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Authors explore words, shapes and inventions

■ By Melanie Cummings
SPECIAL TO THE BEAVER

Every word in this article owes its existence to the mish-mash of words created by Latin, Greek, Roman, Anglo-Saxon, French, Norman and Viking societies.

But oh how the definitions and spellings have evolved.

Lexicographer Katherine Barber tells the histories behind 500 common words in *Six Words You Never Knew Had Something To Do With Pigs*.

Barber joined fellow authors James King and Martha Baillie at the Oakville Club last Sunday for a Books and Brunch event organized by Bookers Bookstore.

Since 1991 Katherine Barber has been editor-in-chief of the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*.

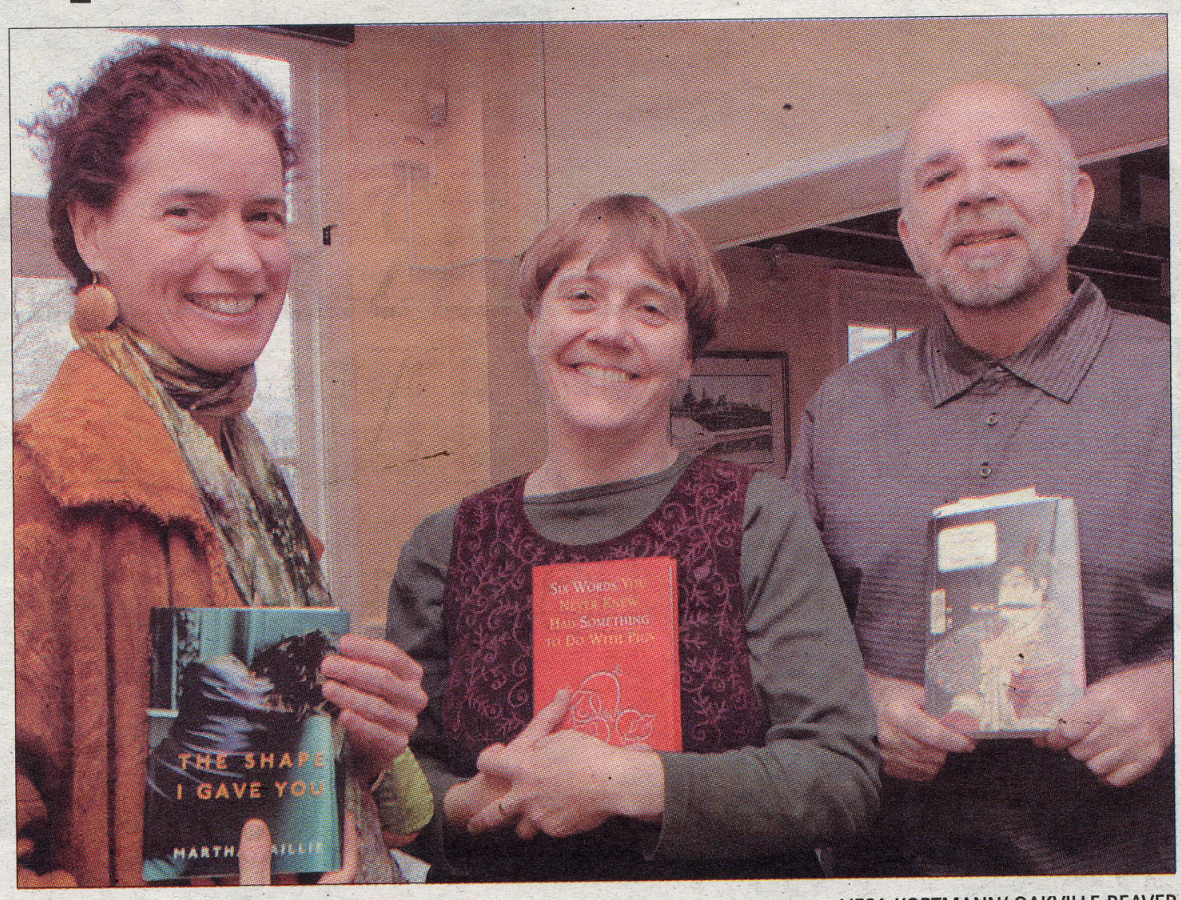
In the time it takes most people to eat lunch Barber is able to scroll through an abridged history of the English language.

Her book makes the seemingly unlikely connections between words such as porcelain and pig.

The story goes like this: explorer Marco Polo brought ceramic pieces from China back to Europe. Italians thought the newly-imported textile looked like the shiny, pink innard of a cowery shell, or what Italians called porcelana. Among Italians the shell is named so because it mimics the appearance of a female pig's vulva.

"Who knew this?" asked Barber.

By Barber's reckoning the origins of our language have been bent and molded by a bevy of societies.



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AUTHOR, AUTHOR, AUTHOR: Bookers Brunch with Authors featured three writers (l-r) Martha Baillie, *The Shape I Gave You,* Katherine Barber, *Six Words You Never Knew Had Something To Do With Pigs* and James King, *Pure Inventions.*

For example, the word gallop actually started out as wallop. But the Normans couldn't pronounce the letter 'w' very well. The Franks created 'wallop', which was used in reference to horses and how well they ran. The speech impediment among the Normans turned that word into 'gwallop' for a time. Eventually they tired of including the 'w' and changed the word to gallop.

The French did the same with the typical vowel-consonant-vowel-consonant pattern of Latin by ditching the consonants and squishing the vowels together.

Unlike the malleability of the English language, author Martha Baillie's book *The Shape I Gave You* is about absolutes.

Specifically, these are the feelings garnered from reading a sentence that articulates exactly how a reader feels; or when someone places a hand in the perfect place on an aching body.

"This book took me to corners in my psyche I never expected to go to," said Baillie. She describes *The Shape I Gave You* as a guilt-ridden book borrowed from Baillie's exposure to Catholic, Presbyterian, Jewish and motherhood forms of such self-blame.

She said she had no idea that she was going to write about a woman whose 18-year-old daughter dies and that this character would lock herself in a room to write an 80-page letter to this deceased child.

But when Baillie got a Canada Council grant, it affirmed this was the story that she had to write.

McMaster University English professor James King tackles the heady questions of an authentic life and the true meaning of art through the fictional story told in *Pure Inventions.*

King's exploration takes readers into the world of Japan's mid-19th century courtesans where the central character Hiroshi is depicted as a prankster and expert print forger.

As his story moves through to the 20th century Hiroshi travels to Boston to work as an authenticator of Japanese art for the renowned Gardner Museum. There he is faced with his estranged past and forced to grapple with his own understanding of reality.

While *Pure Inventions* is fiction, King infuses realism into it with references to Frank Lloyd Wright, Isabella Steward Gardner, and Vincent Van Gogh.

It's a storytelling form that fits with King's prolific past. *Pure Inventions* is his third novel. He has also written 20 books of nonfiction, among them biographies of Margaret Laurence, Farley Mowat, and Jack McClelland.