

# Etymology with Helen Zaltzman

## Ologies Podcast

### March 5, 2019

Oh, haaaay. It's the ghost of the succulent plant you somehow killed, just incredulously staring at you like, "How? How!? I'm a cactus." Alie Ward, back with another episode of Ologies. Okay, so don't galaxy brain too hard but each word I'm saying has a history, and a lifespan, and a backstory, and was probably born out of a grunt and then went through pubescence in another language spelled with too many vowels. And if you sat down and listened to its biography you'd likely love it even more. But, before we get into backstories and etymologies, a few complex words of thanks:

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This week, Smacksmooresheemsmaam says:

*This podcast is fantastic for getting myself through boring car rides and long days at work. The host, my father, Alie Ward, is captivating and asks her guests all of the right questions.*

Now for some reason, "The host, my father, Alie Ward" had me actually cackling out loud when I read it.

Also, DJLiz13, I creeped your review about your late father and it got me teary and I'm sending you hugs.

Okay! Etymology. Oh, I have wanted to cover this topic since the day I first laid eyes on a list of ologies back in 2002. So strong is my thirst. I include some etymology in every episode, you know that. But what's the etymology of etymology?? This is like your mirror image staring at your real face. Or one hand washing the other. So, etymology comes from the Greek 'etumos' meaning truth. This ologist studied English and language at St. Catherine's College and the University of Oxford, England and went on to become a writer, co-host of the long-running comedy podcast Answer Me This. Then she began a linguistics and etymology podcast called, The Allusionist in 2015. She's known as The Etymological Lodger and I had so many people send drooly, feverish messages that I should interview her about word origins. And I said to myself, and them, "Sure! Right! How about if I also interview Beyoncé while I'm at it! I can't get her!"

But somehow I was able to get her attention via Twitter and convince her to come to my home, aka my apartment, and hang out on my couch for an hour and talk language. To say I like her would be a gross understatement. I'm so into her. She's the best. So, we talk about the fundamental truth that language is always, always changing whether you want it to or not. And about, of course, various word origins, Latin, gender in languages, the bible, aka *The Oxford English Dictionary*, slang,

emojis, the pliability of boobs, mediocrity, step parents, babies in glasses, Greek, the Romance languages, and more with host of *The Allusionist* podcast and person who technically for a living researches the origins of language and thus is an etymologist, Helen Zaltzman.

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**Alie Ward:** Do people put an extra L in there a lot?

**Helen Zaltzman:** Uh, no, actually that is not one of the regular spelling mistakes. But they see the Z's and they panic.

**Alie:** Do you say Z as in zed or zebra?

**Helen:** Well, I say zed when I'm in zed-saying countries. But I'm on your turf, so I've translated it.

**Alie:** Yeah, look at that! Do you say zebra [phonetic: zeb-ruh]?

**Helen:** I do say zebra [ph. zeb-ruh]. Is it zebra [ph. zeeb-ruh] here?

**Alie:** Yeah.

**Helen:** Ah, yeah. So, okay, here's my rubric for when I'm in the States. If it's a different word like zed, zee or coriander, cilantro, I'll say the different word. But it is harder for me to use the correct American pronunciation if it's the same word. So it's hard for me to say tomato [ph. toe-may-toe] because it sounds just wrong when I say it. I can't do it properly. My mouth won't form a proper American shape to do the word properly.

*["Tomato, [ph. toe-may-toe] tomato, [ph. toe-mah-toe] oh let's call the whole thing off." - Fred Astaire in Shall We Dance, 1937.]*

**Alie:** Tomato [ph. toe-may-toe].

**Helen:** Tomato [ph. toe-may-toe]. It's stupid isn't it?

**Alie:** Tomato [ph. toe-mah-toe] sounds so much fancier.

**Helen:** I don't know, I think...

**Alie:** It does.

**Helen:** It's not even an English word! We got it from South America.

**Aside:** Quick aside, the word tomato comes from the Nahuatl, a language of what's known historically as the Aztec Empire, for, 'the swelling fruit.' And thus, a tomato is what people called a hot girl in the 1920s. Language experts think this was due to plump, juicy connotations. Now, as long as we're just starting this out on the horniest

foot, another fun produce aisle conversation you can have loudly is that avocado comes from the Nahuatl for testicle.

**Alie:** Now, how long have you been interested in language?

**Helen:** I remember first becoming interested in language when I was fairly small. I was, I think, seven. I went to a very old fashion school so I started learning French and Latin at a very young age. I was like, "Oh, that word seems similar to this word in English." And, it was a bit like when you see *Homeland* or something where someone's got a wall with lots of newspaper clippings joined together with string.

*[clip from Homeland, season 1, episode 11, Carrie: "You understand..." Saul: "It's a timeline."]*

So, it's like, "Ahhh, I wonder what these things have got in common." And also I grew up in quite a verbose household. I was the youngest. I was an accident. *["whoopsie!"]* There's quite a bit of time between me and my elder brothers who are both very witty and good at talking. And I just thought, if I'm gonna say anything then I really have to bring my A game. It was just a form of survival to be verbally deft from a young age.

**Alie:** Did you talk early?

**Helen:** I don't know because I don't think anyone was paying attention. But apparently I was an early reader. My mum says I was an early reader, but I remember her teaching me to read. So, I think before that I was just looking at books with the appearance of reading.

**Alie:** They're like, "Why's she wearing bifocals? She's two."

**Helen:** I did have glasses from one and a half! How did you know??

**Alie:** DID YOU?? REALLY??

**Helen:** Yeah, not bifocals until I was fourteen. Yeah, it was... *[laughs]* There are not many pictures of my childhood.

**Alie:** Reeeeeeally?

**Helen:** Yeah, I had these pink plastic thick glasses. And then sometimes they'd put a Band-Aid over one lens to strengthen the other eye. But they used to put it over my eye, but then ripping it off is quite painful. It's a good time.

**Alie:** Babies in glasses are the cutest babies.

**Helen:** Sort of. I think glasses styles have improved.

**Alie:** No, babies in glasses are always cute.

**Helen:** Is it like babies that look like angry little old men, who look like old codgers, maybe?

**Alie:** Yes exactly!

**Helen:** That's a good fun.

**Alie:** They're a kinder-codger.

**Helen:** Yeah. Like a baby wearing a tiny bow tie.

**Alie:** Yes! I guess like an old man in a diaper with a pacifier isn't as cute, but when you reverse it, it's good. You know?

**Helen:** *[laughs]* It's so unfair.

**Alie:** So, now when did you start making language your living? When did you start writing professionally? When did you start getting into etymology as a career?

**Helen:** Well, I studied some at university. I did an English degree, but I did this special course that only 15 people did in the whole university and it stopped at 1400.

**Aside:** Again, she took an English language course that *stopped* at the year 1400. Just imagine! The vellum! The ancient diphthongs! The deteriorated antiquities! Why did it stop at 1400?

