Episode 104: Words the Vikings Gave Us, with Grace Tierney

**Mark:** [00:00:00] Welcome to the Endless Knot podcast

**Aven:** where the more we know

**Mark:** the more we want to find out

**Aven:** Tracing serendipitous connections through our lives

**Mark:** and across disciplines.

**Aven:** Hi, I'm Aven,

**Mark:** And I'm Mark.

**Aven:** And today we're talking about Vikings. Woo. We are in fact going to be talking about Vikings with the author Grace Tierney, who has a new book out about them. Grace Tierney is a columnist, author and blogger writing on Ireland's coast. She blogs about unusual words at wordfoolery.wordpress.com, tweets @wordfoolery, and serializes contemporary comic fiction at Chanillo.com.

**Mark:** Her other books about words include How to Get Your Name in the Dictionary, the extraordinary lives of those who gave their names as eponyms to English, and Words the Sea Gave Us, nautical nouns from fishermen pirates and explorers. [00:01:00] She also broadcasts a monthly slot about the history of words on LMFM.

**Aven:** Today, we're going to talk to her about her newest book, Words the Vikings Gave Us.

**Mark:** Arrr. I don't know, that's what Vikings sound like.

**Aven:** Sure. So let's turn to that interview now.

 So hi Grace! Thank you so much for joining us.

**Mark:** Welcome!

**Grace:** Hi, thank you very much for having me. It's lovely to be here.

**Aven:** So I think we'll start off with our traditional first question and I'll give that to Mark.

**Mark:** Yeah, I mean, we're always interested in, connections. And of course, talking about etymology etymologies are always inherently connected. So we'll get into that later. But we're always curious if you found any surprising connections between your work, your research, your writing, other interests in your life, other things that you do, that draw together, what we're going to talk about today just sort of something surprising.

**Grace:** It's a good question. And I like the [00:02:00] fact that you focus on the connections. Cause that's certainly something that I come across all the time with etymology. I think Irish people are slightly obsessed with unexpected connections. So your first conversation with an Irish person is probably going to be over a cup of tea.

Because you have to drink tea, I actually don't and my mother-in-law hates me for it, but then. They like to make that connection and they will keep going until they find it because we all believe that we either know or are related to everybody else on the island, which is often true, I have to tell you. So you'll keep chatting and you'll discover that your second cousin lived in the same village as this person or sat beside them in primary school or your uncle's best friend was their best man or just the most bizarre connections in life. So I, I picked an Irish connection, but not a familial one, exactly. Because I'm the sort of sad person that reads dictionaries. I suspect I might be talking to another couple that might be like that. yeah,deny everything. Well, certainly in etymological, you know, in [00:03:00] these circles, it's fine, but not in real life.

People think you're strange. So I was reading the dictionary of Hiberno English, Dr. Terence Dolan, I think, edited it, but lots of contributors, quite recently, because I thought I'd gen up on my Hiberno English. So Hiberno English is the type of English, which is spoken in Ireland. So we have slightly different grammatical structures and we've inherited a lot of words from Gaelic.

And then there's some English words that have kind of come into Irish usage but have sort of drifted away in mainstream, in mainland UK, but we've retained them or twisted them in some way. So it's a good rate if you're into your dictionaries. But I found one in which I had literally never heard used, and I was fascinated by it.

So I went off to research it for my blog. And it was glimmerman. So the background on that, 'glim' joins English via Dutch and originates in proto Germanic. And originally came in the 1400s, meaning bright, but later adjusted to actually mean kind of dim or flickering light. But I was kinda like, well, what on earth would a glimmer man [00:04:00] do or be? So I got stuck into that and discovered that it was the name given to two men who patrolled the streets of Dublin during World War II, which in Ireland was called the Emergency because we weren't combatants, we're a neutral country. But they were enforcing a rationing of gas supplies, which was something that I don't believe happened elsewhere.

So basically you could only use your gas to heat ,cook, or light your home during particular hours, but Irish people and their cup of tea were quite tempted to use the last few drags of gas molecules out of the pipes in their homes to get just enough to boil a cup for a cup of tea. Except the problem was that this was A) against the rules because you were cheating the rationing, but B) it was actually quite dangerous as well. So they instituted these glimmer men who would patrol the streets. And if they caught you using the gas, you would actually be cut off from the supply entirely. And people were terrified of them. And after this a few people commented back and they sort of, they remembered their parents talking about being terrified of glimmer men, and [00:05:00] if they came into an area, the word would go round all the houses going, oh no, the glimmermen are coming. But in researching it I discovered the link to the Dublin gas company, because that's who they actually worked for and immediately was much more interested because the closest thing my family has to a family business is the Dublin gas company.

Sadly, we don't own it. It's now been sold anyway, it was a Victorian company, but my grandfather worked there. My uncle worked there, he met his wife there. And in fact, their first date was at a gasometer, you know, those big gas storage tanks, but they're beautiful structures. Yes. That's where he brought her for the first date and she still married him. And, and one of my cousins worked there as well. So discovering that I had a link to the glimmermen was actually just a really nice family connection.

**Aven:** So you did manage to bring it back around to family, actually. Yeah, exactly. So you, in fact, sat down, had a cup of tea or metaphorically with the word and found a family connection is what you're saying.

**Grace:** Exactly. Exactly. I, you know, and I [00:06:00] probably would have boiled my kettle using a bit of gas. So, you know, it all comes together.

**Aven:** That is very cool. That is a good word. It's too bad. It was a scary person because glimmerman sounds very sweet, doesn't it.

**Grace:** Honestly, it sounds like something, you know, from a fantasy novel, but no, apparently not

**Aven:** Yeah, as Mark said earlier, that's the kind of fun rabbit holes that you end up going down when you do these sorts of, of looking into a word that seems fairly straightforward in the sense that you knew where glimmer came from, and yet it brings you into a whole historical piece.

And, I think that's why we all love etymology. Right?

**Grace:** I think so. I think that's what gets you hooked anyway, and then you can't escape.

**Aven:** Yeah. So on that note, I know you have a blog. We'll get to the book in a moment, but, I know that you have a blog, Wordfoolery, and that is obviously all about words and interesting etymologies and connections. Where did that interest start? Why is this a particular interest of yours? Has it always been.

