

MEMOIR CLASS: Russell Baker, Growing Up Chapter 10, p. 182

Baltimore: “It was common for the poorest household to contain a large dictionary, for conversation was a popular Depression pastime and Americans were passionately interested in words. Uncle Harold consulted his dictionary regularly looking for jawbreaker vocabulary to give his tales more weight.”

Arlington: On 30th Street, we had several dictionaries, and some of my most colorful memories include their use like just the other day. I was trying to change the words to “Memory,” you might remember, a song from *Cats*, the musical. In searching for one particularly rhyming word, I knew just what to do: get Dad’s rhyming dictionary! This tattered red volume is a heritage piece that I treasure like some do a love letter or grandma’s diamond ring. I can almost hear Dad turning the pages while looking for a perfect blending word for one of his often-hilarious poems.

My Mom had a huge dictionary on a stand in her sewing room/office. We knew she was using it when her Smith-corona stopped momentarily. She loved etymology, and the his of a word in that dictionary even included the year the word came into use in English. My big sister, Zan, inherited this tome, and she used it to write more than thirty books.

Then there was the other use of the dictionary which I remember most of all: My Dad was a word smith, and he also spared the rod, but taught the child. His method of “punishment” for most infractions was to use argosy of words to give us a list, often as many as ten words, to define and use in a sentence. We climbed, sometimes pounding the stairs to our rooms, and we could come back down when this task was finished. Of course, an extra part of this punishment plan included an apology to my mom. That was more difficult for me than defining the new words, for pride was well entrenched in my personality way before the new vocabulary and reluctant tears!

Today, dictionaries are part of the internet and are probably part of almost every home because of our cell phones, but I still peruses the pages of my vintage volumes and sometimes even come to the word I was looking for in the first places!

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