amok

Q: A magazine article I read recently described a baby-sitter as being unfit because she allowed the children in her care to "run amuck," which immediately made me wonder about that phrase. Any clues?

—*Doris S., Toledo, Ohio.*

Do you mean "any clues to where the children went"? I'd check the coat closet, personally. If they're not there, they're probably in the cupboard under the kitchen sink. I used to be very good at eluding my baby-sitter for hours at a time, or at least until she forgot about my feeding an entire jar of grape jam to the dog. I think the reason I don't remember any of my baby-sitters very clearly is probably that I met each of them only once.

Still, as trying as I may have been to my baby-sitters, I never actually ran amuck in the original sense of the word, and I doubt that the children in that magazine article did, either. *Amuck,* more properly spelled *amok,* comes from the Malay word *amok,* meaning "a state of murderous frenzy." In English, the word *amok* dates back to the sixteenth century and the first contacts between Europeans and the inhabitants of Malaysia. The standard story of the word is that the Malays were (as one European account of the period put it) "susceptible to bouts of

AMOK comes from the Malay word meaning "a state of murderous frenzy."

depression and drug use," which then led them to engage in murderous rampages. Anyone in the path of the person running amok, it was said, was likely to be sliced and diced with a particularly nasty native sword known as a *kris*.

One need not be overly politically correct to suspect that accounts of the *amok* phenomenon reported by Europeans may have been somewhat melodramatic and culturally biased. Nonetheless, *amok* entered English with the general meaning of "murderous frenzy" and was usually applied to animals, such as elephants, who attacked humans in the course of a rampage.

As is often the case, however, the meaning of the phrase in English was gradually diluted over the next few centuries until *running amok* became a metaphor used to describe someone who was simply out of control in some respect, and not necessarily chopping folks up. Still, you'll never catch me baby-sitting.

armed to the teeth

Q: Could you explain *armed to the teeth,* please? I remember reading this expression in a translation of the *Odyssey.* Does it refer to some form of armor that ran all the way to the gum and chopper region? Or does it mean that a warrior was so well fortified with weapons that he also held a knife or something in his mouth?

—Paul S., St. Louis, Missouri.

Until I did some research, I had always assumed that *armed to the teeth* had something to do with the knife-in-mouth school of personal armament. Like many folks, I have a dim childhood memory, gleaned from old pirate movies, of buccaneers swinging aboard a captured ship, brandishing blunderbusses in both hands, cutlasses clenched in their teeth. I don't think I can adequately convey how thrillingly illicit those images seemed to me at the time, but keep in mind that I was living in an age when one of the worst things a child could do was to run while holding a pair of scissors. Swinging on a rope while holding a sword in your mouth? Cool! No wonder those guys all wore eye patches.

But it turns out that *armed to the teeth* is just one of many uses of the phrase *to the teeth,* meaning "very fully" or "completely." *To the teeth* has been used as an equivalent for the popular *up to here* (with hand signal indicating the neck region) for quite a long time, since around the fourteenth century. You could, it seems, just as well be fed to the teeth, if you had eaten a large meal, or even, if sufficiently exasperated, be fed up to the teeth (at which point you might arm yourself to the teeth, I suppose).

It turns out that ARMED TO THE TEETH is just one of many uses of the phrase to the teeth, meaning "very fully" or "completely."

The first modern use of *armed to the teeth* was in an 1849 speech by the English industrialist and statesman Richard Cobden, who, speaking of his nation's defense budget, asked, "Is there any reason why we should be armed to the teeth?" He obviously hadn't been watching enough pirate movies.

bar

Q: My girlfriend asked me what I thought were the origins of the terms *bar exam* and *passing the bar.* After looking up *bar* to find that one definition of the word is "the railing in a courtroom that encloses the place about the judge where prisoners are stationed or where the business of the court is transacted in civil cases," I surmised that *passing the bar* referred to entering the court of law or, rather, being considered fit to enter the court of law by passing a bar examination. She, of course, disagrees, and she insists that this *bar* has something to do with *raising the bar,* that is, to allow entrance. Can you help?