**Helen:** You're never going to find anything original to say about Shakespeare, and there's much less to read, which frees up more time for doing extracurriculars. But also there was a lot of emphasis on Old and Middle English, which I always found very interesting and there's a certain clarity in the literature. They got to the point, like, "it's a religious allegory... it's a bawdy limerick... we're going to die at 35 just stick to the point." It's over simplifying and yet there's, kind of, the truth there.

So, I was very interested in it at university and then, just afterwards a dream etymology job came up at *The Oxford English Dictionary*. *[heavenly angels singing]* So, I applied for it and only got to the second round. *[record scratch]* I didn't get very far in because now I know what's involved in being a dictionary etymologist. I realize that I would have been extremely ill suited because that is a job that requires a lot of precision, a lot of dispassion. You're supposed to write dictionary entries with very little character in. They're supposed to be, kind of, authoritative, but not jaunty, not funny. And, you have to be so methodical and I'm not methodical at all.

**Alie:** So, not a lot of room for pizzazz.

**Helen:** No, except for the entry for pizzazz, if they have enough written citations for pizzazz. *[laughs]*

**Aside:** Pizzazz, of course meaning style or flair, vitality. Now, this word emerged in the 1930s, etymologists think from showbiz slang. But for me, pizzazz will forever be tied to the Mexican Pizza at *Taco Bell*, which was first introduced decades ago as yes, a

Pizzazz Pizza. [clip from Taco Bell ad, circa 1985: "Get struck by the never before taste of Pizzazz Pizza."] I will always remember my Mom having to hang her head out the car window and scream into the order box, [as if over a bad speaker: "A Pizzazz... A Pizzazz Pizza!"] When they changed the name to Mexican Pizza, something inside me died. I've been sad about it for decades. I mourned.

Okay, also, Helen studied English at Oxford, so word origins, language, et cetera... And then she says she didn't really do anything with that for about another 12 years when she started *The Allusionist*. But on *Answer Me This*, they get a lot of word origin questions throughout the year, so she was flexing that proverbial muscle all along.

**Alie:** Did you know when you were getting your degree that you wanted to go into historical language? Did you know that etymology maybe was something you wanted to do?

**Helen:** It just didn't seem like a plausible thing *to* do, but also I'm very bad at thinking ahead, so I wasn't really thinking much beyond it. When I was little I was like, "I just want to get to university." Because it felt like freedom. And then when I was there I was just very much enjoying being there 'cause it was like freedom. And I was like, "You'll just deal with the job stuff afterwards." And, then that took a decade.

**Aside:** So an etymologist may be a linguist, a dictionary writer, a podcaster about language and also even a murderer, as detailed in Simon Winchester's book, *The Professor and the Madman*, which is about the compilation of *The Oxford English Dictionary* that began in 1857. It was led by a Professor by the name of James Murray. And the overseeing committee was like, "Man, one person, Dr. W. C. Minor, has submitted over 10,000 entries and etymologies. We should send him, like, a muffin basket or a thank you. What a badass!" Then they found out Dr. Minor was a Civil War doctor who became an inmate in an asylum for the criminally insane. And then they were like, "Hmmmm... We're still going to use these definitions though. That's cool."

**Helen:** So, one of the very important compilers of *The Oxford English Dictionary* was a guy who was in prison for murder. But he had a lot of time to sort through written citations of words, because they still have to go off written citations of things to prove that the word existed, and the time that it existed, and that it means the things that you think it means, and they can demonstrate that. They just have to be able to demonstrate everything with written citations. They collect loads and loads of written examples for words. And also they have to prove that it's important enough and in sustained usage for long enough.

So, it's not like you could provide a hundred written citations for a word you've just made up and it would immediately catch on. [clip from *Mean Girls*: "That is so fetch."] But if you could get it to catch on and enough other people to use it, could get it in the dictionary, Alie!

**Alie:** GASP!

**Helen:** Little project!

**Aside:** Okay, so some of the OED's added words this year, by the by, were, TGIF, Burkini, and haterade. Some interesting choices.

**Alie:** Do you keep up with the OED each year, with the new words added?

**Helen:** No, 'cause I think that's usually a press release game, don't you? Because they just want to annoy people with that, often.

**Alie:** That's a good point. They're usually the most annoying words.

**Helen:** Yes, exactly. They know they're trolling people.

**Alie:** Oh god, that's so sinister and wonderful.

**Helen:** Yeah, I like the relish with which a lot of the dictionaries have taken to the social media age. A lot of them have very salty Twitter accounts.

**Alie:** Oh god, yes.

**Helen:** And you learn some good words, but also the print edition of dictionaries, there's a limit to the number of words they can put in there. So, some have to go. It's difficult for words to enter, but there's a lot of room on the Internet so they can track those words, and something that may only be briefly useful, like, "On fleek" that can enter the dictionary quickly, but it doesn't necessarily have to stay there if it was just a few years of on fleekness.

**Alie:** On fleek sounds so much better coming with a British accent. [*laughs*]

**Helen:** I only ever say in quotation marks. [*computer voice: "Eyebrows on fleek"*] I've never managed to say it in an actually descriptive way.

**Alie:** I don't think anyone other than the original vine poster. [*Peaches Monroe: "Eyebrows on fleek."*]

**Helen:** Peaches Monroe.

**Alie:** Is that what her name is?!

**Helen:** Yeah.

**Alie:** Good job! How do you know that?!

**Helen:** Well, [*laughs*] I have studied the etymology of "on fleek."

**Alie:** That's why you're the best!

**Helen:** Oh Gosh. But yeah, I'm too old to say it without quotation marks.

**Alie:** Yeah, we all are.

**Helen:** [laughs]

**Alie:** Now, at what point did you get the idea for *The Allusionist*? How did that develop?

**Helen:** Right, well, around 2014, I just had the idea of doing a show that was called *Word Detective*. And I was like, what does that mean? So, I worked back a bit, and then my friend Roman Mars who makes *99% Invisible*, had just founded Radiotopia and I knew that he was interested in getting me to do some stuff. And he came to stay with me in London in the summer of 2014. So, while he was jet lagged and vulnerable, I was walking him around the park and I said, "I've had an idea for a show, it's a bit like your show, but for language instead of architecture and design." And he was like, okay.

**Aside:** So they dug around for the financing, because she wouldn't have been able to do *Answer Me This*, plus *The Allusionist*, plus handle extra time of a day job. As someone who still hasn't mailed Christmas presents, in March, I get this.

**Helen:** Podcasting for the first many years was financially rather painful.

**Alie:** OH SURE!

**Helen:** So, that was how it started. He was like, okay we can make this financially viable. And also it was a slightly quieter time and podcasting then.

**Alie:** Yeah, it is quite a din of different shows.

**Helen:** Yes. Certainly very noisy.

**Alie:** And now you must have had a bit of a field day when you were first coming up with words that you wanted to explore. I mean, how did you decide which words get in?