**Grace:** I, I'm not sure that it has always been, but I have [00:07:00] always liked words.

And I was a big reader as a child. I think that's where most of us get started. Both my parents are huge crossword geeks and, I have in the past been accused of eating the dictionary, but in fact, I just read them. But when I was a teenager, I studied a few different languages in schools.

So we, have to do English at well, sorry. English is my native language, my mother tongue, but we, we all study Irish Gaelicas well as well. And then we typically take one or two foreign languages too. So I had French and German as well. But in the Irish class, I did struggle a bit with that. It's not the easiest language in the world, in my opinion. Although there's plenty of fluent speakers, but we had a tiny section, for our final exams when we were going to be 18 and graduating from school, heading off to whatever we do next in life. And, they had this small section, which was only worth about 5% on the exam called Stair na Teanga. So that's history of the language.

And I went "ooh, history" cause I liked history already. And I thought I could do this. I don't have to learn too many words [00:08:00] for this, I'll be able to manage. So when you talk about Proto Indo-European, I have to really struggle to say that because to me that's Ind Eorpacha, which is it as Gaelige. So I kind of learned about etomology in Irish, which is bizarre because I don't particularly cover Irish words on the blog. Rarely there might be a bit of slang or something like that, that I find interesting, but usually it's English language words, and unusual ones that I try to focus on, but it gave me a sort of a background. Oh, so there is this history of language, that sounds kind of interesting. And once you've noticed it once, and you're studying a few foreign languages, you start seeing the connections unless you're completely blind to them.

And because I had an interest in history that sort of built over time, so somebody would tell me about the history of the word "quiz". And I'd be like, well, that's very interesting. Or, you know, you'd just hear bits and pieces and learn things as you go along. So when it came to me wanting to dabble into blogging, just a fairly new technology, 2009.

And I just wanted to [00:09:00] try it out, but all the writers I knew were writing about writing and I felt that was possibly a little bit boring. Now it works for them. And there's some great writer blogs out there, but I didn't want to talk about my writing. I wanted to talk about something else and I thought, well, what am I actually interested in?

What should I talk about? And I picked etymology somewhat at random, and I haven't really managed to escape since. So what's, what's been a blog and it has now finally gotten, you know, a bit more organized, and a bit more regular. So that's every Monday there will be a word there come hell or high water.

I developed a few series on the blog, so I like, I have an interest in nautical things. I live beside the sea and always have done

So I developed a series of nautical words, and then I became quite interested in words that were named after people. So the classic Irish one is captain Boycott was a land agent who was boycotted in Ireland and that gives us boycott.

So we're all quite proud of that when we all learn that one in school. And I thought, oh, that's quite interesting. Are there other people like that? So [00:10:00] when I had the couple of series going then I gradually accumulated a few blog posts. Well, there's quite a lot written there. I've put a lot of work into it.

Maybe I should make a book. And that's how the first book came about, which is all about eponyms, it was "How to get your name in the dictionary". that sort of went okay. And then I thought I should really do another one of these. I went with nautical words because I had the series going, but when it came to the Viking one, it was much more that I had stumbled across a lot of Viking connections to nautical words, because they were amazing navigators and early boat builders. And as a result, they got their hands on a lot of the English words for nautical things. So your rudder, and starboard these are all Viking words. I went 'oh, this Old Norse thing sounds kind of interesting' and it grew out of that.

So it's always sort of just being whatever has sparked my interest and whatever I feel like writing, which may not be the best way to pick a topic for a book, because it does take you sort of a year and a half to two years to get a book [00:11:00] out. And the way I do it, I don't know, at the beginning, whether I have enough words to make into a book, because as I'm sure you've discovered during your own podcast, that you will occasionally go, oh, that word sounds really interesting.

There must be a great history behind that and you look it up and it's a two sentence explanation with no particular history as like, oh, that one can't go in the book, nobody's going to be interested. And then another one, which could be really straightforward and simple and short has loads of information behind it.

So you don't really know until you have the thing finished. But yeah, that's how I got into my Vikings. I've finished that one now and it's out in the world and I'm currently working on Christmas words, which is very broad and has loads of great stories. And it's, I'm actually delighted that I picked that topic, but you never really know until you get stuck in.

**Aven:** Yeah.

**Mark:** Yeah. And, and I mean, I think one of the interesting things, about this approach that you've taken, with this kind of series, is that you sort of organize them into [00:12:00] kind of thematic groupings, which allows you to not only give the etymology of the word, but to give a whole bunch of context. and people love stories about Vikings. So people are fascinated by, this culture. so you get kind of two interesting things, at the same time,

**Grace:** This is it, the old two for the price of one marketing deal. I like it. I should get you to write my blurbs from now on.

Yeah, no, but it's true because very much for me, although the linguistics and the etymology are important, I'm much more about the story. I like the history, the unusual person that has a strange story that connects to a word, or how a word changed a little bit of history or what it tells us about society at the time.

I mean, I liked that a lot in, in the Viking book because it gave a real contrast between the Anglo-Saxon societal approach to women, for example, versus the Viking version. And I can't help wondering about the conflict that that must have caused between the two societies when a) they were invading each other.

[00:13:00] Well, primarily the Vikings invading the Anglo-Saxons, but then when they lived side by side and under the same rulers, I just have this vision in my head of there's this Anglo-Saxon lady, who's looking at the Viking guy and how he's treating his wife and going, I think I'll get me one of those because they did intermarry significantly.

And that had its effect on the language as well. And I can tell why, because those Vikings, they had a few moves. They really did.

**Aven:** They did like to comb their hair after all

**Grace:** They did. And they weren't adverse to taking a bath either. So like, they've got to have been better that the locals,

**Aven:** that actually is a good bridge to the question that, you know, you do deal with in the book, but I think is worth talking a little bit about is how the words, how these Viking words came into English. What are the basic time periods? What are the vectors?

Because obviously the picture of, and I know we all know what is wrong with this picture, but the picture of the Vikings as invaders who come raid and go home that doesn't leave a lot of words [00:14:00] behind. That's not a lot of cultural interchange going on in that particular scenario. So what were the ways that Viking words came into English?

And, at what times?

