the language in whatever way seems best to them. All we do is report back on that behavior..." Get the picture? -- a scrunched shoulders, palms up, dumb smile, "What us worry? You burp it; we print it!" The process described in Word

Nerd doesn't sound quite as bleak as Morse paints it. It appears a bit of thought and hand wringing goes into it before a new word makes the grade. But I still have to ask, "Really, now, Mr. Morse, how many zas did you all see on the front page of the New York Times?" Page-by-page comments: P18.

John says the basic rule for foreign words is that we might adopt them if there is no English equivalent. Regarding his examples, I doubt he ever got a call complaining about TACO or CROISSANT, and his other examples, ADIOS, CIAO and AMIGO, contradict his stated guideline. He also gives SI as an example, but SI is not in our dictionaries as the Spanish word (we have a pretty good word for "yes"), rather as the seventh note of the scale. JIAO is not an alternative spelling for the Italian CIAO, but a Chinese unit of currency (also spelled CHIAO, which may account for John's confusion.) John notes that, "Foreign currency tends to annoy people the most." I find non-Western units of measure of ANYTHING well over the horizon of basic American English. We have our own units, for goodness' sake. If dictionaries want to include them with a "foreign" label, fine by me, and welcome, but that would involve judgment, which scares the bejabbers out of modern dictionary makers. John's two examples of annoying foreign currency, the XU and ZAIRE, are both out of use now, by the way. And I think you'll find the "some reason" XU does not take an S is that xu is the plural for xu, sort of like jiao for jiao and sheep for sheep. John sticks up for the most annoying interjections, including MM, HM, HMM, BRR, and BRRR, implying they're all over Ogden Nash. Hmmm? This sent me to the two dozen Ogden Nash poems in my collection, and I could find nary a one. Twice on this page, John expresses bafflement at people's annoyance with far-fetched words in spite of them being "extremely playable" and "extremely valuable Scrabble words." Now might that be precisely the reason why they are so annoying to so many people who just want to sit down and play a nice American English word game? These screwy little words from beyond the pale will often be the biggest factor in the outcome of the game. I'll hazard a guess that the complaints the NSA received about LI were the tiniest fraction of those for XU. P19. Admittedly, John is limited in the time or space he can devote to new technology and slang words to support his case for a vibrant, growing language, but the few examples he does give seem so unimpressive that one might almost be led to the opposite view. Some go back decades (MOOLAH, BYTE, AWOL); COZ goes back to at least Shakespeare's time - kind of hard for me to view Shakespeare as slang! (By the way, it meant any sort of relation.) And I'll put my money on PHAT and CHILLAX (whatever they are) fizzling out before the American public starts using them. Even the gushing discussion of "catfish" as a new synonym for "impostor" (p23) leaves me thinking, if this is an uplifting example of the wondrous growth of our language, would somebody please bar the door! (By the way, a bit of web searching casts major doubts on the claimed practice of dumping catfish in vats of cod for

shipping. And there's some suspicion that the Catfish "documentary" itself was a work of pure fiction.)P25. I hope I'm not alone in thinking that bringing registered trademarks into tournament Scrabble is wildly inappropriate. Do they really want to overturn the basic, and essential, rule of the game disallowing proper nouns for the sake of a few dozen more words? And I'm very disappointed that Merriam-Webster allows itself to be strong-armed by Scrabble players. Actually, I think Merriam-Webster should be ashamed of itself for publishing the OSPD with thousands upon thousands of words they wouldn't see fit for their own dictionary. Shouldn't that be grounds for a dictionary company having its license revoked?P31. "Worse, for me, was that [expunging "despicable" words from the OSPD] pitted my job requirements against my strong personal belief in free speech. Ah, the classic American dilemma, choosing between one's job and the Constitution."So much hand wringing, over nothing. I assure you, John, that the free speech business in the Constitution is there to protect us from an overreaching government. A mother is not going to be hauled off to the gulag for telling her daughter not to say, "Shut up!" And, if you think about it, "free speech" also protects speech that doesn't offend. A dictionary maker doesn't have to worry about being hauled before the Supreme Court for passing over this or that word.P33. "It goes without saying, the editors at Merriam-Webster were appalled that we were even doing this."That's rather hard to swallow. At that time, the early 1990s, the major dictionaries had only themselves been including "obscenities" for a decade or so. And they could honestly claim they saw nothing a little funny about fifth-graders playing School Scrabble with offensive words leaping off a quarter of the pages of the OSPD? When it would never cross their minds to include such words in their own children's dictionaries? And I'm guessing they still don't, even with 25 further years of progress beating back the dark forces of civility.P35. "I began to receive letters and calls from all over the world [regarding the removal of "offensive" words from the OSPD.]"If those six examples represent the worst of this tempest, it didn't even need a teapot; a thimble would do. Assuming they're not all tongue-in-cheek, notice that at least 5 of the 6 asked for MORE words to be removed, turning the general point of the chapter--that anyone can see how silly this censorship stuff is--on its head.P38. "[Joe Edley's] tai chi exercises between rounds were legendary."John, you blew it! You could have used "qi" in running text in a major American publication! You could have made tens of thousands, nay, millions, of Scrabble players' lives complete!P42. "Had I been able to enter this event in disguise with an alternative identity, that would have been fine with me."And here, John, you could have nonchalantly worked in "catfish"!P49. "I now had a tournament rating of 1554."Ratings pop up here and elsewhere in the book, as they did throughout Word Freak, and there's no evidence in either case that the author could explain how ratings are calculated. I say deep-six the voodoo

rating system and switch to the player's average points per turn (PPT) production. That one little, perfectly easy to understand, statistic says it all about a player's skill level. If you can eke out a fraction more of a point per turn than anyone else, game after game, then you are the No. 1 player.