—Andrew W., via the Internet.

Honestly, I don't know what gets into you folks sometimes. Any fan of Davy Crockett knows that *bar* is simply a backwoods form of *bear.* Back when our country was young and sensible, anyone wishing to become a lawyer was first required to wrestle a fierce grizzly bear. In the unlikely event that the prospective lawyer won the match, he had "passed the bar" and was admitted to practice law (and was, incidentally, often subsequently sued by the bear for infliction of emotional damage). This was such a sensible system that as of 1846 there were only three lawyers in the entire United States, and they kept pretty much to themselves.

Oh, all right, that's not exactly true (although I'd like to point out that it's never too late to institute such a system). Your supposition, that the *bar* in question is the wooden one traditionally separating the lawyers, judge, and other interested parties from the riffraff in a courtroom, is correct. *Bar* has been used in the metaphorical sense since sixteenth-century England, when a lawyer admitted to practice before the court was said to have been *called to the bar.* This same *bar,* by the way, underlies the word *barrister,* which is what the British call lawyers who appear in court (as opposed to solicitors, who merely advise clients).

The BAR in question is the wooden one traditionally separating the lawyers, judge, and other interested parties from the riffraff in a courtroom.

Incidentally, I believe your girlfriend may be a bit confused about what *raise the bar* means. The phrase actually comes from high jumping, where raising the bar makes things harder, not easier.

Big Apple

Q: Why is New York City called the *Big Apple?*

—Adele K., via the Internet.

I'd call this question one of the hardy perennials of the word-origin biz, except that it's really more of a monthly. What's especially interesting is that a majority of folks asking

about *Big Apple* do not live in New York City, which is virtually never referred to as the Big Apple by its residents. I guess this proves that advertising works. The term *Big Apple* was adopted in 1971 as the theme of an official advertising campaign aimed at luring tourists back to New York City. The ad campaign tried to recast New York, then generally perceived as noisy, dirty, and dangerous, in a more positive light by stressing the city's excitement and glamour.

Stablehands in New Orleans referred to New York racetracks as the BIG APPLE.

As to the origin of the term *Big Apple* itself, the prevailing wisdom for many years was that it was used in the 1930s, by jazz musicians in particular, but that no one knew where it first arose or how it became a synonym for New York City. Fortunately, Professor Gerald Cohen of the University of Missouri did some serious digging and uncovered use of the term *Big Apple* in the 1920s by a newspaper writer named John Fitzgerald, who wrote a horse-racing column (called "Around the Big Apple") for the *New York Morning Telegraph.* Fitzgerald's use of the term thus predated the jazzmen's *Big Apple* by about a decade.

It was still unclear where Fitzgerald got *Big Apple,* however, until Barry Popik, a remarkably persistent New York City slang historian, took up the search. Popik discovered that in 1924 Fitzgerald had written that he first heard the term from stablehands in New Orleans, who referred to New York racetracks as the Big Apple—the goal of every trainer and jockey in the horse-racing world.

Armed with the true story of *Big Apple* (and dogged determination), Popik spent the next four years trying to convince the New York City government to officially recognize Fitzgerald as the popularizer of *Big Apple.* In February 1997 he finally succeeded, and the corner of West 54th Street and Broadway, where John Fitzgerald lived for nearly thirty years, is now officially known as *Big Apple Corner.*

blackmail

Q: Please tell me what the origin of the word *blackmail* is. I have been told it has to do with freelance knights whose chain mail has turned black.

—Norman L., Franklin Square, New York.

I've never heard that theory, but it does make a certain amount of sense. So these unemployed knights, desperate for moola, became so unscrupulous that they started extorting money from people? And then their armor turned black, like a full-body mood ring? I like it. Among other things, it explains why so many lawyers wear dark gray suits.

