

Multiple Choice Example Question

To be honest, it's totally random

Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds, Charles Mackay's seminal work on folly, was first published in 1841. To my mind one of his most interesting sections concerns the way in which a word, or phrase, will grip the masses, until you cannot listen to an exchange between two people without hearing it used. D'you know what I mean?

In Mackay's day the London mob were seized by successive manias for catchphrases as various as "Quoz", "What a shocking bad hat" and "Has your mother sold her mangle?". In some instances, he is able to trace the expression back to its origins in a real happening, or a popular ballad, while with others, although unable to explain where it came from, he nonetheless furnishes a wealth of anecdote. One such is "Who are you?", a line that was so much the rage, it entered the literary canon through the mouth of the caterpillar in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. According to Mackay, "Insolence made use of it to give offence; ignorance, to avoid exposing itself; and waggery, to create laughter". So entrenched did "Who are you?" become, that a judge at the Old Bailey used it in court to devastating effect. However, Mackay offers no wider analysis of the collective psyche, nor hypothesises as to why a given phrase self-seeds throughout the body politic at a given time.

I would argue that "D'you know what I mean?" came to prominence in the mid-1980s precisely because this was the time when, following the depredations of the first Thatcher term, people began to doubt they were being understood: old class-bound discourses were breaking down, ethnic minorities were burgeoning, and therapy-speak was rising from the couches of the shrinks to infest every fourth-rate chat mag's agony column and every daytime TV show. No wonder the next phrase to clamp British speech in its steely jaws was the even more hateful "To be honest...", with its implication that the speaker doubted her own veracity, let alone her interlocutor's. By the time we reached the end of the 1990s, there was a pressing need for new involuntary mantras, and so "At the end of the day" spewed forth from the mouths of football managers, and was piped deep into the group mind. There were many phrases already in existence to express the idea of finality and summation, so why did this particular one become such a virulent meme? My argument is that, buried way down inside our secular soullessness, there remained a core of Judaeo-Christian anxiety about the coming millennium, and that when, during the last years of the century, we bumbled "At the end of the day", we were subconsciously alluding to our fear of Revelation, followed inexorably by Judgement.

Naturally, there are also those phrases that derive from television shows and songs. A recent example would be "Am I bovvered?", devised by Catherine Tate. That the phrase became so widespread was testimony not only to its effectiveness in successive sketches, but also to its ready application to a host of real-life situations.

Since the credit crunch the one I've been hearing most frequently is "random". Random is employed, so far as I can see, entirely randomly, not simply to express the idea of contingency, the chancy or the haphazard, but, perversely, its opposite. As in a man of my acquaintance describing the posting on YouTube of film clips that have been overdubbed to comic effect: "They just get hold of some random film...". At which, I pulled him up and explained that the reverse was the case: the clip had been carefully selected. I first noticed "random" falling unbidden from the lips of my teenage children. My informants tell me that "random" insinuated itself into British vocalisation through such US teen productions as *Clueless* and *Beverly Hills, 90210*, and was altogether passé years ago. I think not. Responding to the universal, but imperfectly acknowledged, awareness that it was bankers' willingness to accept systematically flawed calculations of risk that led to the near-collapse of the western financial system, random resurged. It became a talismanic word. It is now uttered, I contend, the way certain Orthodox sects chant the name of God: as a form of prayer, in this case addressed to Fortuna herself.

What does the writer suggest is his serious purpose in writing this piece?

- A. To draw attention to the misuse of language.
- B. To update Mackay's ideas for the television age.
- C. To explain a phenomenon Mackay merely described.
- D. To rescue Mackay's work from relative obscurity.
- E. To draw parallels between the 19th Century and today.