**Grace:** One of my friends did joke when I said the next book was going to be about Vikings. And they said the only words that the Vikings gave us was "help" and "run away". They weren't entirely wrong. They didn't actually give us either of those words, unfortunately, it would be so funny if they had. Yeah, I, well, I lay the blame firmly at the door of the monks, which is perhaps a little unfair because they were Irish.

I should be sticking up for them more, but to a large extent, they were the ones that recorded the history at the time. And I do mention that the Roman empire gets better press because they wrote their own histories. They had their own historians. Whereas the Vikings didn't, well, they had the Icelandic sagas, but for a long time, people thought they were just made up.

Increasingly there seems to be a lot more fact behind those but generally speaking the stories were, oh, they've come, they've [00:15:00] destroyed our monastery, they've taken all our gold. Well, more importantly, they've taken our religious gold, which of course meant nothing to the Vikings. They just saw shiny and went, we'll be having that.

they enslaved the poor old monks, which was not a good situation to be in at all. So they, you know, they weren't all good. I'm not excusing them for everything. I did find out a few nasty things about them as well, and kind of went now that's not okay. But ultimately over time they did settle because that was really what they wanted to do.

They were farmers effectively on summer raiding trips. Now the trips got longer over, over the centuries. So they were basically at it from about 750 to 1066. That's kind of the classic Viking period. And you're talking Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. but the range of how far they go and what they actually do when they land in the different places is quite interesting.

So I have my little cheat sheet map beside me, which is colored basically green and orange. And the green is all the places that they raided, but then subsequently settled. And that's basically [00:16:00] Ireland right across to Russia. Obviously you've got your Scandinavian countries, but it's down through France and even to Sicily and the south of Italy.

But then you look at the places that they just raided, you know, took what they could get or did a bit of work. You know, they were body guards for the emperor of, Constantinople, for example, And it's right down to Morocco and Algeria and across to Turkey, these guys went everywhere. They were totally fearless and they weren't in the biggest of boats. Now they were well-made boats.

And they were great because they could go up rivers as well as do coastal stuff. And they developed their navigation. So they were able to go right across to Vineland over your neck of the woods. So they got everywhere and ultimately went, Hey, there's a whole load of really nice land here because they were coming from a farming background.

Basically they'd set up their crops in the spring, leave a proportion of the women, but not all of them because some of them were warriors as well, and then would go off for the summer and come back in time for the harvest, [00:17:00] settle up over the winter, tell their tales, and start all over again.

So when they got to good farming land, for example, England in particular, they went, oh yes, we like this, this is what we want. And I don't know if you've ever watched the Viking series it's on Netflix. And I think the history channel, but it was filmed in Ireland. In fact, and my cover designer was actually involved in some of the filming of it, which was kind of a nice little link, see all these connections, but it's actually quite close to the reality of how they lived.

They did good historical research. I was quite impressed with it, as the further I got into my own research, the more I realized that they were quite accurate in terms of showing the waves of raiding, and then they'd, maybe settle a little bit and use that as a base and then raid further the next year worked their way around Scotland and then started hitting Ireland from the late seven hundreds at which point the monks weren't happy. but if they settle and they live side by side, And their language [00:18:00] is based from proto Germanic. I mean, I know it's not exactly German, Old Norse isn't exactly German, but you know, it sounds familiar to the Anglo-Saxons that are also from the same root. And what happened in a lot of cases was the Anglo-Saxons would have a word, for example, they had three different words for happy, gesælig, eadig, and bliþe. And the only one which survives now is turned into blithe. But Vikings had happy, well they had hap, which became happy and it replaced the Anglo-Saxon word. So in my mind, at least, the Anglo-Saxons went, oh, well that word works quite well. We'll take that one. And some they took and some they didn't, but it left a huge influence on quite early formation of English. So we've got things like get and take, bash, eye, window, lots of really simple words, they and thing, like, it's quite hard to say essentially, like talk for more than a paragraph and you will have used a Viking word.

So while the earlier books that [00:19:00] I did might have slightly longer more, you know, serendipity is in one of them, for example, you know, you use the fancy words, but the Viking words are much more every day and homely and farming based and obviously nautical and the Anglo-Saxons just lap that up. I mean, it was still a language that was forming and they took what they could.

**Mark:** Yeah. And I think that that's an important point that is often forgotten. You tend to hear more about, oh, the influence of French on English. but I think, because it's not maybe as obvious to the casual observer, it tends to get forgotten how much of an influence, Old Norse had on English, in quite profound ways.

**Grace:** Yeah, very, very basic. And I, I would also argue the toss over the whole French thing as well, because that's largely Norman French, and Norman means Northman and they were only two or three generations after being Vikings. So I find it quite amusing that all the Norman influence on English is not [00:20:00] credited to the Vikings because technically, it kind of is, it certainly had an influence.

I found one thing, which I can't totally vouch to, but I found it in my notes today, which said that by the year 1000 AD, Old Norse or the Danish tongue, as it was called at the time was the most widely spoken language across Europe. So it was the lingua franca for a while. Like that's just crazy to me.

**Aven:** Yeah. In terms of geographic spread, if not numbers, because they weren't, they would never numerous as people, but they got everywhere.

They made an impression when they got there. Yeah.

**Grace:** They did. They always made an impression, you've got to say that. You know, and sometimes quite lasting and I do put a little bit about place names in the book. I didn't want it to become a place name book, but quite a lot of the, particularly in Ireland.

But I do refer to some of the other countries as well. Nearly all of our cities are around the coast and that's because they were pretty much all founded by the Vikings. So it's quite fun tracing back the place names as well.

**Aven:** I know [00:21:00] ages ago, Mark, when you did that Runes video, with NativLang, and he talks about the, the runes scratched onto the Hagia Sophia, basically the Norsemen going "I was here"!

**Grace:** I know! I have to say, I have actually seen those. And it was very cool.

**Aven:** Oh yes. That would be good. I can never get out of my head whenever we talk about, Vikings going all over the place and turning up places you don't expect them to be, which is, I think what happens. If you haven't thought about it a lot, you know, you're reading some historical account and suddenly they were are Vikings or at least Norseman or Danish or whatever you want to call them. The 13th Warrior just always comes to mind. And those, I don't know if you've seen that movie, but oh, I think you would enjoy it. It's I mean, we enjoyed the movie, but it has a whole scene near the beginning. You've got a guy from the court at Constantinople, basically being delegated as a translator to, some Vikings, to some Norsemen who have come to trade.[00:22:00]

And so there's this sort of Arabic, Greek, Latin. They, they finally settle on Latin as their common language, but you've got them, you know, the various languages and trying and this, Viking boat coming out of the mists to the shore as, and the man and his, you know, his Muslim get up and on his little Arabian pony.

