Common Phrases...and the Amazing Stories Behind Them

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[Review]

Reviewed by Lizzy Walker

Common Phrases...and the Amazing Stories Behind Them
Max Cryer
978-0-8389-1097-9, paperback
319 pages, $18.00

In Max Cryer's Common Phrases...and the Amazing Stories Behind Them, the author discusses the history of some of the most used phrases in the English language. He answers the common question, "Who said it first?" (7). Part of Cryer's reason for writing this book is based on the fact that "the originators of many of our most useful second-hand remarks go uncredited" (7). He gives credit where credit is due (though, sadly, this phrase is left out of the book).

The book's value lies in its trivia and in Cryer's plain, concise writing. It is clearly for the general user as he avoids hifalutin terms, but nor does he condescend by writing too simply. Anyone from the language buff to the college professor can find value in the pages of this book.

Cryer delivers a short and sweet explanation of some phrases while spending more time on others. The book reads quickly from cover to cover, or it can be used for quick reference to learn about a specific phrase. The phrases range from the serious ("Your country needs you," 313), to the amusing ("I have a cunning plan," 142; "Nudge-nudge, wink-wink, say no more," 205) to the misquoted ("I can see Russia from my house," 137), to the amended ("Far from the madding crowd," 96). Cryer also includes quotes that are incorrectly attributed, such as Jacque Rousseau's statement, "Let them eat cake," that is now commonly attributed to Marie Antoinette. The afterword, "Shakespeare" by Bernard Levin, is the perfect "last word" (315) for Cryer's book. It is a poem that includes a large number of quotes penned by the Bard that we hear almost on a daily basis.

Cryer has written several books concerning phrases and their origins, as well as books on love songs and the legends behind them. He has a background in the entertainment industry, and has held many positions in the entertainment and media fields including actor, recording artist, radio show host and producer (for more about him, see http://www.speakers.co.nz/maxcryer.html).

This book is worth purchasing for any library collection. However, due to its generalist nature, it would perhaps best fit into the general collection rather than in reference. The cost, $18.00, is more than reasonable for this paperback edition.

Lizzy Walker is currently working on her MLIS with the University of North Texas SWIM cohort and enjoying every minute of it.
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