



## Book Review

### **The Life of Guy: Guy Fawkes, the Gunpowder Plot, and the Unlikely History of an Indispensable Word.**

BY ALLAN METCALF. Oxford University Press. 2019. Pp. 176. \$18.95 (Hardback) ISBN 9780190669201. \$12.99 (E-book)

“Remember, remember,” or conjure if you must, not “the fifth of November” or even Guy Fawkes, but the most remarkable history teacher with whom you had the good fortune to study. Recall the teacher whose style of lecturing was closer to storytelling and whose accounts of historical events resembled cleverly connected anecdotes. This teacher’s remarkable knowledge and good humor made you eager to enter the classroom and not just to take notes but to “take note”—of the times, of the places, of the incidents, and of the people whose actions resonated back then and reverberate still. Now imagine that your history teacher also taught you grammar. Further imagine that both the history lesson and the grammar lesson that kept you spellbound in your school desk occurred in tandem and focused on a single word: *guy*.

Fortunately, you won’t have to squeeze into that undersized desk to enjoy and learn from Allan Metcalf’s *The Life of Guy: Guy Fawkes, the Gunpowder Plot, and the Unlikely History of an Indispensable Word*. A cozy armchair or sofa may substitute. And forego any worry about nodding off while you read; Metcalf’s energetic and edifying account of this particular etymological oddity will keep your inner schoolchild fully engaged through the work’s fourteen chapters. As the subtitle delineates, in his study Metcalf explores how a single first name, one associated with notorious explosives expert Guy Fawkes, became a commonly used second-person pronoun in both its singular (*guy*) and plural (*guys*) forms. Further, the author explains how the plural form came to reference women as well as men when used in informal greetings such as “Hey, *guys*,” “You, *guys*,” and “What’s up, *guys*?” And Metcalf offers reasons why, out of all the given names in the English

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language that might have evolved to serve this particular grammatical function, *Guy*—and not Tom, Dick, or Harry—prevailed.

Professor Metcalf is a language specialist, but *The Life of Guy* reveals another calling: history buff. The first seven chapters provide the groundwork for the emergence of *guy* (in its current form as a pronoun) out of *Guy* (the first name of the infamous Fawkes) as the author recounts a series of escalating and connected historical events. These include, but are not limited to, Henry VIII's marital dilemmas, the king's break with the Roman Catholic Church, the subsequent establishment of the Church of England, and the thwarted Gunpowder Treason Plot of 1605, in which conspirators hoped to return a Catholic king to the throne by exploding the House of Lords. The uprising was foiled when a search party surprised ammunitions specialist Guy Fawkes in a basement storage room surrounded by 36 powder kegs he intended to light with a slow-burning fuse. Annual commemorations of Gunpowder Treason Day began a year later and continue to this day in parts of Great Britain and The Commonwealth.

On the original Bonfire Night, and on subsequent anniversaries, straw effigies of Guy Fawkes fueled the flames. Metcalf notes that children solicited "pennies for the Guy" (82) in order to finance their incendiary creations, aiding the detachment of the word *Guy* from *Fawkes*. Effigies of the Pope were burned as well, but this practice decreased as religious tolerance increased in England. Metcalf notes the arrival of *guy* (as a general term for the common man) in North America around the time of the American Revolution. The author recounts how George Washington, in an effort to defuse anti-Catholic sentiment among his troops and to bolster friendship with Catholic Canadian allies cautioned his men against burning effigies of the Pope, and by extension, Fawkes, on this night. Quickly, Fourth of July celebrations supplanted November Fifth commemorations in the United States and Bonfire Night traditions waned.