And that's all, it's very entertaining.

**Grace:** That sounds like that's right up your street. You'd be sitting there counting off how many languages they're using.

**Aven:** Oh yeah. There's a whole, there's a whole scene. We went when it first came out. it's, it's based on a Michael Crichton book. that's a sort of reworking of the Beowulf saga.

Like, it's, it's hard to explain, but it is, ends up being a Beowulf story. and when it first came out in theaters, way back when we were in grad school, and we went and watched it, and there's a scene at the beginning where everything has subtitle, subtitles or not, they don't put subtitles on it and they're speaking the various languages and, and, he tries Greek on them and they don't understand it.

And then he speaks Latin and they do. [00:23:00] Then, you know, you get the scene where they never gives you subtitles, but they get it. You know, the translator translates as they go along. They made a joke in Latin and I laughed before the rest of the audience. It was sort of pinnacle of nerdery has been achieved. I don't think I've ever had a better moment than that

**Grace:** That is, that is brilliant. I absolutely love that

**Aven:** And the fact that I was like proud and not ashamed. I think that also speaks to me anyway. Yes. Sorry. That was a

**Grace:** You should be proud. Anybody that can get a joke in Latin deserves to be proud.

**Aven:** It was a fairly basic joke, but you know, yeah.

 if there was nothing else that my classics education could do for me, it should at least let me get a joke in a movie.

**Grace:** Exactly, exactly.

**Aven:** sorry. That was a bit of a tangent, but I do think, I mean, it is. It is part of that, that wide picture of the Vikings, which I think people are starting to under, you know, I think it's starting to move into popular culture, that [00:24:00] understanding of it.

**Grace:** Yeah, I do. I do think there's still an awful lot of misconceptions. And, although I do try to give context and some background to this, that is the general history of the Vikings in the book. I couldn't fit it all in there did reach a point where I was kind of like, well, I could have 20 more words or I could go on a rant.

How they're underappreciated and what about all these other things that they did? And I eventually made the decision to take that section out, very reluctantly and, and I couldn't bear to throw it away. So I put it as a free download on the blog site. So there's now nine things you never knew about the Vikings and like, I almost like that as much as the book, you just, and you just become obsessed about these little details and go, no, but people need to know that there's a reason why they don't have horns on their helmets. Do you know the helmet horn story? Because if not, I have to enforce it upon you. Have you heard this one?

**Aven:** Well, that it comes from the Wagner. I just

**Grace:** absolutely love that story. The fact that it's got [00:25:00] nothing to do with the Vikings and it's just a costume designer, but we all think it's true. And I said this on a couple of interviews when the book came out and, and everybody, I spoke to went, "no, really?!", they didn't know it at all.

So I'm on a one woman crusade to make sure they're not misunderstood.

**Mark:** This was a topic that, one of my graduate professors, Roberta Frank wrote about, that's right, years ago.

**Aven:** Yeah. An article, a scholarly article on why they didn't have horns and where it came from. Right? Yeah. Cause it got mentioned again recently because.

I dunno, there was some archeological find quite recently where of course they ran the headline, cause it was a, I think it was a Roman helmet or something that did have horns anyway. And so they of course were all running the headline saying "it was the Romans, not the Vikings who had horns!" Shocks, you know, "archaeologists shocked to find", and all the medievalists on my feed were like "no, we are not shocked."

"I thought Roberta Frank, like, put this to bed."

**Grace:** no, [00:26:00] I think that one's going to be circling for another couple of centuries to be perfectly honest.

**Mark:** So I am curious about how you approach your research and what sort of, resources that you use because, in a sense you've kind of turned etymology around because you're starting with the premise. Okay, there are all these words that come from the language of the Vikings, rather than starting with, with the modern word and looking backwards.

So, most etymology books will kind of go in the reverse direction in a sense. So how did you track all, though I get, I get the feeling that, you know, like me, you read through dictionaries. So that's kind of how you find all of these,

**Grace:** well, that's, that's part of it. I'd have to say that's not the whole thing.

And I've only really resumed my reading of dictionaries in the last year or two. I decided that if I was going to, you know, keep going with this whole etymology series thing, I should really buy a few more reference books. So, um, if you're ever in Galway, Charlie Burns bookshop is [00:27:00] fantastic. It's just a labyrinth of rooms.

And I found the etymology section and, and it was Nirvana. But anyway, so I now have a big pile of dictionaries I have to read. And to be honest, they're not something you read one after another, no matter how dedicated you are. So I'm trying to intersperse them with fiction and history books and things.

But, yeah, so I, what I actually, the very first thing I do is I start with the shout out to people that read the blog and basically go, do you have any weird words on this topic? So I will have chosen the topic and then I kind of go. What one would you like me to research? Which I just like to involve people in it. And then if they do suggest one that ends up in the book, I give them a little credit and put their name in beside the words that was suggested.

So it's just a nice way of kind of paying back to the readers on the, on the blog. So that gets me a handful. I wish it got me more, but it gets me a few. I think people are afraid to suggest things in case, I don't know. I give out to them somehow. I'm not sure, but, I also maintain a very precious document, which is backed up in about three [00:28:00] different places, where every time I come across the words that sounds interesting, it goes in there.

And increasingly that's becoming more organized as I've gotten more into writing the books. So I have them sorted by topics. So I know that the next book after the next one is going to be weather. So every time I see anything even remotely interesting on the weather forecast or talking about the weather, that gets jotted into that. document in a section entitled weather. And basically when I get enough words in a section, which is typically about a hundred that I would start with, then I kind of go, there might be a book in this one, whereas if I can only find four or five words, then, well, that's maybe an article or a blog post.

So they gather over time, I'll find things in fiction books. I follow a whole load of etymology podcasts, just saying so I fish in that sea as well. And definitely Twitter is a great source. Cause you've got wonderful people like Haggard Hawks and Susie Dent, Bunny Trails, yourselves. So. Lots of [00:29:00] people love words.

