# AN INTERVIEW WITH MARK PHILLIPS,
# AUTHOR OF *THE WIZARD OF OZ VOCABULARY BUILDER*

**What gave you the idea to write this book?**
You might say that the impetus was laziness.

**How so?**
As a teenager I had a terrible vocabulary. That's because I didn't like to read. But I knew that the only way to build a vocabulary was by reading. I wished there was one book that just happened to contain all the vocabulary words I'd need to know for my SATs. That way I'd have to read only one book, not lots of books. But there was no such book.

**And you've always thought there should be?**
Right.

**Why *The Wizard of Oz?***
A few reasons. One is that the original children's novel, by L. Frank Baum, was written in 1900, which means that it's in the public domain; in other words, it's free to use. But also, it contains a wide range of characters and situations. That allowed me to use a wide variety of adjectives and verbs in a natural way.

**For example?**
Well, for example, Dorothy is **artless** but **plucky**, the Lion is **pusillanimous**, the Witch is **nefarious**, and so on.

**Any other reasons?**
One other reason I chose *The Wizard of Oz* as a vehicle is that the story is known and loved by everyone. Remember, this book is aimed at people with weak vocabularies, which means that it's aimed at people who don't like to read. I wanted to use something that wouldn't be intimidating to anyone, and *Wizard* seemed to fit the bill.

**How did you make the word list?**
That was a three-stage process. First, off the top of my head, I made a list of all the words I could think of that I didn't know in high school but that I know as an adult. Then, as I worked on the book over several years, I was constantly on the lookout for words I'd forgotten to put on that list. I'd always be reading on my commuter train. Whenever I'd come across a good word in the book I was reading, I'd write it down. Then I'd add it to my master list that evening. Finally, I checked the indexes of several other vocabulary books to see if there was anything that had fallen through the cracks. I ended up with a list of about 1850 words.

**How difficult are the words?**
I excluded words that I felt were too easy, even though they appear in some other vocabulary books—such as "gullible" and "wholesome." I also excluded words that hardly anyone uses, even though you might see them in novels by Tom Wolfe—such as "empyreal" or "concupiscence." Mostly, they're SAT-type words, such as "abate," "banal," "commiserate," "desultory," and so on. But I also included some "newer" words that you see in newspapers and magazines but that don't show up on SATs—such as "tony."

**How did you learn these words, if you didn't like to read?**

I only learned them as an adult, after I began to like reading.

**Are there any special books you learned them from?**
I learned most of them from novels by three authors I especially like. I like them so much, in fact, that once I read one of their books, I decided to read all of them. I always had a dictionary with me so I could look up all the interesting, colorful words they used.

**Who are they?**
Well, the first is Herman Wouk, who happens to be my second cousin once removed. I began with his books because I felt somewhat duty bound to read them—because of the relationship, however distant. Anyway, I loved all of them. The next is A. J. Cronin, whose best-known novel is *The Citadel.* The third is the mystery/suspense author Cornell Woolrich, whose best-known story is "Rear Window," the basis of the Alfred Hitchcock film classic.

**I notice that your publishing company is called A. J. Cornell.**
Right. It's an homage to A. J. Cronin and Cornell Woolrich.

**How is your book different from other vocabulary builders?**
The main difference is that my book uses all the words in context—so the reader will remember them. Most other books are just lists of words with no means of reinforcing the meanings. If you've ever tried to memorize a list of definitions out of context, you know that they are soon forgotten.

**But some of the newer vocabulary books are also in the form of a novel.**
Right. But those books place all the definitions in a glossary at the back, which is annoying and disruptive. In my book, the definitions are on the same page as the words.

**How did you write the definitions?**
I started by looking up each word in about three different dictionaries. Then I said to myself, How can I redefine this word so that anyone can understand it. I made sure never to use other difficult words in the definition. For example, if you look up "disdain" in the dictionary, it says "scorn; contempt." Well, I would never assume that the readers of my book know the meanings of "scorn" or "contempt." In other words, I explained all the meanings in simple, everyday English.

**What else did you do?**
Another thing is that if a certain word has a meaning but carries with it a certain implication, I explain that implication. By doing that, readers understand the subtle differences between similar words; that is, because of the implications presented, they understand the differences between, let's say, "beseech," "entreat," "implore," and "importune." Other vocabulary books might simply say that each of those words means "beg" and leave it at that.

**What did you do about pronunciation and etymology?**
Pronunciations are given for any word that might be confusing—but not for all words. Etymology is mentioned only if it might help reveal the true meaning of the word. For example, I mention the epic poems of Homer in connection with the words "mentor" and "stentorian."

**How did you make up the illustrative sentences that appear with each definition?**
To me, those illustrative sentences are crucial. Even though the reader has already seen the word in context in the story and has already read a definition, I give an illustrative sentence that relates the word to some concept or event that the reader is already familiar with—to make it really stick in his mind. In doing that, I tried to make the sentences either very funny or very informative. If I

couldn't make up a good sentence off the top of my head, I searched through books of famous quotations, newspapers, encyclopedias, the Internet, and so on, until I found the perfect sentence.

**That must have been very time-consuming.**
It was. But I wasn't working on a deadline. So I spent however much time it took.

**Can you give some examples of funny sentences?**
Well, I got the idea for a sentence for the word "gall" from a cartoon I once saw in a magazine: "I asked my lawyer if he wanted to hear a funny lawyer joke, and he said yes; then he had the gall to bill me for the time it took to tell it!"

Sometimes my wife helped me write a joke. She's a very funny person. That's how the sentence for "pontificate" was written. I wrote the setup, and she supplied the punch line: "At the Super Bowl party, just to sound like a regular, sports-minded kind of guy, Les (who knew nothing about football) began pontificating about why the team he'd bet on would win; then he gave himself away by asking, 'What inning is it?'"

**What did you mean when you said that sometimes the illustrative sentences are informative?**
I meant that the sentences often refer to famous events and people in the worlds of history, politics, science, literature, music, art, sports, and so on. By reading them you can learn not only about vocabulary, but about every school subject.

**What can you learn about, let's say, history?**
Well, for example, nearly everyone has heard of the Bay of Pigs, but not everyone knows what it was. I teach about it with my illustrative sentence for "fiasco": "The 1961 Bay of Pigs fiasco, in which about 1400 CIA-trained Cuban exiles tried to overthrow Castro but were killed or taken prisoner, was probably the most embarrassing episode in the Presidency of John F. Kennedy, who had approved the mission."

And I teach a bit about World War II in my sentence for "myopic": "Some historians say that Germany lost World War II because Hitler 'left his back door open'; that is, while fighting his enemies to the west (Britain, France, the United States), he was myopic about the advance of Russia's powerful Red Army from the east."

**With so many possible sentences you could have used for each word, how did you narrow it down to just one?**
For one thing, I tried to use sentences that were in some way astonishing or amazing—in a "Ripley's Believe It or Not" kind of way—you know, to grab the reader's attention.

**Do you have an example of that?**
Well, for the word "spurious" I used the following, which I found in a newspaper: "In March 1990, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that at a British museum 'a spurious 6th-century [stone coffin] was exposed only after someone noticed that it depicted a female figure wearing 19th-century underwear.'"

**How else did you narrow them down?**
Well, I knew that teachers might be judging this book as a possible text for their students. So wherever possible, I used sentences that express positive values.

**What do you mean?**

I mean I chose sentences that deal with civil rights, democracy, anti-smoking, anti-pollution, and so on.

**For example?**
For example, for the word "decimate": "Experts say that the smoking population will be decimated by lung cancer."

**So you're trying to get people to build their vocabularies and quit smoking at the same time.**
Exactly.