**Helen:** Well there's a long Google doc with potential ideas that I've had since before the show began. And I have done not that many of those ideas because a lot of it is just what can I actually get done? How can I think to pursue this? Who can I talk with about it? Who will agree to be on the show or knows about it? What's an angle that is not just going to be really dry? A lot of it is what am I curious about and what don't I know about. Because if I feel like I know where something's going to go, I'm not very interested in making an episode about it. Or if it's very familiar. It's patching up my own ignorance.

But, I am a team of one! So actually, although it was pitched as an etymology show, it hasn't really been a lot about that because what it turns out I'm far more interested in is human behavior and how things are applicable now. Like, what's resonant to people now.

**Aside:** So rather than being a historian, Helen prefers to look into the current usage of words and terms and how they kinda roll around our brains and out of our face.

**Helen:** And then it's finding bits of information to give to people. And so, it's gone in a very different direction to what I thought. But sometimes I'll have insomnia... I remember I had insomnia, and often what I do is, "I wonder whether this word comes from where I think it does." And then if it didn't, I think, "Oh, that's worth making a note of it. It's surprising." So I remember in the first few months of *The Allusionist*, I thought, "I'll just check..." in the night, whether 'step' as in stepparent just means you're a step away from the biological lineage. And it doesn't, it means grief.

**Alie:** GASP!

**Helen:** I thought, "Ahhh, and if I didn't know that then a lot of listeners are not going to know that." I firstly was trying to get someone to speak who was from a museum of orphans and abandoned children in London because I thought they would be interesting on, like, the history of the family in that respect. And they would not speak to me.

**Alie:** Really??

**Helen:** Yeah. And then I thought I'll do it differently, because you have a lot of wicked stepmothers in folklore. And Aaron Mahnke, from the podcast *Lore*, we were kind of internet friends and I was like, "Would you be interested?" It was just before his show was, like, really too big for him to be... way too busy to do this. And he came with a lot of fascinating research about how you didn't really have a stepparent unless someone had died because divorce was uncommon and therefore stepparents got a pretty bad rap. I also just put a Facebook post up saying, "If you've got feelings about step in your own family existence, just record yourself talking about them."

**Aside:** [clip of man talking: "I've got a somewhat complicated family and have several stepparents. Although I never really call them that. I've always just known them as their first name. It can be a bit jarring to explain how you're related to this person who you refuse to call your Dad."]

And that was very compelling because a lot of people said, "You know, I'd never consciously thought about it and now I have. I think I hate it."

**Alie:** Really?

**Helen:** Yeah. So it was just a very interesting montage to me of how people dealt with this word as children, or as stepparents, or stepsiblings, or the different words that they use. I think in Sweden, *Bonus* is the term, which I felt was much more positive.

**Alie:** That is more positive! That's my bonus dad!

**Helen:** Right, right. Much less wickedness.



**Alie:** Yeah. You don't think of someone who's getting angry at your tee ball games and secretly hates you, you know?

**Helen:** Right. Who's just trying to take all of your parents' money and then leave. Kill them and leave.

**Alie:** Like when you look at a house and there is a bonus room and you're like, "so much possibility!" More than expected.

**Helen:** Yes. 'Cause it's a bonus.

**Alie:** It's a bonus!

**Aside:** The word bonus comes from the Latin for *bon*, a good thing. So, somewhere there is a sweet, nice stepdad driving carpool or a stepmom working her ass off to put together a cool birthday party, and y'all, it's okay to shed a tear about this, bonus folks. You're good.

**Alie:** Now is there something about the elasticity of language? I feel like that's kind of what we all love about etymology, but is your interest rooted in human behavior and how we keep morphing things?

**Helen:** Yes, my interested is very much in human behavior. And I think that's what partly got me interested in etymology in the first place was just a lot of it is a little idiosyncratic and you can see these signs of how people would have behaved several hundred years ago. So, there's a lot of mistakes in how words have evolved. It's not necessarily logical. And I think that was appealing that it's not these straight paths. Another thing I learned about doing the show was that I'm not a language prescriptivist. I was such a pedant when I was a child.

**Alie:** *[laughs]*

**Helen:** Just a nightmare, particularly to my Mum. But it's unsustainable. When you know anything about how language behaves, you can't keep it up because there's just so many things contradicting it. And there's a lot of cognitive dissonance if you want to keep up your pedantry. But also after a while I was like, "You're carrying around a lot of pointless anger. It's just not necessary." So that was a positive surprise, I think. It was just being amenable to how language is going to change and has always changed, particularly the English language. That has evolved much more rapidly than a lot of other languages that are deliberately kept the same. But if you know about English, you're like, "Okay, this is what happens." People use it the ways that they need it to be used.

So if there is a gap, then people will fill it with either a word that they've decided to use in a different way or they will invent one. *[clip from Mean Girls: "Gretchen, stop trying to make fetch happen!"]* A lot of it is driven by that kind of necessity. You can't control it.

And even if it doesn't necessarily make sense, it's never made sense. You might not like it, but you have to understand that this is a linguistic process.

**Alie:** Now, what is it about English that has made it evolve so rapidly? And also, having studied Latin, where do you see we grab the roots from? Latin? From Greek?

**Helen:** Oh yeah, English is such a mutt of a language, which is why it's so fascinating. It's a problem as well, which is more to do with its later history. So, English kind of came about originally from a bunch of invasions. There were native languages in the British Isles, but then there was the Roman invasion, which I think was 50 BC to about 400 AD. And then Germanic forces invaded around 500 AD. And then Vikings. And then in 1066, the Normans. So you've got a lot of French influence but also a lot of Latin through French. And so at that point you had the language of governance being Latin, but then the language of posh people being French. And then normal people still speaking Anglo-Saxon, a Germanic version of Anglo Saxon. And then that kind of coalesces into middle English that then becomes modern English.

So, I think about 70% of English words have some Latin roots, but a lot of those Latin roots would've come from Greek or they didn't come directly from the Romans. And then you've got, what I call euphemistically, 'Britain's enthusiastic foreign policy.'

*[The Price Is Right loser horns, "BUM BUM BAH DUM, WAAAAAH"]*

So it was not only people coming in and invading the country, it's also us going to other parts of the world, a lot of other parts of the world and a sticking our dicks in them.

**Alie:** *[laughing]* Pretty much!

**Helen:** Yeah, so English has happened in lots of different places, but also we found words in those places and brought them back. Or we brought back things we found like potatoes and thus the word with them. That happens a ton. You've got this very idiosyncratic thing. Whereas French, you've got an academy keeping French the same. They decide on whether you're allowed gender neutral pronouns or whatever. They don't like this. It's very gendered language. Whereas English doesn't have that kind of control and has resisted that kind of control. They've tried and it hasn't really taken off.

**Aside:** *[comedically warped voice]* By the way, if you hear something that sounds like vacuuming, it's because there's someone outside my door vacuuming. I run a very professional podcast studio here.

