Popular Words Invented by Authors | Otherwords
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OgDAFxVm5tw
Transcript: https://dontveter.com/ec/newwords.pdf

You might have heard the uproar in March 2021 over the decision to stop publishing six Dr. Seuss books for racially insensitive imagery.

While this may not be a tremendous loss to literature, one of those books could claim a notable linguistic accomplishment.

If I Ran the Zoo, published in 1950, contains the first written instance of the word “nerd.”

When authors create words for a one-time usage, they’re known as nonce words.

Though it kind of sounds like “nonsense,” the word nonce is actually a cognate of “once,” as in, words to be used only once.

However, sometimes these single-usage words can pick up steam, becoming neologisms, terms that are still new and limited to certain fields.

And perhaps some of those will eventually make their way into our shared vocabulary as full-fledged words, becoming so common that we totally forget their literary origins.

I’m Dr. Erica Brozovsky and this is Otherwords!

Okay, if we’re talking about authors creating words, we have to address the 600 lb. gorilla, the Bard himself, William Shakespeare.

Bard: a person who composed and recited epic or heroic poems, often while playing the harp, lyre, or the like.

1.one of an ancient Celtic order of composers and reciters of poetry.

2.any poet.

3.**the bard,** William Shakespeare.

At one time, he was credited with inventing over 2,000 English words, though that number has dwindled in recent years.

Turns out, he was such a prolific writer that his works were just the first place many scholars had seen these words, but it’s likely many were already in common usage at the time.

For instance, "dwindle" was first seen in Henry IV Part 1.

Shakespeare’s lexical creativity was more about finding new and ingenious ways to use existing words.

He would combine them, giving us bedroom, outbreak, and cold-blooded.

He would change nouns into verbs, so gossip and elbow went from being things to actions you could do.

And he was absolutely extravagant with prefixes and suffixes, sprinkling un-’s and -able’s all over the place.

Not all of his creations caught on, but he churned out verbal innovations with such regularity, it's not surprising that we still use many today.

Well before Shakespeare, the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer, famous for his Canterbury Tales, wanted to describe the light, tremulous call an encaged bird makes as it yearns for freedom, and came up with the onomatopoeia "twitter."

700 years later, we’re the encaged birds, tweeting our takes into the void.

In 1667, John Milton published Paradise Lost, an epic poem and origin story of the ultimate arch-villain, Satan.

He envisioned Hell having a capital city, which he named Pandemonium.

The meaning has shifted since then to describe a state of chaos where all hell has broken loose, but the original, literal definition was “the place where all the demons lived.”

By the way, arch-villain is one of Shakespeare’s creations.

A couple hundred years later, Sir Walter Scott was writing his chivalric romance Ivanhoe, considered a major influence on the modern version of the Robin Hood story.

He wanted a new term for hired mercenaries--soldiers without loyalty to any banner, whose lances were free to fight for whoever could pay the most.

So he called them freelancers, and the term caught on to describe people who work job to job for different clients.

It’s definitely more colorful than the lackluster “contractor,” but still a weirdly violent term for someone who designs corporate logos.

Oh, and lackluster? Another one of Shakespeare’s.

Lewis Carroll’s poem Jabberwocky is a multitudinous sea of nonce words.

Okay, Will, we get it.

Many were created by melding two existing words together to get something that almost sounds like a word you already know.

For instance, chortle is a combination of chuckle and snort, and galumph was supposedly a triumphant gallop.

Both of these words managed to transcend Wonderland’s borders into the English dictionary.

I guess if you buy that many lottery tickets, you’re gonna win something.

When preparing his 1840 volume, The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences, Reverend William Whewell wanted a single word to refer to a practitioner of the scientific method and came up with "scientist."

Just think: if he had gone a different way, we might be calling them sciencers or sciencesmiths, or... Scientician!

Uh... Speaking of scientists, when physicist Murray Gell-Mann theorized the existence of subatomic particles in 1964, he named them quarks, inspired by a nonce word that James Joyce came up with for his 1939 novel Finnegan's Wake.

Like most of Joyce's writing, I have no idea what the original meaning was supposed to be.

In 1920, Karel Čapek wrote a science fiction play about humanoid machines constructed to perform manual tasks.

He borrowed a Czech term for forced labor, and "robot" quickly left the world of science fiction to describe real-life automated machines that work for us.

On a related note, most people think that "droid" originated in 1977's Star Wars, but its first appearance was actually in the 1952 short story "Robots of the World! Arise!" by Mari Wolf.

I don't know if this counts as a new word though, since it's really just a shortening of android, which comes from the Greek for "man-shaped."

Also, Lucasfilm trademarked the term so if another author wanted to use it, they'd have to cough up some Republic credits for it.

Moving from sci-fi to fantasy, J.R.R. Tolkien used the word tween to describe the period in a hobbit's life between childhood and adulthood, roughly 20 to 33.

Today, we use it to refer to pre-adolescence, because of its similarity to "teen."

Since teenager wasn't really popularized until the late 1950s, Tolkien was probably just shortening "between," or combining it with "twenties."

However, hobbits did live over a hundred years, so maybe the definition hasn't changed that much.

One more scientician for you! In 1976's The Selfish Gene, biologist Richard Dawkins wanted to express how culture could be shaped by a process not unlike natural selection--that ideas and thoughts could survive and replicate based on their fitness.

He needed a word for a unit of culture that could spread, so he took the Greek word for imitation and condensed it to sound like the word "gene."

Though now we mostly use this term to mean visual jokes that you post online, it originally meant any shareable idea, style or behavior, from religious beliefs, to fashion trends, to new words.

That means the word "meme" is a meme.

Like biological genetics, it can be very difficult to discern why some nonce words survived and spread while others didn't.

Why did nerd become a household word, and not its neighbors, preep, proo and nerkle?

Maybe it just sounds better, though some suspect Seuss simply stumbled on a slang for nut that was already becoming popular.

It’s impossible to know today.

Yes, Will, you can take credit for "household word."

One thing is certain . A single writer can coin a word, but they can’t make it popular.

All of us, collectively, through our behavior and interactions, get to decide what becomes a real word and what stays literary nonce-sense.