

Oxford Australia Word of the Month

June 2008

illywhacker – ‘a small-time trickster.’

Australian Oxford Dictionary

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illywhacker

The story behind the Word of the Month

Until Peter Carey's 1985 novel *Illywhacker*, the term **illywhacker** was fairly rare in Australian English. The earliest, and most detailed, account of the word occurs in Kylie Tennant's 1941 novel *The Battlers*:

An illy-wacker is someone who is putting a confidence trick over, selling imitation diamond tie-pins, new-style patent razors or infallible 'tonics', altering cheques obtained by fraud from, say £10 to £100 ... A man who 'wacks the illy' can be almost anything, but two of these particular illy-wackers were equipped with a dart game. The board had a steel back, so that the dart would drop off, unless it stuck on one of three or four holes, which had been liberally provided to allow a fair chance for anyone desirous of collecting the gift box of chocolates, which was the prize of the successful dart-thrower.

Peter Carey's **illywhacker** is of very much the same ilk: "What's an illywhacker?" ... "A spieler ... a trickster. A quandong. A ripperty man. A con-man". **Quandong** is literally the small Australian shrub and its fruit, and the transferred sense 'a person who exploits or imposes upon another' is also first recorded (this time in 1939) by Kylie Tennant: 'In this crowd of low heels, quandongs and ripperty men, she looked at her ease and yet not of them.' Interestingly, **ripperty man** (one assumes it means 'a person who rips off another') is recorded only by Kylie Tennant and Peter Carey. We therefore have a number of Australian terms, including **illywhacker**, that have a very narrow range of published evidence, concentrated especially on Kylie Tennant and Peter Carey.

What is the origin of **illywhacker**? Kylie Tennant provides a clue when she refers to a man 'who wacks the illy'. The **illy** appears to be a fraudulent device (as in the shonky dart board made of steel), or the actual process of trickery. Sidney Baker in the second edition of his *Popular Dictionary of Australian Slang* (1943) gives **eeler-spee** 'a trickster or spieler', and **illywhacker** 'a trickster or spieler', indicating that **eeler-spee** and **illywhacker** are synonymous. In his *Australian Language* (1945) Baker gives four synonyms for 'various sharpers, tricksters and others who live by their wits': *spieler*, *eeler-spee*, *eeler-whack* and *illywhacker*. He also explains that synonyms two to four are pig-Latin-type variations of **spieler** 'swindler'. All of this evidence indicates that the **illy** of **illywhacker** is indeed an alteration of **spieler**, and that the **illywhacker** is a person who uses some kind of illegal or unfair device or ruse.

Although the term **illywhacker** has never been widely used in Australian English, it has received some impetus since the appearance of Peter Carey's novel: 'Australians used to be champions in the art of bulldust, lords of the tall story, illywhackers of stature and bearing. How low we have sunk. If there's something wrong with this country, it's got to be the poor standard of lying' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 August 1995). It would be a great pity if such a delightful word were lost from Australian English.

metrosexual
weapon
of mass destruction
karrack
glycaemic
burka index
barbecue stopper
senior moment
Sudoku hornbag
dishlicker
cyberstalking
Naltrexone
pear-shaped
witlof
yakitori
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