

Reading Guide

Splendiferous Speech: How Early Americans Pioneered Their Own Brand of English by Rosemarie Ostler

- 1) The prologue describes features of “American talk” that include real-world metaphors (like *pull up stakes* and *save someone’s bacon*), exaggerated tall talk, and enthusiastic adoption of slang and new word inventions. Have you ever noticed those features of the language? What would you say makes American English distinctive?
- 2) Chapter 2 describes various ways in which American English had grown away from its British counterpart by the time of the Revolution, including changes in pronunciation and meanings, new word adoptions, and contributions from other languages. How different did that make the two languages? Do you think any of these processes are still going on?
- 3) British writers and critics began attacking Americanisms as early as the seventeenth century. What were their main complaints? Do their critiques of American English make sense to you?
- 4) Noah Webster wrote two dictionaries of American English, one in 1806 and a much larger version in 1828. What were his aims in writing these books? How important do you think his dictionaries were to the evolution of American English?
- 5) What were the main conduits for adding words and expressions to the American language in the nineteenth century? Why do you think those areas of the culture were especially fruitful for language creation?
- 6) What motivated John Russell Bartlett to write the *Dictionary of Americanisms*? What made his dictionary different from previous collections of American words? How important would you say it is to preserve popular slang and casual vocabulary such as Bartlett collected?
- 7) Bartlett produced four editions of his dictionary. How were they different from each other? Did you learn anything new or surprising about American language and culture from reading about the types of words and expressions found in the various editions?
- 8) Which American words and word histories discussed in this book most surprised or intrigued you? Do you have any favorite words or expressions from the American past? Which current words and expressions do you think deserve to be collected in a future dictionary of Americanisms?