



Vulgar Tongues: An Alternative History of Slang

Max Décharné

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Slang is the language of pop culture, low culture, street culture, underground movements and secret societies; depending on your point of view, it is a badge of honor, a sign of identity or a dangerous assault on the values of polite society. Of all the vocabularies available to us, slang is the most alive, constantly evolving and—as it leaks into the mainstream and is taken up by all of us—infusing the language with a healthy dose of vitality.

Witty, energetic and informative *Vulgar Tongues* traces the many routes of slang, beginning with the thieves and prostitutes of Elizabethan London and ending with the present day, where the centuries-old terms rap and hip-hop still survive, though their meanings have changed. On the way we will meet Dr. Johnson, World War II flying aces, pickpockets, schoolchildren, hardboiled private eyes, carnival geeks and the many eccentric characters who have tried to record slang throughout its checkered past.

If you're curious about *flapdragons* and *ale passion*, the changing meanings of *punk* and *geek*, or how *fly* originated on the streets of eighteenth-century London and *square* in Masonic lodges, this is the book for you.

Vulgar Tongues: An Alternative History of Slang Details

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Nigeyb says

Vulgar Tongues: An Alternative History of English Slang is a supremely enjoyable, informative and rigorously researched trawl through the wonderful world of slang in the company of Max Décharné.

Thematic chapters take the entranced reader through the slang history of sex; prostitution; Cockneys, and other regions and countries; homosexuality; criminals; drinkers; drug fiends; music lovers; youth cults and subcultures; music; and the armed forces and services.

Max Décharné is an author, songwriter and musician. He has recorded numerous albums and singles, and eight John Peel Sessions as the singer with The Flaming Stars. A regular contributor to Mojo magazine since 1998, his books include Hardboiled Hollywood: The True Crime Stories that Inspired the Great Noir Films, King's Road, the jive-talk dictionary Straight from the Fridge, Dad: A Dictionary of Hipster Slang, and A Rocket in My Pocket: The Hipster's Guide to Rockabilly Music, a history of rockabilly music (Serpent's Tail 2010).

Vulgar Tongues: An Alternative History of English Slang was published by Serpent's Tail in November 2016....

Slang is the language of pop culture, low culture, street culture, underground movements and secret societies; depending on your point of view, it is a badge of honour, a sign of identity or a dangerous assault on the values of polite society. Of all the vocabularies available to us, slang is the most alive, constantly evolving and - as it leaks into the mainstream and is taken up by all of us - infusing the language with a healthy dose of vitality. Witty, energetic and informative, Vulgar Tongues: An Alternative History of English Slang traces the many routes of slang, beginning with the thieves and prostitutes of Elizabethan London and ending with the present day (where the centuries-old terms rap and hip-hop still survive, though their meanings have changed). On the way, we meet Dr Johnson, World War Two flying aces, pickpockets, schoolchildren, hardboiled private eyes, carnival geeks and the many eccentric characters who have tried to record slang throughout its chequered past. If you're curious about flapdragons and ale passion, the changing meanings of punk and geek, or how fly originated on the streets of eighteenth-century London and square in Masonic lodges, then this is the book for you.

By way of example, here's Max on the surprisingly long history of some seemingly modern slang....

Fly - Now associated with the hip-hop fraternity, fly – a term of approval meaning smart, aware, capable – was in use in London 200 years ago, recorded in the third edition of Francis Grose's *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1811): 'FLY. Knowing. Acquainted with another's meaning or proceeding.'

Groovy - Groovy in its modern sense comes from 1940s jazz, when a band played in the groove. Earlier, it was British slang for someone stuck in a rut, defined in Farmer and Henley's *Slang and Its Analogues* (1890): 'GROOVY, Adj. – Settled in habit; limited in mind.'

Punk - Forever associated with the music revolution of 1976, it began as a slang name for a prostitute, first recorded when Shakespeare was a boy. At the 1722 murder trial of Mary

Bolton, a witness called her a ‘nasty draggle tail’d toad, ugly Puss, and stinking Punk’.

Rap - Dr Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) listed ‘To RAP out. To utter with hasty violence.’ *Wit, Character, Folklore & Customs of the North Riding of Yorkshire* (1898), had ‘Rap, n. A friendly chat’ and ‘Rap-off, v. To speak on the spur of the moment.’

Like - Prefacing every other word with *like* sounds modern, but the beatniks were there first. In a *Popeye* comic of 1960, the sailor closes down a beat club his father opened in his cellar, prompting the latter to object ‘Popeye Don’t Dig It’ and ‘He’s Like Wasted’.