And if something comes up, that sounds kind of interesting. I'll take that one for later investigation. What else do I do apart from that? With the Viking one, I would have gone off and borrowed quite a few Viking books and Viking history books, obviously, from my local library and lots of internet searching, whatever works and, and often I'll think, oh, I've got the complete list and I'll start writing the book. I, I usually go from a to Zed, although it's not a to Z in the book, I do it by topics. cause I think A to Z is just a bit too dictionary-like for me personally, as a reader, I like things to be in, in sort of grouped by topics. So like the Viking one, I might have nautical things or romantic things or law and politics.

So they sort of gradually form into chapters. It's a little bit nebulous. Now when I say this out loud, it doesn't sound like a process, but it is a process and it is what I've used for the last two books because it sort of works for me. When I might start with that hundred, but by the time I finished writing the book, it's, it's typically about 250. And then I think I'm finished and I put it aside for awhile. When, when I come back to [00:30:00] do the edits, inevitably in the meantime, I have discovered other words, because I think when you have your focus on a particular topic, you start seeing it everywhere. You'll see it in a news report, a friend will mention something.

You'll overhear somebody in the queue at the dentist, you know, and they'll just say a word and you think, oh, that sounds like it might be. And when you check it out, it turns out as disease. And of course the endlessly frustrating thing is when you eventually press go on the publishing process and it goes off to print , the very week that you do that you will discover the best word ever that fits perfectly in that topic and that you have not included. So the nautical book, the one that killed me on that was I had it published. And then I wanted to talk about lighthouses in an interview about it, because I, I love lighthouses.

I just think they're really pretty and they're romantic and they're very interesting structures architecturally. And, and then I went, lighthouse. Oh, god. Looked up the index and went, oh God lighthouse. [00:31:00] Isn't in the nautical book. Despite being one of my favorite nautical words, it's not in there. So yeah, inevitably, you know, and then I sort of put those into another document that's entitled "Edition Two" which I will probably never get to, but you know, it makes me feel a bit better. Yeah.

**Aven:** The, the problem with language and its glory is that it is infinite.

**Grace:** Yeah. You can never do them all. Again with the sort of historical facts, allegedly there's about 600 words from Old Norse that are in relatively common use in English.

And the book covers about 300. I'm sure I didn't get them all for a start, because it's impossible to include everything. But also some of them were just not that exciting. They were very simple words that didn't have a whole lot of history to them. So, you know, you have to make some editorial decisions, and it is a little bit like throwing out your babies at times, but it has to be done because you can't give somebody an etymology book that's 500 pages long because their head will actually explode. It needs to be a [00:32:00] bit shorter than that.

**Aven:** Well, you can't give a publisher that anyway, whether or not you can give it to the, I think it

**Grace:** would be crazy. It would be cruel to the reader. And, you know, basically I decide what goes in or what doesn't. So I'm quite flexible around that.

So there is a chapter in it which is modern Vikings, which you could definitely say it was like, ah now here, if the word only became a word in the 1900s, then is it a Viking word? Well, yeah. It, it hopefully is that it has Old Norse roots or that it refers to some Viking cultural thing.

So things like, Valhalla and Asgard actually didn't come into English until relatively late, because it was only when historians started studying the Icelandic sagas and learned, you know, finally the monks had retired and the historians started looking at the Vikings, that they brought some of those terms into mainstream English use.

They would have, of course been words if you were Norwegian or Swedish, [00:33:00] but they weren't really in English. So they're kind of late additions. And then I found a few sorts of technological ones. So I've got, Kindle as in the Kindle ebook reader is actually named in honor of the Vikings and Bluetooth, which has a lovely story behind it.

And IKEA, so I did put some modern ones in just because they were fun and they are Scandinavian words, which we use in English every day. So I felt I could, you know, wiggle those in.

**Aven:** I think that's fair. I mean, that's the question I asked, right? When did Norse words come into English and the answer can be, they're still coming into English.

That's fine. That's no problem with that, admittedly. Yes. Whether you call them Vikings is slightly tricky, but there are days definitely when, various, Nordic country folk seem to want to be, to identify as Viking. So we'll give them that.

**Grace:** I think they do. Honestly, if you ask most Irish people, they will try and claim that they have some Viking ancestry, whether they do, or they don't is a bit debatable.

Now, [00:34:00] having said that, what I did discover, which was fascinating was Orkney and Shetland. I had no idea how much Viking history they had up there and how long they were ruled by the Vikings -- 700 years, like longer than the Romans. And they still have huge genetic overlap with the Vikings. So. I don't know, 40 or 50% of adult males in Orkney are basically genetically Viking, which I think is amazing. I really want to visit there now after doing all the research, I really, really want to go there. So if anybody wants to give me a free trip to, to there, not in the winter, maybe. I dunno. It might be a bit cold, yeah.

**Aven:** I'm not sure you can even get there half the time in the winter.

**Grace:** Yeah. I could be a very bumpy plane trip or boat trip, but I'd be willing to take the hit for it.

**Aven:** Yeah. the Orkneyinga saga and things like that. These, stories of, of the Icelanders spending their time in the Orkneys. It is, it's fascinating that connection because if you're not north sea adjacent, you maybe don't, you know, I speak for myself. I shouldn't say you, [00:35:00] I don't necessarily think of quite how connected that sort of circle is.

There's, you know, the circle of the north sea and how Iceland and the Nordic area and, Ireland and Scotland, like those parts are really very close to one another. You think of them as being part of their respective, sort of larger geopolitical set, setups, you know, Europe or UK or whatever.

**Grace:** It's genuinely really well worthwhile taking out a map when you think about Vikings and actually looking at where they were, because it's, it's really obvious when you look at the map that they clearly used Orkney and Shetland as a little stop off point. In the same way, I suppose, that in the age of sail you would have used the Azores for getting fresh water and fruit when you're heading over towards the new world. So it's like, they're almost the eye at the center of the storm and everything else that like the main holdings of the Vikings are all around that.

And also had you actually heard of the north sea empire because that's certainly not taught in the history books in, in this country, at [00:36:00] least. So this was the idea that for about 30 years mainland UK was actually ruled by a Viking king and he ruled the UK, the north sea and Norway and Denmark. And that became a sort of a maritime empire in the same way that the Greeks obviously had a maritime based empire as well with all their islands.