**Helen:** It's just vacuuming. People have heard it before.

**Alie:** They've heard it before. So why did Latin steal from Greek so much?

**Helen:** That is a really good question. I think because you had a lot of Greek power before you had Ancient Roman Empire power. And also there is a lot of cultural crossover. So, there's basically like three parents for most languages. Again, it's just going back to the

root word and then it being in different locations evolved into slightly different versions of the words.

**Alie:** And when it comes to finding the root word of something, what's been one of the more surprising entries, or what are some of your favorite etymologies? Because there's a story behind all of them.

**Helen:** Yes, although frustrating. Often the story is "we don't know." The pathway doesn't go very far particularly with slangs because they don't have the written citations, so they can't prove where a slang came from cause it's usually in people's mouths way before it's written down. I really liked the etymology of the word 'mediocre.' And I don't know why it is, but it means 'halfway up a jagged hill.'

**Alie:** Really?

**Helen:** Yeah. What an evocative thing.

**Alie:** My god! I never knew that one.

**Helen:** I would have thought to get halfway up a jagged hill you have to be really quite good.

**Alie:** Yeah.

**Helen:** That doesn't seem like an easy path, or the absence of any particular quality. It seems like a hard climb.

**Alie:** Yeah! How many jagged hills where these people climbing?

**Helen:** I don't know.

**Alie:** It must be quite a lot if 'you could only get halfway up' was a burn.

**Helen:** Yeah, "we just scampered right to the top before breakfast." So I find that very fascinating and I don't understand why it is. It seems like quite the story.

**Alie:** Yeah, I didn't know that. Have you ever heard the etymology for buxom?

**Helen:** No, that sounds fun.

**Alie:** It's such a good one. This is one of my favorite etymologies. It comes from pliable, and then compliant, and then friendly, and then beautiful, and then sexy, and then boobs.

**Helen:** Wow. So it wasn't that the boobs were pliable.

**Alie:** No... *[laughs]*

**Helen:** The person was pliable. That's a sexy trait to some.

**Alie:** Evidently. Yeah. So, it's one of those weird twists and turns, just thinking about it having to morph at every stage of the way.

**Helen:** Yeah.

**Aside:** Googling, "Buxom woman" will not, sidenote, get you *any* returns of pliable branches. Now, speaking of searches, where does Helen go first to uncover a word's history? She says EtymOnline and Dictionary.com are her preferred sources, as she's constantly traveling with her husband and she can't haul around a shelf full of dusty reference books. Come on.

**Alie:** And you're kind of wandering about, which is... what a life. You and your husband.

**Helen:** Ridiculous.

**Alie:** Scientist. Physicist.

**Helen:** Yeah.

**Alie:** I would say that you're traipsing about the continents.

**Helen:** Traipsing. Yeah. Gadding about.

**Alie:** So you bop around...

**Helen:** Yeah, we bop around to different countries.

**Alie:** And, so you're a wandering etymologist.

**Helen:** [*laughs*]

**Alie:** That's so romantic!

**Helen:** Wandering audio-tainer.

**Alie:** If you would have thought as a college student that you would get to travel the world while doing etymology.

**Helen:** I know, right? Bananas. And getting paid.

**Alie:** Living the dream!

**Helen:** Living the absolute dream.

**Alie:** GASP!

**Helen:** I couldn't even allow myself to have that dream because I'd have thought, "I don't want to be disappointed."

**Alie:** Well, and podcasts didn't exist.

**Helen:** Nope. They did not. *[laughs]*

**Alie:** When it comes to, like, a goal with etymology, do you feel like with language you can use your platform to have people see each other differently? Do you ever feel like you can fix some ills of the world with language?

**Helen:** Yeah. When I'm feeling evangelical. So, it is an entertainment show first and foremost, and it's supposed to distract people on a commute, or when they can't sleep, or when they're feeling anxious, or whatever. But then it's just when you get into language and you're thinking about all the different ways that can be used, I think a lot of it is about empathy because the more sensitive you become to all that, you become more aware of your own usage and how other people might interpret it and the various things they might mean with their usage.

So, it forces you to think about other people more in their communication and the endless variety thereof. And also if you get into your hangups you can often realize that a lot of them are about snobbery or a way of controlling people almost by telling them that they're saying something in a way you disagree with. And so, removing yourself from that, or encouraging other people just to not focus on that, I think that is quite important because it's just more compassionate.

**Aside:** And the etymology of compassionate? It's late Latin for *com* plus *patti*, so to suffer together. And yes, the root of passion is to suffer. But compassion is 'to feel the pain of others,' which is terribly moving.

**Helen:** So I'd say that is the more serious thing.

**Alie:** And you mentioned a live show you did recently. It was about gender pronouns and preferred usage.

**Helen:** Yeah, I've been doing a lot of work about gender in language. That's all festering into something and not quite sure what form it will emerge in yet. So, it's about things like titles like mister and misses and mrrs and gender pronouns. And just how, to me having gender in the English language doesn't really make much sense. I don't think it's necessary.

Some languages have far less gender, and there are a lot of languages that have no gender pronouns at all, and languages where they don't use titles. And I'm curious to know whether the absence of those things has any effect on the way that people communicate with each other or relate to each other. And it's certainly not the case that languages that have no gender pronouns don't have gender imbalance, but I'm just thinking, why don't we default to gender neutrality? And then people can always opt into a gendered pronoun if they want. I feel like it would save a lot of bother if it was just default, "They."

**Alie:** Yeah, why do you think that there is resistance to that?

**Helen:** That's a really good question. I think some people fear change. And change can consciously or unconsciously to people be almost insulting because it's like, "you're wrong" rather than just, "you do a thing and it's not necessarily wrong, but it's not necessarily the permanent way." And I think also some people are just not comfortable with the idea of a different kind of society. I mean, I see this even in myself, when you've been raised in this, sort of, very binary gender way and there's certain gender limits and so on. I felt like I molded a lot of myself to working around the constraints of that just to, kind of, optimize the way that I could exist in this thing I didn't really agree with, and make it as irrelevant to myself as possible. But I couldn't possibly escape it. But then if that crumbles, who am I?

There are some people who've adjusted themselves a lot more to living in the patriarchy or whatever and take advantage of that. Male and female. Then if it's taken away, some people are like, "Yes, like I feel so freed." And other people are like, "Yeah, who am I and what am I supposed to do and how am I supposed to benefit?" Like, they don't know what the benefit is to them of a fairer society because they might think it's not. So, I think that is scary to people. And, some people want neat categorization of everything. But I have a lot of arguments as to why. It's very easy to give people the right pronoun. It doesn't really affect you. But also 'you' was originally a plural pronoun that we also use in the singular.

**Alie:** Oh!

**Helen:** Yeah, and people have adjusted to that because they've had a few hundred years to deal with it.

**Alie:** What was it before?

**Helen:** Oh, so 'you' was the plural form and 'thou' was the singular form and the informal form. And you would use 'you' to be polite. And then people were so polite 'you' just became the dominant form.