Crib - Calling a dwelling your *crib*, was not unknown in 17th-century England. Eventually it became English criminal slang for a home. Pierce Egan’s 1823 update of Francis Grose’s dictionary lists it as burglar’s terminology: ‘CRIB. A house. To crack a crib: to break open a house.’

If you love language, the changing meaning of words and colourful phrases, wordplay, euphemisms, etc. then *Vulgar Tongues: An Alternative History of English Slang* is sure to find favour. More so, if the knowledge that, say (and as mentioned above), the word “groovy” was already very old by the time it became common currency in the 1960s, having latterly been a hip jazz term of the 1940s, then rest assured this book will lace your boots, tighten your wig, and quite possibly pad your skull, as it takes you on a global, pan-cultural voyage of discovery. Bravo Max.

Now then, if only someone would write a similarly authoritative tome about Teddy Boys and Girls.

Matty Esco says

Not narrative. Not history. Barely slang. There was no etymology whatsoever. There'd be the word, its approximate definition, the 70s crime novel it was pulled out of, and an occasional dad joke. If I'd wanted to read a list of jazz patois and olde English spellings of swear words, I would've looked up one of a thousand BuzzFeed lists and saved myself two hours.

It gets 2 stars because the phrase "We're going to fist city" made me laugh. (It meant fighting, once.)

Valorie says

Décharné’s book covers the history of slang across the English-speaking world in a really interesting narrative style that makes the whole thing easy to read. Slang is separated by subject, so it’s easy to trace the history of how we’ve talked about crime or sex over time. Some chapters have more information than others, but this is a well-researched book about our more vulgar languages tendencies.

Jill Hutchinson says

If you are easily offended, this is probably not the book for you. as the author looks at the history of slang

and how it has evolved since the days of Shakespeare. I think the problem is that 95% of the entries relate to words that used to be (and in some cases still are) considered profane and have sexual connotations. Many of these words are in common use in modern everyday language and the "f" word does not cause people to gasp as it used to..... but not all slang is comprised of what were once called "dirty words". Instead it is the colorful speech oddities of groups and sub-cultures such as Cockneys, musicians, con men, beggars, and thieves and the author gives very short shrift to those phrases. Thus, the book begins to become repetitive and rather dry as the author concentrates on the many slang words for copulation, male/female body parts, and sexual preferences. Lots of quotations from books and poems which contain these words/phrases but not much original thought from the author. Frankly, I was bored with the whole thing.

Joseph Weyek says

Wow. I pretty much hated this book. Not interesting. The author tries to be funny and interesting, but he fails. He reminds me of a joke teller who begins the joke in English and delivers the punch-line in ancient Greek. Thud.

BTW: ixnay on the opeday is pig latin, not back slang or whatever the fock he calls it. He doesn't even know what pig latin is.

Wendy says

Informative and well-organized, but so very dry. I'm a word-nerd and I still kept running into whole segments of the book where nothing on the page sunk in, despite re-reading the passage several times.

Bruce Reiter says

This is a splendid romp through the use of slang. It chronicles the evolution of some of the more commonly used bits and pieces, their transport from region to region and culture to culture, changing meanings over time. Alas, published in 2017 it is already outdated. The publication of street jargon occurred primarily to alert the general public to terms being used by criminals or within the young to mask discussion of sexual events. Of particular interest to me was the author's interpretation of the "Black Power" Movement of my youth coupled with the language of soldiers in Vietnam, both occurring during my lifetime. Some of the commentary will elicit guffaws or knowing smiles. The Maori designation of the term "Whitey" as a being not destined for the stewpot because of salt content makes the book well worth the study.

Brittaina says

Pedantic, but has interesting information. The chapters are sequenced fine, but the segments within are a bit too focused on one word, with little explanation for some others that pop up.

I especially enjoyed the chapter on the '60s 'Uppermost of the Poppermost', though The Beatles are mentioned but not fully exploited.

Peter Tillman says

Hit or miss compilation for me. I didn't find much of interest until I got to the musical slang, where I found such gems as:

"The proponents of Harlem jive talk ... do not hope that courses in the lingo will ever be offered at Harvard or Columbia. Neither do they expect to learn that Mrs. Faunteen-Chauncey of the Mayfair Set addresses her English butler as 'stud hoss', and was called in reply, 'a sturdy old hen.' " -- "Original Handbook of Harlem Jive," 1944.