I had never heard of any of that. So I do think a certain amount of their history is genuinely just being glossed over. We do the, they came, they raided, they went away and that's about it. Which is a shame.

**Aven:** Yeah, I do know that story to some degree, but only because, you know, I happened to be married to a medieval English specialist who works on Old Norse and I read a bunch of sagas one summer when I had nothing else to read. you know, certainly never got that in our history classes or, you know, like it wasn't, it's not something I know from anything other than, later interest-based reading because yeah, it's, you know, it's one of those things that, 1066, everybody talks [00:37:00] about the Normans and the whole, Viking part of that story is completely ignored by people, or, you know, you never hear about it

**Mark:** No, yeah, early medieval stuff doesn't get quite the same coverage that later medieval history does

**Aven:** well. And, and I don't want to speak for the UK necessarily and the British Isles in general, but I think at least in England, the focus being on the Saxons and Alfred and all of that.

So they go from the, Romans because, you know, for, for various cultural reasons to do with what heritage people wish to claim and what they think is important, they want to claim the Romans because they want to claim that civilized classical past. And then they want to claim the Saxons because at some point in the 19th century, the English decided that that was their, you know, spiritual and racial heritage and so to become indigenous, they have to be Saxons. And so that I'm simplifying a bit and also maybe getting on a [00:38:00] soapbox a bit, but anyway, but you know, so there's this focus on that period because that's the, true English and I am using English advisedly here, the true English past.

And so that's the focus. And then the, you know, invading French and, you know, Europeans ruined everything ever since. And the idea,

as I said,

**Grace:** We'll move on past that one before we start annoying anybody who's from the continent!

**Aven:** Seems to be kind of, you know, kind of writes that whole Viking period out because of that.

**Grace:** And I do get the impression from talking to English, friends that, to an extent history,. I have to say, I didn't study my history in England, I studied it in Ireland, which obviously has additional stuff, but that there's sort of, you've got your Romans, you've got your Anglo-Saxons, Normans, they then skip a whole load of Kings and Queens, as far as I can tell and move straight onto the Tudors, [00:39:00] the Victorians, and that seems to be, oh, I'm sorry. Obviously, world war II. But there are lots of other topics in there, boys and girls, but anyway, I'll have to pick another time period, just to try and get it sort of out there. I'll be on another crusade the next time you're talking to me, I'll be giving out the, Oh, but they forgot about the Plantagenets, or, I don't know, that'd be something.

**Aven:** Yeah. It's all the words the hundred years war gave us.

**Grace:** Oh God, that's a bit of a hefty title. I'm not sure about that

**Aven:** one. You don't think I've got the marketing down? well, I mean, I think that's the sort of interesting, I don't know if I call it a subtext because I think you say it in the introduction, but of your book, which is that obviously, you know, a lot of this is just driven by the, just the sheer fun of learning words and learning where they come from and finding out things you don't know.

And that's at bottom, great fun of etymology, but I think you kind of indicate in the book that you see some possibilities anyway, of larger lessons that you can kind of get from [00:40:00] knowing better where our language comes from and where particular segments of vocabulary come from. And, and I think the themes, the way you've divided up the themes in the book, you kind of make that point too, that look, they're not all words for ax, you know, whatever that we got from the Vikings. So do you see that as sort of, a part of the point?

**Grace:** It sort of wasn't what I started to do by any means, but it sort of accumulated as I was working through the words, because yes, I did think it was going to be ax and, well, they did give us bash. I did notice that when I was flicking through the book, so they did give us a few violent ones, and they gave us a couple of words around slavery, which isn't their, shiniest moment, I'd have to say, but, Well, yeah, it's when you start finding it's not just one or two or romantic words, there's actually enough to make a chapter.

And there's not just one or two words about laws. I had no idea that they were such a, maybe not always law abiding, but they certainly made laws. They, they were not in a Greek sense, but they were [00:41:00] reasonably democratic. Unless you were a slave. If you were a slave, you were stuffed, but if you were just a normal person, you did have a sort of a court gathering that you could go to, you could, you know, speak up for yourself and resolve disputes in a relatively civilized way. And that simply wasn't what I expected to find. So when I find things like that, those are the ones that get me a bit excited and I write a little bit more about them and try and see, well, is that more widespread?

Could I make a chapter out of this? So, yes, I suppose I do get on my soapbox a little bit by gathering them in that way. But it is indicative of the things that they were interested in. So there's a farming chapter because they really were farmers. And there, I knew in advance that there was going to be a nautical chapter, because I already had some of those words from the previous book. So, yeah, language does tell us a lot about the people that spoke it, and the people they interacted with. And I think even today, if you speak another person or another culture's language, it does broaden your horizons on that person and culture.

You, you realize that you [00:42:00] have things in common with them. And while the tower of Babel may have divided us by giving us all these different languages that has given us plenty to talk about and podcasts and blogs, and, you know, we have to be grateful for that, but when we unite via language or shared words that we've stolen from each other's language or borrowed, depending on your perspective, you realize that we're more connected than we think, and that if they have a simple word for a hug, then, well, clearly there was affection and it wasn't all bashing people. I like that. I like the fact that I can learn a little bit about what it was like to be a Viking child or a woman or a man in the past, you know, so many hundreds of years ago, but I'm still using their words. And I think that's really quite charming.

**Mark:** Do you, do you have any favorite words or stories that you'd like to share or even ones that maybe didn't make it into the book

**Aven:** the one you found the week after

**Grace:** I knew you were going to ask that question and I've been racking my brain going, [00:43:00] what was the one from the Viking book? I can't remember what the one was. I was so annoyed about lighthouse.

I'm still giving out about that. Yeah. It's terrible. The way you get fixated on these things. I, I quite like the stories behind, Bluetooth and berserk. So the Bluetooth one, I've told a few times to people at this stage, but, if you have a mobile phone or whatever device, and you're using Bluetooth software to wirelessly transfer information between it and your computer or your tablet or whatever.

If that's active, you have a little symbol up at the top of your screen to show that your Bluetooth is active. And if you actually look at it, that's a Viking rune. So it's the initials of a Viking king called king Harold Bluetooth Gormsson, because they had great names back then. They really did.