Just kidding, of course. But the real story of *blackmail* is pretty interesting in its own right. In the first place, English now has two different *mail*s, but it used to have three. The letter kind of *mail* is rooted in the old German word *malaha* or *malha,* meaning "pouch," which at first meant "any kind of pouch or bag" but was narrowed in the seventeenth century to

mean "mail pouch." The "metal mesh armor" kind of *mail,* on the other hand, comes from the Latin *macula,* meaning "spot," referring to the holes in the mesh of chain mail armor.

Blackmail, meaning the extortion of money by the use of threats, especially threats to reveal secret or embarrassing information, comes from a third, now obsolete, sense of *mail,* meaning "payment" or "tax." This *mail* came originally from the Old Norse word *mal,* meaning "agreement," and exists as a word today only in Scots (the national language of Scotland) and some dialects in northern England.

Not surprisingly, the first blackmailers were corrupt politicians, Scottish chieftains who demanded protection money from local farmers. The farmers risked having their crops destroyed if they refused. The mail, or payment, was said to be black probably because the color black had long been associated with darkness and evil, but it might also have been because payment was usually made in livestock, rather than in silver, which was known as *white money.*

The "give me money or I'll burn down your farm" kind of *blackmail* first appeared in English around 1552, but by the early 1800s we were using *blackmail* to mean just about any sort of extortion, especially threatening to reveal secrets.

The first BLACKMAILERS were corrupt politicians.

blizzard

Q: Can you tell me where the word *blizzard* comes from? My English teacher thinks it might have been a German word.

—Amy A., via the Internet.

Funny you should ask. Actually, I must admit that I picked this question to answer because I am, as I write, firmly snowbound in a farmhouse in rural Ohio. At first the thought of not being able to go anywhere bothered me, but then I remembered that there's really nowhere to go out here anyway. So now I just sit by the window and watch the coyotes circling the house as darkness falls. I think they're after my grilled cheese sandwich.

This snowstorm isn't a true blizzard, the official criteria for which include sustained high winds and low visibility, but it certainly has given me the impetus to investigate the origins of *blizzard.* There seem to be a variety of theories about *blizzard,* many of which (the theories, not the storms) come from Iowa.

It turns out that Iowa more or less claims to have invented the word *blizzard,* a boast for which there is some evidence. The earliest known use of *blizzard* to describe a snowstorm was in the *Estherville (Iowa) Northern Vindicator* newspaper in April 1870. To hear the folks in Estherville tell it, a local character named Lightnin' Ellis coined the term, which rapidly spread around Iowa and then throughout the entire United States.

But (there's always a *but,* isn't there?) while the application of *blizzard* to a severe snowstorm may have been an Iowa invention, the word itself had already been around for quite a few years, meaning "a sharp blow or shot." Colonel Davy Crockett used *blizzard* in the 1830s to mean both a blast from a shotgun and a verbal outburst, and the term was probably fairly well known even earlier. The use of *blizzard* to describe a violent storm was, it would seem, more of a logical extension than a true invention.

Iowa more or less claims to have invented the word BLIZZARD.

So where did *blizzard* come from in the first place? No one knows for sure, but it may well be onomatopoeic, designed to sound like the thing itself. After all, *blizzard* does sound like a blast of something, whether bullets, words, or blinding snow.

blockbuster

Q: My son (age six) and I were discussing where the word *blockbuster* came from because he and his mother were making a similar inquiry about *grapefruit* earlier in the day. I told him that I thought it was when the movie industry had a movie that was a smash, a great many people would gather at the movie houses and would crowd the sidewalks and maybe encompass an entire block around the theater. Would you please help us with this? —*Louis I., via the Internet.*

O.K., although I'm not entirely clear on the status of that *grapefruit* business. Did your son and his mother ever get an answer to their question? If not, tell them that grapefruit are called that because they grow in bunches, like grapes. If you or your son's mother went ahead and made up some other answer, you're on your own.