Metcalf scoured historical documents, including the trial records of Guy Fawkes and his co-conspirators and commemorative Church of England sermons, to trace indubitably the pronoun's origins back to the name *Guy Fawkes*. Certainly, there were other *Guys* around, then and now. Of particular interest to this English professor were the sources Metcalf consulted to follow *guy* as it travelled down the centuries to complete its metamorphosis from proper name to personal pronoun. Numerous references to *Guy Fawkes* and later simply to *guy* appear in poems, plays, and lyrics from that time forward. Unfortunately, the author of the most recognizable tribute poem, "Remember, Remember," remains anonymous. Still many writers, canonical and obscure, included the name *Guy Fawkes*, or variants of it, in their verses, and helped Metcalf chase the word *guy* down the portals of literary history. These include playwrights Thomas Decker and Ben Jonson, a teenaged John Milton, and poet Francis Herring. Metcalf notes a renewed interest in Guy Fawkes, both the historical figure and the name, spurred by the success of the British graphic novel *V for Vendetta*, written by Alan Moore and illustrated by David Lloyd, a work begun in 1982 as a series of comic books and later published in a single volume. The work's protagonist uses Guy Fawkes tactics to subvert a fascist state in a dystopian Great Britain. The series was popularized further by the 2005 film version written by Lana and Lili Wachowski and directed by James McTeigue.

Even before cracking the cover of the hardback or swiping into the e-book, it is evident to readers that Metcalf finds humor in names. Indeed, the first four words of the book's title, *The Life of Guy*, through rhyme and meter, wink at Yann Martel's more philosophical *The Life of Pi* (2001). Playfully, Metcalf includes a number of puns in his study of a name gone pronoun, including the groaner "Oh you osamas, how sweet of you" (ix) as he emphasizes the unlikelihood of crafting a personal pronoun from a terrorist's name in our own time. In considering Guy Fawkes's alias *John Johnson* (Fawkes also went by an alternate first name, *Guido*), the author asks, "[I]f he had been able to keep that alias through all the interrogations that soon followed, instead of 'you guys' might we nowadays be saying 'you johns'?" (34). Chapter 8, "My Pronoun, 'tis of Thee," finds Metcalf lamenting the loss of an archaic pronoun by quoting lines from a popular American ballad: "*Thou* art lost and gone forever, / Dreadful sorry, Clementine"—emphasis mine. In his eulogy for the departed pronoun, the author proffers *guy* as *thou's* replacement. The light, convivial tone is sustained throughout Metcalf's writing and accounts for this book's charm.

But Metcalf's study of the word *guy*, as informative and as entertaining as I find it, is not without a certain flaw. In chapter 11, "Roadblocks," Metcalf shifts from his historical perspective on the linguistic evolution of the word *guy* towards social commentary about its present usage in its plural form. He notes the obvious and curious gender anomaly: *guy* in its singular form refers to a man exclusively, while *guys*, supposedly, denotes women as well as men. Metcalf's observation is accurate; people do say *guys* when addressing or referring to groups comprised of more than one gender. However, I question his claim that this usage has become broadly accepted as gender neutral. He acknowledges certain critics, whom he classifies as feminists, who express discontent with the use of the term *guys* in reference to women. Glibly, Metcalf counters "you could argue that 'guys' shows women conquering territory that had been exclusively male. It's like women gaining full membership in a previously all-male club" (131). Or not gaining full membership. Or perhaps gaining partial membership as an afterthought. For many, and I include myself, *guys* is too similar to the word *mankind*, which ostensibly refers to everyone, regardless of gender, but that, in fact, signals men. Curiously, Metcalf avoids discussion of *gals* in this chapter, although he does consider *y'all* as a Southern alternative to *you guys*.

But, please, don't let my disagreement on this one point deter you from reading this fascinating study of the word *guy* that charts how the given name of an infamous traitor was distilled down the centuries into a frequently used pronoun. Metcalf is uniquely qualified to have penned *The Life of Guy*. In his study, he merges his expertise as a forensic linguist with his passion for history, and both are enhanced by his predilection for humor. Who but the author of the popular *OK: The Impossible Story of America's Greatest Word* (2011) could fill 176 pages with information about a second single word, *guy*, and maintain his readers' interest through fourteen chapters? Evidently, I am not alone in this appraisal. Currently, *The Life of Guy: Guy Fawkes, the Gunpowder Plot, and the Unlikely History of an Indispensable Word* appears on top-seller lists in the categories of etymology and linguistics.

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