**Alie:** Really?

**Helen:** Yeah.

**Alie:** I didn't know that.

**Helen:** And people can handle that. So, 'they' ... I mean, it's not such a leap. People use 'they' as a kind of general pronoun anyway. Like when they're not sure who they're referring to. So if I said, "Oh, I'm going to stay with my cousin." You might say, "Oh, where do 'they' live?" without it being a political thing. But as soon as you introduce the politics to it, for some people, their fuse is lit.

**Alie:** I wonder if part of it, it's just a resentment that a newer, maybe, generation gets a benefit of something that we didn't, you know?

**Helen:** Yes.

**Alie:** I think about what my life would have been like if I weren't gendered so much. And I wonder if anyone just is pissed that they're like, "You get that?! I didn't get that!"

**Helen:** Right! Yes, I definitely think there's some part of that.

**Alie:** Which is the worst reason to withhold something from someone. The absolute worst, most petty, bitchy...

**Helen:** Yeah. I'm very interested in how language is used to manipulate. And in positive and negative ways, it can be used for that a lot. I was reading this '80s classic-of-business-schools kind of manual, which is about the language of persuasion. And it was talking about just how it's much easier to double down on something that seems like a bad decision than to admit that it was bad and do something different.

**Alie:** Oh my god.

**Helen:** You start seeing that and just all sorts of things.

**Alie:** That was in an instructional book???

**Helen:** Yeah.

**Alie:** Oh, that's horrifying. That explains a lot of our politics now.

**Helen:** Really does, doesn't it? You start seeing it everywhere.

**Alie:** I keep wanting to do an episode just called, "Apologies" with someone...

**Helen:** [*cracks up laughing*]

**Alie:** ... who is a good mediator who can just explain the best way to apologize.

**Helen:** That can just be a whole mini-series in itself. There's so much to apologize for.

**Alie:** Can we do some Patreon questions?

**Helen:** Oh yeah!

**Alie:** Okay. This is rapid fire. It's lightning round. We'll get to as many as we can.

**Helen:** Great. Hee hee!

**Aside:** So, before listener questions from Patreon, there may be some info on items and services that I use and like and who support the show. Also each week a portion of the proceeds from ads goes to a charity of the ologist's choosing. And this week Helen chose POPStheClub.com. Their mission is to transform the lives of teens who have loved ones in prison or in jail. POPS stands for 'Pain of the Prison System.' And they establish these high school clubs for these kids to gather, they can be empowered through creative expression, writing, poetry, emotional support. They also publish a book full of the students' creative work, writing, and poetry. So, it's POPStheClub.com is who Helen picked.

Okay, Patreon questions.

**Alie:** I'm going to go in order received. So, I didn't categorize these.

**Helen:** It's very fair.

**Alie:** It's very fair. Adrienne Van Halem asks: What's the origin of the phrase 'red herring'?

**Helen:** Oh crap. I did know this from *Answer Me This*, but I can't remember. [*laughs*] Sorry.

**Alie:** Okay. I'll put it in an aside.

**Aside:** Okay, looked this up and supposedly it's from smoked herrings turning red when they're cured and fugitives leaving trails of them to fool and confuse bloodhounds. So, a red herring is like a gross trail of fish that a dog thinks is you. This episode started off so horny. I don't know what happened. [*toilet flushing*]

**Alie:** Christina Shuy says: Do you have a favorite word and history of? Other than mediocre?

**Helen:** Yeah, mediocre was good.

**Alie:** Any seconds?

**Helen:** Just trying to think, I mean, there are lots, but now my mind's gone blank. Never heard of a word history before. No, I mean, this never happens when you get like a direct question, like, what's my favorite film? I've never seen a film.

**Alie:** [*laughs*] Ever! What is one?!

What was the last word that you learned? Do you remember?

**Helen:** Oh, there are words that I have to look up every time. Like lacuna. I just cannot remember what lacuna means.

**Alie:** It's a great, great word. You know how I learned that word? Did you ever see *Eternal Sunshine*?

**Helen:** I did. And that was how I learned of the word but I still haven't...



**Alie:** The best!

**Aside:** A lacuna, are you ready for this? Is a bookbinding term meaning a chunk of the glued pages have detached from the spine and are missing. And in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, which was written by the genius Charlie Kaufman, the company that can wipe away specific memories is called *Lacuna Incorporated*. [clip from *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, 2004*: "But why remember a destructive love affair? Here at *Lacuna*, we have perfected a safe, effective technique for the focused erasure of troubling memories."]

**Helen:** Just can't... It just won't fix in my mind.

**Alie:** Well, there's a blank spot where lacuna should be.

**Helen:** Yeah.

**Alie:** There's a lacuna...

**Helen:** AHHHHHH!!!!!!

**Alie:** ... where there's a lacuna!

**Helen:** That's how I'm to remember it! Thank you!

**Alie:** Boom!

**Helen:** You really guided me through that.

**Alie:** Erica Smith asked: Do you have a favorite website to research the etymology of words or phrases?

**Helen:** EtymOnline. Strongly recommend.

**Alie:** Awesome. Bob White [*"Hi Bob!"*] just says... This is an imperative, not even an inquisitive: Explain queue. Q. U. E. U. E.

**Helen:** [*laughs*] Well, it's a way you stand in line with people. We got the word from French. In French 'queue' is pronounced queue [ph. kuh] and means tail. So that's very cute, isn't it? Like a dog's little queue [ph. kuh].

**Alie:** Oh, that's adorable! I do love that, having context for all these words, it's like seeing someone's face and being like, okay. And then getting to know them as a person. You know?

**Helen:** Yeah.

**Alie:** Awww, I love it. Katie Cobb: Why is 'the eff word' so versatile?

**Helen:** It's a great word, isn't it? A lot of the swears are very flexible, but particularly that one 'cause it can be noun, verb, affectionate, sexual, insult. Yeah, it's very handy.

**Alie:** Yeah, what is the fucking etymology of that word?

**Helen:** Oh, that is a hard one to know because, it's old but it's also 'cause it's kind of slangy. So when people make up an acronym for it, it's definitely not an acronym. It's hundreds of years older than that. But a lot of the etymologies of swears are just a bit unsatisfactory because they don't really know. But, it wasn't such a rude word as it is now. Like the C bomb wasn't such a rude word as it is now. Like, religious swears were more rude in the 14th century when these swears were around; body parts, and sexual ones, not so much as the religious ones. But yeah, I think when people are down on swearing, you just think, well, what word can you use in as many varied ways as the F bomb?

**Alie:** It is the Swiss Army Knife of cussing.

**Helen:** [*cracks up laughing*]

**Alie:** There's nothing it can't do.

**Helen:** That is a wonderful way to describe it.

**Alie:** I still can't say the C word. That's not a word that... I think that's more of a British word.

**Helen:** Yeah. I didn't realize... that's been very educational to me making this show about language. I knew that there were differences in American vocabularies versus English, but I was less aware of the nuances of usage, because I hadn't spent as much time in the States. There are certain things you don't realize it until they're pointed out. So, I think the fourth episode of *The Allusionist* was about the C bomb. In Britain, it is a strong swear. It's one of the strongest, but you still get people who are kind of... it can be an affectionate one. "Ah, you old C bomb!" You know, in context. You wouldn't say that to someone you weren't very confident would understand the intent.