Your theory about *blockbuster* does make a certain amount of sense, since the term is almost always used today to describe a motion picture (or, less frequently, a novel or play) that becomes a "hot ticket." And movie fans certainly do line up around the block (or worse, camp out on the sidewalk for days) in search of tickets to such blockbusters.

The term arose during World War II as Royal Air Force slang for an extremely large type of bomb.

The actual origin of *blockbuster,* however, is a bit grimmer than just another lame Hollywood schlockfest. The term arose during World War II as Royal Air Force slang for an extremely large type of bomb, weighing as much as eight thousand pounds, so powerful that it was capable of destroying an entire city block. After the war ended, *blockbuster* was appropriated in the 1950s by the advertising industry, who added it to their arsenal of superlatives alongside *astounding, incredible,* and *revolutionary.*

bloviate

Q: Help! For years I have been using the verb *bloviate* in reference to speaking in an overblown, self-important

If You Can't Say Something Nice, Say It Nicely.

As soon as human beings began to use language to communicate what they meant, they began to look for ways to disguise the meaning of what they said, or at least to soften the impact of their speech by avoiding words that a listener might find offensive or hurtful. *Euphemism* (from the Greek word meaning "to speak pleasantly") is the term for not saying what you mean, and over the centuries English has developed thousands of euphemisms, delicate stand-ins for direct and honest speech. Not surprisingly, euphemisms tend to be employed when the subject involves one of life's great anxieties: birth, death, sex, religion, wealth, poverty, and assorted bodily functions. Euphemisms also tend to reflect the public morals of particular times and places, and nothing sounds sillier to our modern ears than the taboos and euphemisms of a bygone age.

But the twentieth century will also be known for coining its share of ludicrous howlers that fool no one today and will supply the linguistic anthropologists of the future with hours of amusement. A brief sampling of the twentieth century's greatest weasel words and phrases.

associate: Low-paid clerk in a chain store such as Kmart or RadioShack.

away from his/her desk: Doesn't like you, won't talk to you, and wishes you'd go away. An important late-twentieth-century advance in telephone etiquette.

crowd management team: Riot squad.

culturally deprived: Raised in poverty, presumably without access to the opera.

efficiency: Tiny apartment without a real kitchen. A real-estate term justifiable only by the argument that it is "efficient" to be able to cook dinner without leaving the living room.

effluent: Toxic crud, most often industrial waste that has just been dumped into a previously clean river.

explicit: Pornographic.

frank exchange of views: Shouted threats.

loss prevention: Surveillance of customers (and often of "associates" as well, see above) in a store in order to prevent "inventory shrinkage" (theft).

no outlet: What replaced DEAD END on street signs.

poorly buffered precipitation: Acid rain. A term invented by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 1982 to replace the dangerously clear term *acid rain* in official documents.

preowned: Used.

questionable: Blatantly illegal, immoral, and/or unethical.

sampling: Stealing the work (usually musical) of other artists, mangling it, and passing it off as your own.

travel center: Truck stop.

One of the most famous practitioners of public BLOVIATION was President Warren G. Harding.

manner. Someone asked me about it the other day, and I went to the dictionary for a precise definition and *couldn't find it!* Panicked, I checked at least four other dictionaries (including two slang dictionaries, in case it was one of those humorous pseudoacademic words, like *absquatulate,* only based on *blow* instead of *squat*)—*no luck!* Is it true—does one of my favorite words not really exist? Have you ever heard or read it before? I couldn't have just imagined this, could I? I write from the precipice of madness. Pull me back.

—J. M., via the Internet.

Consider yourself pulled back from the precipice. You are not nuts—*bloviate* does indeed exist, and it means exactly what you thought it did. You've also discovered the same thing that I did when I went looking for *bloviate* late last year—most major dictionaries do not list the word. One that does is *Webster's Third New International Dictionary,* which defines *bloviate* as "to orate verbosely and windily," though I'm sure the term could be applied to writing as well.

