

Old words that still pack a punch

by Sabine Eiche

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Many years ago, I was research assistant to a famous American journalist who was writing a book about art. Being very naïve, I dared to criticize his style. But only once. What a finger-wagging I got. And I was told in no uncertain terms to stop being so pernickety.

I've long forgotten how mortified I felt at being reprimanded. All I remember now is that wonderful word pernickety. Originating in Scotland in the early 19th century, it means fussy, overly precise. For me, pernickety arouses memories of an era when life moved at a human pace, when we had time to be nitpicking.

Today's accelerated pace can easily overburden us with stress. People have different ways of relieving the pressure. Some vent their feelings by muttering a few choice words. Too often, they are tiresome four-letter expletives. Whenever I hear them, I want to hurl those obscenities to the bowels of the earth and replace them with some vibrant words that have long served us well.

My mother, when riled, had recourse to a handful of expressive terms. Knucklehead was one of her favourites. She used it most often when behind the wheel. Knucklehead started out in 1869 as the name for a component of a mechanical coupling device, but by 1890 it referred to a person behaving stupidly.

In fact, there's a range of words describing people whose actions or behaviour exasperate us. Nincompoop, meaning a fool, has been around at least

since 1676. Noodle, which the attentive listener will have heard on “Downton Abbey,” has a similar connotation and is first recorded in 1753; noodledom refers to noodles collectively.

Other words allude to the thick-headedness of someone acting foolishly. Blockhead, popular in the 16th century, has as its source the wooden head used by wig-makers and hatters. Numskull, in use since the early 18th century, appealed to Dickens – remember Sir Arrogant Numskull in “Bleak House”? The early 20th century gave us nitwit, which stresses the silliness of a foolish person.

People talking nonsense often goad us into retaliating with a strong remark. For anyone tired of the vulgar slang “bs,” there’s an arsenal of words ready to be fired off. Fiddle-faddle is probably the oldest, dating back to 1577. It means trifling talk and is akin to fiddlesticks. Balderdash has been known since Shakespeare’s day, when it was applied to a jumbled mixture of liquids, like milk and beer. In the later 17th century, balderdash came to signify a senseless jumble of words. Persiflage, from the French “persifler,” to banter, was introduced in 1757 for frivolous talk. Flummery, meaning empty trifling, appeared around the same time. Taradiddle was coined at the end of the 18th century to refer to pretentious nonsense.

It’s a good idea to have an oath ready for when you’re seriously provoked. But instead of those monotonous profanities, why not try “Malediction!” (15th century) or – my favourite – “Blastation!” (18th century)?

Are you flummoxed or nonplussed (confused, perplexed) by what you’ve just read? Well, here’s something that may really flabbergast (astonish) you – why don’t we start a Slow Word movement, along the lines of Slow Food and Slow Money? Or am I being too pernickety once again?