**Alie:** Of course. This almost dovetails but Danielle Rivera asks: What is your biggest word-related pet peeve?

**Helen:** Oh, I have a lot, but I'm always trying to confront my prejudices, and some of them I think will never leave, but I can just not give them more room. Others have really dissipated over the years. But at the moment I am really keeping an eye on the word "community." I think that people using it should think, "Is there another word I can use?" Because I think it's being used thoughtlessly, and so when people say 'the black community' or 'the gay community,' that sounds like it's 40 people that meet in a village hall and they all have the same viewpoint.

I can understand why something might be quite specific, you might have the gay community in a particular city, but when you're talking about millions of people, it's too small a word for that. And I heard someone say 'the female community' and thought,

"That is half the world. That is not appropriate." So, if you're using community, I think there are different nouns you could use or different ways to reframe the adjective that you're using. Like science community, you could say 'scientists.' So part of it, to me, is an efficiency thing, but partly also there's a kind of condescension in it sometimes. And I'm always thinking, "Why is that there? What's it covering over?"

**Alie:** What would be a better word in the context of the black or the gay community? I agree with you completely.

**Helen:** Yeah. Often, it's 'people.'

**Alie:** People?

**Helen:** Yeah.

**Alie:** Boom. Done.

**Helen:** Black people. Gay people. But then it's like, what you're trying to say with such a big generalization? Should you break that down a bit more?

**Alie:** So, indicative of, perhaps, what you're saying doesn't reflect the thoughts of everyone.

**Helen:** Right. Just be careful of the generalizations. Yeah.

**Alie:** That's a great note. Danielle Rivera also wants to know: How many people assume that you study insects or that you have a podcast about bugs?

**Helen:** Quite a lot! And confusingly, right behind your head are some beautiful insects.

**Aside:** I have a big, gross dead bug collection on one wall of my apartment and I'm just realizing how creepy that must be for visitors. But Helen is very wonderful and she's compassionate. But yes, etymology and entomology.

**Helen:** But I can understand why people would mix them up because they're not exactly words you need in your everyday vocabulary. I wouldn't necessarily remember if I didn't particularly care about either.

**Alie:** Oh, sure. Yeah, they don't roll off the tongue often.

**Helen:** So when people get it wrong, I think, "at least they tried."

**Alie:** They're so close.

**Helen:** They busted out a tricky word.

**Alie:** So, so close. That'd be like if someone bought you a shoe and it was a 7.5 and not an 8. You'd be like, pfffflookathowcloseitis! Ivey Crutchfield wants to know: Can you ask her the origin of coccyx?

**Helen:** Wow. That's a really interesting one. I could look it up. I don't keep all the words in my brain.

**Aside:** A coccyx, sidenote, is a tailbone. So, technically, there were two present while recording this. Also present, next to us on the coffee table, is a hulking 5-pound Dictionary of Etymology that I've had for 20 years. It's one of the first things I'd rescue should all of my belongings become threatened by fire. That's not true. I'd probably run out of the house without pants and then just order a new book online with the insurance money. But anyway, we looked it up for you, Ivey.

**Helen:** Oh, this is good, actually. It's from the Greek word '*kokkux*,' [ph. kuk-koo] [*cuckoo clock cuckoos*] supposedly called by the ancient Greek physician Galen - who was very influential in the history of medicine - because the bone in humans supposedly resembles or Cuckoo's beak. Wow!

**Alie:** Your butt bone is a bird beak!

**Helen:** [*laughs*] Isn't that nice and alliterative!

**Alie:** Boom!

**Helen:** There you go.

**Alie:** I'm so glad they asked! Thanks, Ivey!

**Helen:** Lovely question.

**Alie:** Mads Clement wants to know: What's the best way to take down linguistic prescriptivists? Every time someone's like, [*mocking*] "That's a made up word," I want to do murder.

**Helen:** Yeah. Well, all the words are made up, ultimately.

**Alie:** There you go.

**Helen:** Yeah. Language evolves and you can't stop it. But you can be swept away by the tide if you just stand there not moving.

**Alie:** I like that idea.

**Aside:** Once again, "Language evolves and you can't stop it, but you can be swept away by the tide if you just stand there not moving."

**Alie:** Kadie Spino wants to know: Can you do the thing that the dad and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* did and trace any word back to Greece? [*clip from My Big Fat Greek Wedding, 2002: "Gimme a word. Any word! And I show you how the root of that word is Greek. Okay?"*]

**Helen:** No.

**Alie:** No. [*whispering*] Can't happen.

[*clip from My Big Fat Greek Wedding, Girl: "Okay Mister Portacollis, how about the word kimono?" Dad: "Ah ha! Kimono. Kimono, kimono, kimono..."*]

**Alie:** Em Meurer wants to know: What is your opinion on starting essays with, "Webster's Dictionary defines X as...?"

**Helen:** HA! That is desperate! Yeah. Don't do it. And also don't start anything with, "It is a truth universally acknowledged..." in a *Pride and Prejudice* riff because I see a lot of journalists starting articles with that and I'm like, "You're out of ideas." What happens in the next paragraph, if you're trying to do that beginning? What happens next? And then you could work back to opening with something more relevant.

**Alie:** So that's tired, played out, done.

**Helen:** It's rather tired and played out. But also, what is it you're trying to say by citing that? It feels like... that's your training wheels and you're not ready to take them off your bike.

**Alie:** [*giggles*] Anna Thompson mentioned the unnecessary U's and someone else answered that about back in the day when you took out an ad in a paper and they charged by the letter...

**Helen:** Oh, unfortunately that is made up, but it's a really wonderful story that I appreciate. It is just that American English is somewhat more streamlined than British English, which I appreciate. So, British English might have the U's cause it's like, oh a lot of those words came from French. And in American English, you're like, "Why do we need it?" 'Cause you can't hear it. It doesn't add anything. Get rid of it. Or like theater. You know, 'er' rather than we have, it's still 're'. And it doesn't make sense that we still have that, but I think we're, in England, still attached to the past and have resisted attempts to make the language more logical. Whereas in the States you have less fettered by that history.

**Alie:** Oh! I didn't know that. I totally bought the thing that it was...

**Helen:** It's a great story. A lot of the really attractive stories, unfortunately, are false 'cause it's easier to make up a great story than to actually have one in life.

**Alie:** Well then, you've just debunked some flimflam.

**Helen:** Oh, shit. Puncturing dreams. That's me.

**Alie:** No, I loved it. Rae Casha wants to know: Did all language evolve from an origin language?

**Helen:** There's like three origin languages. But then, I think it's not even that straight forward because there are some where they don't really act like any other languages. Like Basque in northern Spain is not like Spanish, but it's also not really like anything. It's exciting. Finnish, that's very unusual.