P65. "The British had had the language far longer than North Americans, so it stood to reason the [British] word source would contain a lot more words." Hmmm, I don't think I buy that reasoning. We were using the same language when we split a few hundred years ago, and ever since then, while they've been maintaining their stiff upper lip, we've been inflicting our good, old American "fierce independence" on the language. The reason their Scrabble dictionary is so much bigger than ours is that it was based on the Chambers Dictionary, which "contains many more dialectal, archaic, unconventional and eccentric words than its rivals." (Wikipedia) I've heard Chambers described as actually being more akin to an encyclopedia. Even with all the faults of the OSPD, thank the Good Scrabble Faerie you were born in North America!

P96. "Maven, for her part, remained predictably nonplussed." Huh, what? Maven, the cold-blooded computer, remained predictably "perplexed and bewildered"??? This sent me to my dictionaries to see if I had gone crazy somewhere along the line. All six of them define "nonplussed" in the same, old-fashioned way. But to be sure, I plugged "nonplussed" into Google, and, lo and behold, it throws the opposite definition back in your face along right with the correct one! Man, electrons are just too darn cheap. Looking further into this, here's what appears to have happened. While no American dictionaries define "nonplussed" in this opposite sense, some hoity-toity British dictionary found a few Americans who don't know what they're talking about, and had fun adding the flipped definition as a dig at moronic Americans. They label the cool, calm and collected "unperturbed" definition as "NORTH AMERICAN informal." Gee, thanks. If you dig a little further you will find this definition labeled "non-standard" in the fine print, and "non-standard" is dictionary-ese for, "Ain't really a word, folks!" But the damage has been done. John, PLEEEEEEEASE get this corrected by the second printing! This all ties in with John's musings on misused English and the "Grammar Police" back in the second chapter. Yes, IRREGARDLESS may be "in [the] dictionary" now (p8), but being "in the dictionary" nowadays does not necessarily imply the word has the dictionary's imprimatur. You'll see IRREGARDLESS is also assigned to the untouchable caste, "Non-standard". Toxic Waste! Keep Out!

There were a couple of instances of "is comprised of" being used where conventionally correct usage calls for "is composed of", or more directly, "comprises". The whole comprises the parts. The backwards usage is becoming ever more accepted (cuz dictionary makers doan wanna get involved), but I'm surprised the grammar nazis in John's family never nailed him on it. On p13 we read, "The Scrabble Brand Crossword Game, Inc., unit was comprised of a company secretary with

a couple of assistants." On p39 we read, "A good Scrabble move is comprised of two parts..."P116. "Scores of colorfully decorated... hoodies bore the name... of each team."Colorfully decorated "gray crows of Europe"? :-) Admittedly, none of my dictionaries are right up to the minute, but hoodie as an article of clothing hasn't made any of them, and I hope that's because dictionary makers agree with me that cheap, informal "-ie" constructs are definitely third-class citizens in the word world. Dictionaries don't even have CIGGIE, which has been around forever, and that is as it should be. (But a cringe-inducing -ie word for "self-photo" comes along and dictionary makers can't gobble it up fast enough??? Yuck.)P140. "...I'd read the screenplay for Hasbro to make sure that Scrabble was portrayed accurately and that there was no prurient content or violence involving a Scrabble board, tiles, or other icons of the game."Why, John, such prudishness! You let this slip right by without pausing to delve the profound question, "I mean, what is, really, after all, you know, prurient, I mean?" Are you naive enough to think that if Scrabble is removed from any prurient movie scene, prurience is going to disappear from our society? :-) (See p30.) But if it were a family picture with a Scrabble board filling the screen every few minutes loaded with words from the "notorious word list", that'd be sticking up for free speech, heeheehee?P160. "While insignificant to most Americans, [a correction to Babe Ruth's home run total would be] as exciting to [baseball statisticians] as the admission of QI to North American Scrabble was to me. I get it."Hmmm, I'm not sure I do. I think the proper baseball analogy to adding QI to Scrabble would be bringing the right field fence in to about 80 feet. And I don't doubt most of the calls John received about QI were all very excited, indeed, but maybe in a way diametrically opposite to his own exuberance?To wrap up, let me reiterate, I enjoyed this book immensely, and as much or more the second time through. If most of what I've written here is in the mode of taking exception to passages here and there, well, I can't thank John enough for providing me the launching pads to jump up on my own soap boxes. I hope some of my thoughts can themselves survive close scrutiny. And if I rambled on about everything I found interesting or touching or surprising or funny or entertaining, this book report would be many times longer -- and who would care, anyway? I have to say, though, that John's account of his Scrabble tournament experience is a classic.John, "living room players" like me and you need to stick together!

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