

## CHAPTER 1

# Animal Words

It's a blessing to have a child at home. As a parent, I strive to answer my daughter Ananya's incessant questions about the moon and earthworms and clouds and trees and bears as truthfully as I can. Our investigations into these seemingly mundane matters often reveal insights that are learning experiences for both of us. But there are times when my thoughts are elsewhere and I simply answer the question "Why?" with, "Because that's how God made them." I didn't know the joke was on me until the evening I found the corner of our living room wall scribbled with bright shades of crayons. When questioned why we had that mural on the wall, she simply replied, "Because that's how God made it."

Well, if we were to ask why a crab moves crabwise or sideways, that'd be a pretty good answer: Because that's how God (or nature, depending on how your beliefs run) made crabs. Because that's how their legs bend. That's how their muscles flex. That's how they've adapted. That's how they survive as a species. And that's how we got a synonym for the word *sideways* in our dictionary. If we were to look up the term *humanwise* in a crab's dictionary, chances are it would mean *sideways*.

Here are a few words derived from animals (the only animal-based products we use around here).

**crabwise** (KRAB-wyz)

*adjective* 1. Sideways. 2. In a cautious or roundabout manner.

From the sideways movement of crabs. Also see *cancrine* (chapter 31).

- And then in a true action-film manner, the hero began moving *crabwise* along the wall while scanning the alley for the villain.

**testudinate** (te-STOOD-in-ayt), also **testudinal** or **testudinarian**

*adjective* 1. Slow-moving, like a turtle. 2. Curved like the carapace (shell) of a turtle; vaulted.

*noun* A turtle.

From Late Latin *testudinatus*, from Latin *testudo* (tortoise).

- “I kinda find his slow pace and curved back alluring,” the young fashion model fawned about the *testudinate* geriatric who just happened to be an oil magnate as well.

**Test U Do?**

In ancient Rome, on certain occasions when the legionaries were under attack, they would clump together and hold their shields outward, with the central men holding their shields above their heads. In this way the shields acted like a shell around the cohort, and the name of this formation was *testudo*.

—Julie Murdoch, *South Perth, Australia*

**gadfly** (GAD-fly)

*noun* 1. One who persistently annoys or one who prods into action. 2. Any of the various types of flies that bite livestock.

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Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.

—LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, philosopher (1889–1951)

From *gad* (a goad for cattle), from Middle English, from Old Norse *gaddr*.

- The newspaper columnist saw himself as a public *gadfly*, keeping politicians honest and running critical articles about them when they weren't.

**kangaroo court** (kang-guh-ROO kort)

*noun* A mock court set up with disregard to proper procedure to deliver a judgment arrived at in advance.

From the Old West to the Spanish Inquisition to the Salem Witch Trials, kangaroo courts have made their appearances throughout history. While theories abound regarding the origin of this expression, lexicographers haven't found a convincing proof of one or another, and its derivation can be tagged with the succinct "origin unknown." But that doesn't stop us from speculating. Some believe it comes from the animal itself—a funny-looking creature that bounces around without appearing to achieve anything. Then some think it is so named because it jumps to conclusions. According to one line of thought, the British didn't respect the Australian penal colony enough to give them due process of law, and with that legacy we name it so. Or maybe it is because this setup describes courts whose opinions wander "all over the place"—opinions that change so much from case to case that the court precedent "bounces" like this member of the marsupial family. Others surmise that the term originated from the Gold Rush era involving the trial of some Aussie miners.

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Poetry is a deal of joy and pain and wonder,  
with a dash of the dictionary.

—KAHLIL GIBRAN, mystic, poet, playwright, and artist (1883–1931)

### Jumping to Conclusions

I have known, from youthful days in Tennessee, a kangaroo court to be one which sets its own rules of procedure, and more specifically one in which the plaintiff and the defendant can find themselves in switched positions with the plaintiff being found guilty and the defendant innocent, and not necessarily of the initial charge.

—R. David Cox, *Galax, Virginia*

### waspish (WOS-pish)

*adjective* 1. Like a wasp, in behavior (stinging) or in form (slender build). 2. Easily annoyed; irascible; petulant. 3. Of or pertaining to a WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant).

From *wasp*, from Middle English *waspe*, from Old English *waesp*, from *waeps*.

- When she called him *waspish* in her most charming voice, the cranky, lean fellow didn't know what attribute of his she found so alluring.

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He is a hard man who is only just, and a sad one who is only wise.

—VOLTAIRE, philosopher (1694–1778)