**Alie:** Oh, I've heard about that. [*clip from YouTube Wikitongues Channel, woman speaking Finnish: "Muulla Suomalaiset on aika hiljaisia ihmisiä, me ei tykätä puhua hirveesti small talk"*]

**Alie:** So they think three origin languages, perhaps.

**Helen:** Yeah.

**Alie:** Okay. I was surprised by what a Romance language is. I thought I knew them. Is English not a Romance language?

**Helen:** It sort of is. Romance languages are, broadly, languages that were heavily influenced by Latin. So like Spanish, Italian, French, English 60-80%.

**Alie:** Yeah. I didn't know that. I thought it totally that it was. Carrie Stuard wants to know: Are there any synonyms for the most hated word, moist? [*splat!*]

**Helen:** Moist. Do you hate the word moist?

**Alie:** At this point, it's an underdog. You know what I mean? Like, can moist live? Can it just do its business? I don't hate it.

**Helen:** It's fine.

**Alie:** I don't hate it. I tend to think of dew or grass more than I think of...

**Helen:** Well, that's a lovely form of moisture. I suppose the people who hate it are maybe thinking of bodily crevices.

**Alie:** I think... [*laughs*]

**Helen:** And that's their prejudice showing.

**Alie:** Yes, it is.

**Helen:** Yeah. Because other words like damp... I mean, if you're moist from the rain, like a raincoat. Damp. Is that better? Is that worse? A bodily crevice could also be damp.

**Alie:** Sure. I feel like moist has a certain heat to it that damp lacks.

**Helen:** A steaminess rather than chilliness. It's good that we're figuring these things out.

**Alie:** Anyone who hates that word, hopefully you hate it more now.

Chris Brewer wants to know: How do you feel about people using emojis instead of words? [*clip from YouTube user AkA: "Which emoji are you?"*]

**Helen:** Well, grandma here knows that she's outmoded and I don't speak Emoji. I don't use them. My mum send me one the other day and that was a shock. So, she's on board.

**Alie:** People don't even send them to you?

**Helen:** They do, but I don't necessarily interpret them in the way they're supposed to be interrupted because I don't understand how you're supposed to use them and how they affect what has been said. Because my assumption, years ago, was they're just reiterating what's in the words. But I don't think that is the case. They are influencing how the words are supposed to be interpreted. But that is the part that I don't know. So it's a bit of a problem, I think, that I don't speak emoji.

But what I don't like is that the visuals are controlled by someone else. So if you were handwriting you probably wouldn't do your own emoji. There's, like, hundreds of them and it would take a long time. So, I find that a bit prescriptive by Unicode, deciding what can be expressed. So, we may only have 26 letters in the English language and some punctuation, but there's a lot of combinations, mathematically.

**Alie:** Do you have any emojis that really irk you?

**Helen:** I think it would be unfair to pick on some when I don't understand, like, what the nail varnish one means, or the dancing one.

**Aside:** Helen, I got you. So does Emojipedia.com. So, according to them, the nail polish emoji is often used to display an air of nonchalance or indifference. And, the dancing emoji is used to represent a sense of fun or as a positive affirmation, like saying, "Great!" Also, the study of pictures representing thoughts is called 'curiology', and I do have an emoji expert lined up. Should I do it? Are y'all 'nail polish' or 'dancing' about it?

**Alie:** In terms of speaking in gifs, too... How do you feel about that?

**Helen:** Again, I don't fully understand, but I do enjoy that more. It seems inventive but I think it's also because there you often get a facial expression, a moving facial expression and that means more to me than a, kind of, cartoon facial expression or someone who's sticking their tongue out and there's a dollar bill on it, in emoji.

**Alie:** I don't know that one either.

**Helen:** Well, I painted a picture for you. If I put a dollar bill on my tongue, now you'll understand what the emoji is doing. [*clip: "Dollar dollar bills, y'all." -Eastbound and Down*]

**Alie:** But actually this brings up the point of gif [ph. jiff] versus gif [ph. giff].

**Helen:** Yeah, right. You pronounced it the way that the person who coined it says it should be.

**Alie:** Exactly!

**Helen:** But, I say gif [ph. giff] because then people know what you're talking about.

**Alie:** Well, which is it?

**Helen:** It's a recently made up word. I think that if they wanted it to be pronounced gif [ph. jiff] they probably should have gone with a J instead of a G.

**Alie:** Alright.

**Helen:** I know I'm rebelling against the originator, but I'm on gif [ph. giff] because it's less equivocal. Can't mix it up with the lemons.

**Alie:** What do you think is going to win out over time?

**Helen:** [*chanting*] Gif! Gif! Gif! Gif! [ph. giff]

**Alie:** All right. I am shocked that we say different things. I thought it'd be like if someone says your name is Helene.

**Helen:** Yeah, right.

**Alie:** But then again, if enough people call you Helene, your name is Helene!

**Helen:** Right. Yeah. My mum tweaked the pronunciation of the last name, so...

**Alie:** That's what it is!

**Helen:** Right, that's what it is now. I don't even know what it was two generations ago because it's immigrant names. They mutate.

**Alie:** Do you know what it means?

**Helen:** It's, like, salt vendor. Something like that. Probably.

**Alie:** Oh! Well, salt was currency, so...

**Helen:** Yeah, it's useful condiment.

**Alie:** Dollar bill on my tongue emoji....

**Helen:** Daaaaaaa! [*laughs*]

**Alie:** That's what that means! [*laughing*]



**Helen:** If people started doing that in real life where they acted a lot more like emoji and they carried the props around with them, then maybe I could get on board.

**Alie:** All you really need to know is that if you get an eggplant text...

**Helen:** Right. It's lascivious, I understand.

**Alie:** Yeah, better be from your husband.

Tyler Q says: First off, huge *Allusionist* fan. Come back to Melbourne. I promise we won't poison you again.

**Helen:** It's not your fault. It's not your fault I got ill in Australia. It's my fault.

**Alie:** Was it?

**Helen:** It's not their fault. A lot of Australians were self-blaming... It's not their fault. And also, wonderful healthcare that's free for Brits. I appreciate it immensely.

**Aside:** Helen had been working really, really hard. She was exhausted. She had tonsillitis and she woke up with a swollen neck. She had an infection in her neck. She needed surgery and she was in intensive care on a breathing tube, being monitored to make sure her blood wasn't poisoned. Trooper! She podcasted from her hospital bed and she now has an awesome scar and a good story.

**Helen:** I mean, if you have to get stuck anywhere, may I recommend Tasmania? It's really beautiful. Food's amazing. The people are very sweet, and there's some magnificent wildlife. Vineyards and cheeses.

