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INTRODUCTION

When I started to write this book, I realized that I did in fact remember lots of stuff. But I didn't remember it completely, or necessarily accurately. I knew, for example, that 'The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold' was a perfect example of – what? A dactyl or an anapaest? I had to look it up.[1] I remembered a bit about sines and cosines, but had no idea why they were important. I thought I knew what photosynthesis was – until I sat down to explain it.

In the course of talking to other people about what I might include, I discovered two things. One, that everybody I spoke to had been to school. And two, that that was pretty much the only thing they had in common. They had all forgotten completely different things. So, with every conversation, the book seemed to grow longer. One chat with an editor friend sent me rushing to add the active and passive voices to the English Language chapter. Another friend confessed that she had completely forgotten what a square root was (though I have no idea why she suddenly wanted to know). An American I consulted suggested that I include the nicknames of the states of the USA, because this is something that 'every [American] schoolchild knows'. In the end I had to stop discussing it, or this book would just have growed (like Topsy, I s'pect – see p.51).

1 Come to think of it, it's a simile, too – see p.18

All of which is a roundabout way of saying that I hope you too will find things here that strike a chord, however faintly.[2] Things that make you say, 'Oh, yes, I used to know that.' Because by the time you read this, I will almost certainly have forgotten most of them again.

Thank you

I'd like to thank Ana, who wanted me to write this book, Silvia, for making it happen and for sharing my loathing of 'Wuthering Heights', and the other Ana, for neck-breaking design. Thanks, also, to everyone who has entered into the spirit of it and made enthusiastic suggestions, even if I haven't had room to include them all. Special thanks to Bob, for vetting the Maths and Science chapters and pointing out that pi wasn't a recurring decimal. I used to know that.

This book is for Jon and Nic, who are old enough to start forgetting this sort of stuff; and for Mishak and Camille, who are just beginning to learn it.

2 Or is it a cord?

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Learning to read and write was just the beginning. After you'd mastered that, you had to find out how the language worked and, when you started to write your own stories, how to use it to better effect. If (perish the thought) you had to write poetry, too, there was a whole new set of conventions…

Parts of speech

This is a way of categorizing words according to the function they perform in a sentence, and there are nine of them.

Noun: a naming word. There are three categories:

- collective nouns, describing a group of things: *a herd of elephants*
- proper nouns, the name of a person, place or whatever that requires a capital letter: *Caroline, Paris, the Smithsonian Institution*
- common nouns, meaning everything else: *street, book, photograph*

Verb: a doing word, or, more accurately, a word that indicates the occurrence or performance of an action, or the existence of a state or condition: *to be, to do, to run, to happen*. This form