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## Preface

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Most of the chapters in this book grew out of entries posted on my blog, *Word Power*,<sup>4</sup> named after a high-school class that I had expected to dislike. The teacher, Larry Wray, introduced himself as a lover of words. What a strange idea! He then handed out yellow workbooks entitled *Word Power: A Short Guide to Vocabulary and Spelling* by Dr. Byron H. Gibson, who made some outrageous claims of his own:

“Words are power!”

“Teacher, your students will come back through the years to thank you for giving them this help in their single most important objective, learning words and learning them accurately, on which all other life objectives depend.”

“This guide has been prepared to be the single most helpful book you have ever studied.”

*Hyperbole!* I might have thought, had I thought in quadrisyllabic words. I liked writing well enough. I kept a journal. I valued self-expression. (My dad was a psychiatric social worker.) But I used whatever words came to me, undiscerningly, the way a hitchhiker hops into the first car that stops to offer a ride. Along comes Dr. Gibson, telling me that all life objectives depend on the accurate learning of words. Right.

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4. Marcia Riefer Johnston, *Word Power* blog, <http://marciarieferjohnston.wordpress.com>. I have migrated that blog's contents to a new website, <http://howtowriteeverything.com>, which includes a blog along with information about this book.

## Word Up!

I suspended my disbelief. I did the work. This class was supposed to help us prepare for the SATs, after all. My classmates and I, following what the author called the Gibson-Gordis method, learned Latin and Greek prefixes, roots, and suffixes. For example, we memorized prefixes (*a-*, *amphi-*, *ana-*, *anti-*, *apo-*, *cata-*) and associated them with words (*amoral*, *anemia*, *amphibious*, *amphitheater*). We filled out worksheet after worksheet.

The SATs came and went. I flew to Europe to live for a year with an Austrian family. I forgot about Mr. Wray and Drs. Gibson and Gordis. But my separation from the only language that came naturally to me sharpened my awareness of the importance of words. For months, I struggled constantly to communicate in German, coming up against my linguistic limitations in every interaction. Deprived of familiar words, I realized how much I had taken them for granted. With the awe of a child realizing that her parents had once had childhoods, I came to see that words, in any language, had lives of their own—long histories, complex genealogies—that I could only guess at.

I discovered, for example, that *shoe* had taken centuries to become *shoe*. Through those same hundreds of years, the nearly identical but more resonant *Schuh* had evolved to require more space between the tongue and teeth. (Both words ostensibly descend from the Proto-Germanic *skōhaz*, which in the Iron Age meant “covering.”<sup>5</sup>) Similarly, I connected *father* and *Vater*, which must have derived from the same original—or should I say *ur?*—mouth movements.

During that year in Austria, the phrase *Es fällt mir ein*—“It falls into me,” literally, or “It occurs to me”—became one of my favorites. Every day, all sorts of new understandings fell into me. Language fell into me.

When I came home, I moved on to college. I read Homer and Hemingway. I read like I had never read before. And I wrote. I grabbed every writing opportunity that presented itself, on campus and off.

I became a lover of words.

Since then, I’ve done more kinds of writing than you want to hear about. Each has taught me something about words and their ability to

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5. “Shoe,” *Wiktionary*, last modified June 21, 2012, <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/shoe>.

instruct, console, uplift, devastate, tickle, bore, confuse, and persuade. Writing leads me to insight and satisfaction. It deepens my relationships. It brings me pleasure. It earns me a decent wage.

When I set up my blog, the need to name it brought Mr. Wray to mind for the first time in decades. It fell into me that no name would do but *Word Power*.

That yellow workbook? Not the single most helpful book I ever studied. But Dr. Gibson predicted correctly when he said, “Teacher, your students will come back through the years to thank you.” Several years before I thought to thank him, Larry Wray died. Thanked or not, he must have known the value of what he taught us.

During that year in Austria, the phrase *Es fällt mir ein* — “It falls into me,” literally, or “It occurs to me” — became one of my favorites. Every day, all sorts of new understandings fell into me.

Word power. I aim to pass it on.