**Alie:** Good to know. I'll schedule a surgery.

**Helen:** You don't have to have the surgery. You could just go.

**Alie:** But Tyler Q does apologize.

**Helen:** Thank you, Tyler. It's not your fault.

**Alie:** He does ask: Why are a lot of science-based words like species names said in Latin?

**Helen:** Yeah, that's a really good question. Partly, I think because it's kind of an international language. So, scientists might not all speak English, or French, or German, or whoever discovered a thing, but they might have all tapped into Latin. I think the other thing is that Latin still has a lot of status even though the Roman Empire collapsed, what was it, 1600ish years ago. So, people associate it with study and intelligence. It was propagated by religion, by Christianity being performed in Latin, and by kind of high-level politics, and stuff like that. That has helped propagate Latin for hundreds of years after the Roman Empire fell apart.

**Aside:** For more on that, please enjoy the Classical Archaeology episode on Ancient Rome.

**Helen:** But it still has this reputation of things being classier and more intelligent. And that is a really good con to pull.

**Alie:** [laughs] That's a long con.

**Helen:** It's a long con! And it's still happening! People are still coining new Latin words. There's a radio station in Finland I made an episode about, that has done a news broadcast in Latin every week since 1989. Obviously, words like airplane have no Latin equivalent, so they have to make those up, and computer. But I interviewed a guy who coins words for that and he was someone that's no different really to how computer didn't exist in English and then it had to be invented when people started having computers or Internet. So actually, it's fine.

**Aside:** Props to Tuomo Pekkanen, a Finnish Latin professor. And for more on this you can see *The Allusionist* episode number 5 titled, Latin Lives!

**Alie:** Okay.

**Helen:** Yeah. Showed me.

**Alie:** I mean, I remember learning Latin, we just learned so many words for kill.

**Helen:** DID YOU??

**Alie:** You could kill by bludgeoning. Yeah, there were so many. But of course...

**Helen:** It was useful.

**Alie:** Yeah, I mean in those times.

**Helen:** Yeah, it's really indicative of what they were interested in.

**Alie:** Yes.

**Helen:** Yeah, we didn't learn anything that interesting. How disappointing.

**Alie:** I just remember being like, "This is quite gory! *Another* word for kill?" Slightly different ways.

**Helen:** So many inventive ways to destroy a person.

**Alie:** What do you hate the most about your job?

**Helen:** I hate myself, [Alie laughs] and having to spend this amount of time with my talking, and my thoughts, and how limited I feel in my mental capacity. [laughs] So there's that. Also

sometimes it's quite lonely because you're on your own a lot, producing stuff. So that, and I hate the technological side, but I have to do it. But I do find it boring and often frustrating. And often it's three in the morning, and I just really need to get an episode out, and something's going wrong and I don't understand why.

**Alie:** Do you work several weeks ahead? Or are you finishing an episode...

**Helen:** *[laughs]*

**Alie:** Yeah... I finish an episode an hour before it goes up.

**Helen:** Ohhhh, gosh. Yeah, like, no minutes.

**Alie:** Oh god, that makes me feel so much better.

**Helen:** Oh, I think it's weird when people are way ahead. What if something changes? What if something comes up that you think, "Well, now's the time to do that."

**Alie:** Right. Okay, that makes me feel so much better. I figured because you are so successful that you just have them lined up and they just come right off.

**Helen:** No, I'm just the most tragically disorganized person, and it's got worse as well. Like, I was always bad at planning ahead and now... Since I got I'll, actually, last year, I lost a lot of time that I would usually use at least banking some interviews to get ahead on the podcast. But also, I think what's happening in the back of my mind is, "Well, you could plan ahead, but you might get stuck in hospital in Tasmania and never go there."

**Alie:** *[laughs]* So you're using it as an excuse.

**Helen:** I think subconsciously I am.

**Alie:** That's fine.

**Helen:** Yeah. Just to be absolutely terrible at forward planning.

**Alie:** That's great. We all do that.

**Helen:** It's ridiculous. I need to get my shit together.

**Alie:** What is your favorite thing about your job or about word origins?

**Helen:** Ooh. Oh, loads of stuff. Learning is great. That's a real privilege in a job. The people I've met through podcasting, that is delightful. And getting to spend time in listener's brains. That's amazing.

**Alie:** Yeah.

**Helen:** Creepy. I've just made it sound creepy. [*mischievous laughs*] Goodbye, your internal monologue. *I'm* here now.

**Alie:** [*cracks up*] Do you have a favorite thing about word origins?

**Helen:** Hmm... Do I? Favorite thing? I like when someone has a rigid idea about how things should be and there's just so many examples in history of why they're not like that. That's useful to me.

**Alie:** Disproving people.

**Helen:** See, if I can just transform society through the medium of light entertainment that's about words.

**Alie:** I would say that you already are. And, thank you for doing that.

**Helen:** No, you are so welcome.

**Alie:** Thank you for doing this. Thank you for sharing so many words with me.

**Helen:** It is so nice to be here. Thanks for having me.

**Alie:** Yay etymology!

**Helen:** Yay etymology *and* entomology.

**Alie:** And entomology, yes. Thanks for not being bugged by it.

**Helen:** Aye!!!!!!

**Alie:** I know you hate puns I'm sorry.

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So, Helen Zaltzman, how much do you adore her? The answer is a lot. So keep asking smart people stupid questions even if you have an internet crush on them and they are in your apartment politely having to stare up at a wall of dead cicadas. Now, for more of Helen's wit and word wisdom, go immediately subscribe to *The Allusionist*. She is @HelenZaltzman on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#), and @AllusionistShow on [Twitter](#). More links are in the show notes. We're at @Ologies on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#). I'm @alieward on [both](#). For pins, and hats, and totes, and shirts, go to [OlogiesMerch.com](#). Thank you Boni Dutch and Shannon Feltus for managing that.

Thank you Erin Talbert and Hannah Lipow for adminning the wonderful [Ologies Facebook group](#). Thank you interns Haeri Kim and Caleb Patton, Jarrett Sleeper of Mindjam Media for assistant editing and some research this week. And of course Steven Ray Morris of the *Purrrcast* and *See Jurassic Right* for stitching all these elements together.

At the end of each week I tell you a secret and this week's secret: I've been going down little bit of an Instagram hole watching videos of bot fly removal. [*deep breath*] OH BOY. There's this fly, it lays an egg in your skin. And then there's a worm the size of baby carrot in there. And they just pull it out wriggling. At first you just see the head, and then this thing comes out. OH BOY! Rather pear-shaped, it gets bigger and bigger towards the end and then it just POPS OUT. Oh man. That's enough for this secret. Berbye.

*Transcribed by Mike Melchior.*

**Links which you may find of use:**

[Tomato/tomahto](#)

[Etymology of tomahto](#)

["Professor and the Madman" book](#)

[Step parents on The Allusionist](#)

[Origin of pizazz](#)

[Pizazz pizza](#)

[OED added words in 2018](#)

[Etymonline](#)

[Lacuna. Inc. will clean your brain](#)

[Flim-flam about the neighbours](#)

[Calm down, Noah](#)

[Mmmmm, herrings](#)

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