Bing Crosby, 1945 radio show: "Say, is it a solid fact that you guys can beat your chops, ... knock the licks out groovy as a movie, whilst jiving in a comin'-on fashion?"

Nat King Cole: "That is *precisely* the situation."

The book is due back tomorrow, so I won't get to see what other gems I might miss. If you try it, check it out from your library and browse, is my advice.

Pouting Always says

I think the book is pretty self explanatory, like the title says it's a history of slang. The book goes into what constitutes slang and the typical socialite feelings towards slang and then transitions into different slang words, dividing up the chapters loosely into different categories of words. The book traces many words to their etymology and original usage as well as their eventual acceptance and usage by groups other than the one that originally began using the word to distinguish themselves as an out group. I personally really enjoyed the book because I love getting historical context for things, and though for a lot of words I'm not sure if I buy into their original usage being the one that leads up to the slang usage because I've heard plenty of slang that's used where the stem word has nothing to do with the new meaning, it's still really interesting to read about. The book also clearly seemed well researched if a bit long. I did have to put it down a few times to take a break but I don't know how many other people really try to read non stop so this might not even be a problem for anyone else but me.

Steven says

A breezy look at English slang words, how they've developed, and how they've changed over time. The author has a background in mid-20th century music, and it shows. Many of the examples come from jazz and rock culture. But he also thoroughly examines slang related to crime, the police, the human body, prostitution, illicit drugs, alcohol, sex and the military.

Décharné is funny. He's from the UK, so much of the slang might be unfamiliar to American readers. But he does a pretty good job of covering American slang and some of the differences (and commonalities) between these countries' versions of slang.

It's more descriptive than analytical - a fun overview of the words we make up.

Bailey says

Do you love long lists of references put into prose form with very little original commentary by the author, historical context, or etymological interpretation? If so, this book is for you.

I wanted so much to like *Vulgar Tongues*. I love language. I love history. And I love slang. But I desperately wish I had cut my losses after reading the introduction. I kept hoping it would get better, but it was disappointing to the very end.

If you feel compelled to read it, here are the only (somewhat) interesting takeaways:

- Humans have always and will always find creative ways to talk about genitals and what we do with them.
- Nothing is ever as new or original as we think.

Elisabeth says

The best thing about this book is the cover. I guess I just expected way more linguistics from this book. Digressions into the music industry and the like are not what I was looking for when I picked up this book and I just wish the actual interesting explorations into slang were more numerous, detailed, and explanatory. Instead it seemed to be the author frequently drifted from the topic to show off how much he knows about certain things. Not what I came for!

Lydia Wednesday says

The subtitle says it all, "an alternative history" indeed.

The author comes across as the guy you would absolutely not want to get stuck talking to at a record/book store and/or party. The book is an attempt at a revisionist history, where somehow Britain invented everything, including Rock n' Roll. The author name drops bands right and left, and it's obnoxious to say the least. We GET it, you're a music guy. It was written by an armchair linguist who clearly wishes he was born in another decade, and he is a lot of what is problematic within the Rockabilly community. The author believes that being PC is ruining language and culture. Because somehow saying nasty things and offending people is totally cool and cultured. Slang not slurs, buddy. In short, and with slang, the author is a tool.

Here's a quick tl;dr of the book, slang comes out of music and criminal culture. Everything that was ever cool was invented in the UK, and a couple hundred years before everyone else. And since the author CLEARLY doesn't actually know what a hipster is in the current vernacular, saying the UK made it cool before it was cool is something a hipster would say. It's not nerd chic. But it's cool, bro, you're a hep cat daddio with the kids right. No mention of teen girls or any women at all. The bibliography of *Vulgar Tongues* is pretty much just crime fiction novels from the 1930s-60s and olde slang dictionaries written by olde white dudes and almost NO current academic work on the subject. Here's an actual source, by the way,

from an actual institution citing work by an actual linguist...

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-...>

I could go on with how inaccurate this book is, but I will leave you with this, do you really want to read a book about slang written by a man who thinks Meaghan Trainor is a rapper? Do you really think he'd be an authority on the subject? This book in an opinion piece masquerading as an erudite history of language. It's a dude-centric book with very little academic works to back up its claims. The title should be *Vulgar Tongues: My Opinion on the History of English Slang and Since I'm a White Dude Who Probably Owns an Excessive Amount of Obscure Vinyl Records and Reads a Lot of Old Crime Novels, I am Clearly Qualified to Speak on This Subject.*

Rob Christopher says

Breezy but well researched, this book does a "bang up job" of spotlighting the histories behind some really "fab" words and phrases.