Yeah. They really, really did. There was also a gormless as well, which is where we get gormless from, and we get gun from Gunhilde, you know, they they're they're brilliant. Anyway, so Bluetooth obviously is really recent. It was only invented in 1994 by Ericcson. But [00:44:00] obviously Ericcson's Swedish company, Swedish, I think Scandinavian anyway.

And, they wanted to put a little Viking stamp on that, which is fair enough. And hence used his initials, but they chose him quite deliberately because he had united an awful lot of the tribes and smaller clans in Denmark to basically form the guts of the original Denmark nation and the Danish Royal family to this day can trace their lineage back to this particular king back a thousand years, which is just amazing.

If you look it up, you will find it quite easily because they're very proud about it. despite the fact that he was killed by his son, because he wanted to inherit, which is a bit dodgy, if you're on the monarchy side of things, you probably don't want to encourage that in the family.

But, so he united Denmark and also parts of Norway. So he was seen as somebody that brought people together and they felt that that was a good theme for Bluetooth because it was bringing data together and bringing people together via data. But I just liked the fact that he was called Bluetooth.

So apparently it's likely that he had a really bad tooth and [00:45:00] that the translation of blue is just slightly off. I know you've talked about colors in some of your other podcasts and how difficult they are to pin down in the past. So this particular version of blue is also slightly black, so basically had a rotten tooth.

And that's what he was nicknamed after, which is a bit rude for your king, but it does give us a really good name. So I quite like Bluetooth. And I liked the fact that there are Viking runes on my telephone. I just, that's just, that gives me a little buzz. I just love that. And berserk is actually quite good, fun as well.

So. somebody going berserk is obviously the, the meaning that we know today. So somebody going a bit crazy, but it dates back to, Icelandic, bear cult warriors who, would fight. They wouldn't wear armor. They were incredibly brave. Allegedly nothing could hurt them in, battle. And they went to big mental.

So I suspect there's a chance that they were eating some dodgy moss or mushrooms before they went into battle. Not proven. That's just my theory, but there's lots of accounts of how scary they were. Anybody that [00:46:00] faced them was pretty much going to run away So they were great battlers They would wear bearskins and they would sleep on bearskins.

And if they were, if they were killed in battle or whatever, they would be buried in bearskins. And that was all a connection to Odin cause the bear animal was connected to that. But there were two other versions as well. Oh, wolves, and I can't remember what the other animal was, but it was an equally fierce mammal and all three of those you will sometimes see on knights' shields.

So, heraldic type shields will sometimes have, well, it wasn't lion, but you know, the way you'd have a lion on a shield, you'll also have Wolf heads and bear heads. And that comes from the berserkers because they were seen as great warriors. So if you were a Knight, you would choose a nice fierce animal, like the berserkers.

But, they come right into the modern era. So the Danish and British monarchs both have, their official body guards. It's the Lifeguards and the Royal Danish guards. I think it's that. they were bearskin hats. So if you think of Buckingham [00:47:00] Palace and the chap in the red jacket and the big tall hat on top, that's bearskin, and that's a reference to the berserker warriors. Which I just, I love the fact that, you know, this Danish queen who's descended from Bluetooth is protected by berserker warriors. So they, it's all those connections, I guess. That's what you're all about anyway. So you get that.

**Aven:** Absolutely. Yeah. That kind of continuity or, continuity, but often with the kind of change that means that people don't even recognize, it's not that the chain is broken, but people don't see the links anymore because things have changed so much that

**Grace:** yeah, you have to have it explained to you by a good tourist guide.

**Mark:** Some of my favorites are the words that where, the English word seems really boring. And then it turns out that there's this really fascinating etymology and history behind it, words like 'thing'. It seems like, yeah, it seems like, you know, it's such a boring, everyday word that couldn't possibly be an interesting etymology. And yet [00:48:00] it's really fascinating.

**Aven:** Mark was so excited when we went to Iceland back in 2018 and he got to go stand at the law givers rock and, the Althing meeting place and my kids were like, yes, it's a rock.

**Grace:** Oh yeah. Are they teenagers by any chance? Because my teens are not impressed with any of this.

I am so jealous. You got to be there. That's another place I really want to go to really, really want to go to.

**Mark:** It's a very beautiful country.

**Aven:** Yeah. We were, we were very lucky because we ,that's the only trip we've managed to take with family to Europe or, or anywhere really. and we did it in 2018 and, and at this point, I'm like, I'm never traveling again, apparently so, but we, we spent, just, just a week, just 10 days or something in Iceland on the way to England.

and we stayed with Twitter friends in England. It was, it was a very online tour. Okay.

**Grace:** I can just imagine that a certain, somebody -- Mark -- probably [00:49:00] really liked the English part of that trip?

**Aven:** Yep. And, but the Iceland was for mark as well. And I mean, it was, it was, it was fabulous and we loved it and the whole place is amazing.

We only stayed around, Reykjavik and then did the little circle tour outside of it. But it was, it was great. But, but

**Grace:** you never made it to Rome, I mean, come on, fair is fair!

**Aven:** I know that was going to be the next trip and then the world ended. so we'll see. but no, I haven't made it, but, the, Althing is, the valley that it was in is also, this is the thing that our kids actually found interesting, is that it's also by, as far as we can tell complete coincidence, it's in the valley where the continental plates are drifting apart. Oh, goodness. So literally like where the law rock is where Snorri Sturlusen, I can't pronounce his name properly.

I say stir-lus-en, but that's wrong. Right? "Sturt-less-en" , but anyway, the, that very spot right behind it. There's this sheer cliff [00:50:00] like that just juts up, I don't know, 40 feet or something like that. And it goes the whole length of the valley.

And that is the fault line between the two continents. So you can stand, you can go up the hill and stand with one foot in Europe and one foot in north America. And. Which is very cool. And I found very cool too, but our kids who both love geography were fascinated by that part of it and really liked that bit.

And couldn't have cared less about the fact that some Vikings got together and debated law in the same spot, you

**Grace:** know? Fair enough. You know, th the whole founding, you know, the oldest parliament in the world, that wasn't good enough for them.

**Aven:** No, they were on the continental level. Thank you very much. Maybe in the same, literally the same place.

It's really quite amazing. Yeah,

**Grace:** I know. I did not know that that's not all, that's not in the book. Gosh, darn it. It'll have to go in edition two, I didn't know that that's really interesting. Yeah.