You have even (and I hope you're not too disappointed) hit on the origin of *bloviate.* According to *Slang and Its Analogues,* a dictionary of British and American slang, published in seven volumes between 1890 and 1904, *bloviate* is (or was) American slang dating back to the mid–nineteenth century and probably arose as a fanciful variant of the slang term *to blow,* meaning "to boast."

One of the most famous practitioners of public bloviation was President Warren G. Harding, whose turgid prose prompted H. L. Mencken to note: "He writes the worst English that I have ever encountered. It reminds me of a string of wet sponges; it reminds me of tattered washing on the line; it reminds me of stale bean soup, of college yells, of dogs barking idiotically through endless nights. It is so bad that a sort of grandeur creeps into it. It drags itself out of the dark abysm . . . of pish, and crawls insanely up the topmost pinnacle of posh. It is rumble and bumble. It is flap and doodle. It is balder and dash." Now, *that's* bloviation!

bobby

Q: What is the origin of the word *bobby,* for a London policeman, and *beefeater,* for a Tower of London guard?

—T. B., via the Internet.

Nope. It's not going to work, pal. You're going to have to visit England for yourself, whether you want to or not, and you'll have plenty of opportunity to ask the bobbies and beefeaters in person when you get there. Why, just standing around waiting to see the changing of the guard at Buckingwhatsis Palace will provide you with twelve or thirteen hours to research all sorts of quaint English terms, not to mention lots of quaint

"Cheese it, here come the Roberts!" just didn't cut it, slangwise.

English people pressed right up against you who may actually know the answers. Later on, you can repair to the local pub and hoist a few pints with your new mates whilst (they talk like that over there) pondering the future of the country that invented a dish called *toad in the hole.* Have a nice time.

Oh, all right, I guess I'd better answer the question. *Bobby* as slang for any police officer (not just in London) is an allusion to Sir Robert Peel, home secretary in 1829, when the Metropolitan Police Act was passed, creating the modern English police force. Sir Robert also served as the inspiration for several other slang terms for coppers, among which were *peeler,* which is still heard in Ireland, and the now obsolete *Robert.* I guess "Cheese it, here come the Roberts!" just didn't cut it, slangwise.

Beefeaters are the guards at the Tower of London, known for their elaborate uniforms, which they have been wearing since the fifteenth century. I'm going to let you folks make up your own joke there. Anyway, opinions vary as to why they're called beefeaters, but the most likely explanation is quite literal. In the seventeenth century, *beef-eater* was a derogatory term for a servant who was well fed (by no means a certainty in those days), but a menial servant nonetheless. Nowadays, of course, even the lowliest wage slave can afford a Big Mac, so the term has lost its contemptuous sting, and beefeaters have become a treasured symbol of Britain's enduring grandeur. Incidentally, if you happen to actually meet a beefeater on your trip, please ask him what toad in the hole is.

Bob's your uncle

Q: I'm enclosing an article from *New York* magazine about a shop that recently opened in Manhattan called Bob's Your Uncle, the name of which is also evidently a common British expression. The writer of the article asked "ten different Brits" what the expression means and got ten different answers, ranging from "anything's possible" to "there you are." I'm hoping you can shed a little light on the question and, while you're at it, tell us who Bob is. —*Kathy M., New York.*

I'm looking at the clipping you sent along and coming to the conclusion that we have far bigger problems around here than figuring out who Bob might be. According to the author, Bob's Your Uncle (the store) specializes in "unlikely stuff put together in unusual ways"—specifically, "shirts on lamps, steel mesh on pillows, and pot scrubbers on picture frames." This sounds a great deal like the aftermath of some of the parties I threw in my youth. I never suspected there was a market for that mess. Does Martha Stewart know this is going on?

A popular sarcastic comment applied to any situation where the outcome was preordained by favoritism.

In any case, it is somewhat odd that "ten different Brits" didn't at least know what the phrase means, since *Bob's your uncle* is quintessential British slang, a way of saying "you're all set" or "you've got it made."