**Aven:** And then, it's so funny because they don't seem to be connected other than the fact it's [00:51:00] valley, so it was a good place for, having a gathering, but it just happens to be a valley, not that far from Reykjavik.

cause they couldn't have possibly known of course that, that was,

**Mark:** I mean, I guess it made a kind of nice kind of cliff

**Aven:** cliff-like edge, but I'm sure there were other clips in Iceland it's fairly well known for such thing.

**Grace:** They do have one or two hidden down the back of the sofa. Yeah, that's true.

**Aven:** Admittedly, the fault goes like down the whole island, so it's, it could have been anywhere on that, you know, that line, but still, it seems to be just literally a coincidence.

And it's amazing to me. But yeah, it was a pretty, that was a pretty good day. Yeah.

**Grace:** That's that sounds like a great trip actually. I'm quite jealous of that as well. Also not going anywhere or haven't gone anywhere for awhile. Although our 2018, when I did manage to get to Sweden and Finland, so, like, yay! I wasn't allowed to do any research. My teenagers were like, they were with me. They were not impressed. Oh, [00:52:00] is it another fancy word for you. And I was like, yes, yes, it is be quiet. So yeah, they gave me a very hard time about this. Anyway.

**Aven:** Well, ours just rolled their eyes and went back to the YouTube videos when we would go off and I would film Mark talking about place names. Cause we did place name videos for all the little places we went to in Iceland and England. And so we were technically on vacation, but we did film videos so that I could put together a "place names from our travels" video when we came home.

**Grace:** Wouldn't that be wonderful if you could then write that off as some sort of tax thing. Wouldn't that be great?!

Oh, trust, everybody thinks about it. You have to have income before you can get a rebate on your income tax. I've discovered. Yeah, I know it's a very disappointing flaw. It's just a teensy weensy flaw on that particular theory,

**Aven:** but we're working on it someday. Exactly.[00:53:00] well, this has been fascinating and we could keep talking about this forever, but I should not keep you for too long.

So before we go, tell me, you've already mentioned you're working on Christmas words. So there'll be a what, words christmas gave us?

**Grace:** Yeah, predictable titles, but you know, at least it all sits together as a series that way. Oh no.

**Aven:** Predictable titles is a very sensible,

**Mark:** And I presume it will come out in time for the Christmas season.

**Grace:** That is the hope I, again, I am never a hundred percent sure. I actually thought I'd be finished the first draft by now. And it turns out there's more words than I thought, which tends to get me on a fairly regular basis. So to be honest, I'm not a hundred percent sure, but I'm really hoping I'll have it for this year.

And if not, it will definitely be for next year.

**Aven:** Right. And I was looking at the back of this book, you have quite a list of at least theoretical ones that are going to

**Grace:** come. Exactly. Those lists. Yeah. Astute readers who have read more than one of the books will have discovered that those lists [00:54:00] do change as my thoughts evolve on things.

But, yeah, no, the, the current plan is Christmas and then the next one will hopefully be weather on the basis that everybody loves to talk about the weather. So I think it might, hopefully there'll be some good stories behind the words, but the words themselves are interesting. and then I'm considering words the French gave us, but I know that will be a very big topic, and

**Aven:** I know you know that too.

You'd have to carve out very specific pieces of that, presumably. So I have not read vocabulary.

**Grace:** I'm not sure that's all going to fit into one book to be perfectly honest. And I don't know if I want to do two volumes. So it's things like that, that you kind of mull over in the longterm. But so anyway, I think two books in advance is more than enough to be planning, but yeah, I've, I've loads of ideas for this.

I mean, I don't know if I'm still going to be doing these when I'm 80, but, while I still find them interesting and people still like to read them, I will keep going.

**Aven:** That's a perfectly good plan. It's how we go, [00:55:00] as long as we keep finding it an entertaining, why would we stop? Yeah. And so people can find you in the meantime at the blog WordFoolery, of course we will link that in the show notes and you're on Twitter.

I can't now remember what your handle is. I know we have interacted

**Grace:** funnily enough, it's @wordfoolery. So basically if you Google wordfoolery and that's wordfoolery E R Y at the end, you will find me on one platform or another, but Twitter is usually where I'm hanging out compulsively doom scrolling at the moment.

**Aven:** Oh, I know. It's been a real pleasure to just talk about the past and words for an hour rather than about anything that is going on right now in the world. Absolutely. Yeah. and I also note that you also have a couple of fiction books, three, I think,

**Grace:** yeah, they're all, they're all serials, so they're not available in paperback.

They're just online. You subscribe and read an episode as I call them or a [00:56:00] chapter every week. And I just enjoy doing them. They're yeah, they're just sort of diary format. So the first two are an Irish mom, which isn't me. I would just like to say like, it's really not me. but the, the most recent one is about, a librarian in a small town in Ireland and the antics that her very bad colleagues, come up with.

So she's got a very bossy boss and a senior librarian who doesn't want to do any work at all. And it's her antics trying to get them to do work and not leave everything to her and the people that come into the library and the adventures that they have with them. And I don't know how, but Bob, the library bear, is meant to be in the kids section and he has completely taken over the story and keeps popping up left, right, and center. He's developed massive personality and is about to get a romantic subplot. Yeah, there, it's just for fun. And and it's great because you get a bit of feedback from your subscribers like yourselves, I'm sure.

**Aven:** Oh, that's fun. And you can get to that from the blog as well. I imagine you'll find everything on the blog.

Yeah. Yeah. Good.[00:57:00] Well, this has been a delight. Thank you so much for coming and chatting with us about it. So words the Viking gave us in case people haven't caught on by now, that's the title of the book you're going to go look up, Words the Vikings Gave Us by Grace Tierney. So thank you so much.

And we will look forward to the next one. We'll say goodbye, but maybe we'll talk to you next time you've got another one in the series out.

**Grace:** Absolutely. I'd love to do that because honestly, it's really nice to talk to somebody else who thinks words are as important as I do.

**Aven:** You know, I know the feeling.

**Mark:** It's good for, you know, self validation.

**Grace:** Absolutely.

**Aven:** All right. Well, thank you very much. Talk to you soon. Bye-bye

**Grace:** bye-bye.

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Thanks for listening

**Mark:** Bye