



GETTY IMAGES

Amelia Earhart on June 14, 1928, in front of her biplane "Friendship" in Newfoundland.

# What adventurers know could fill a book

**A**dventure is life lived at a high pitch, even when the adventures are small in cosmic scope. Quests, treasure hunts, heists, military missions, secret assignments are all high-level adventures. But a trip to the beach may become an adventure, unleashing a surprising gust of joy, just as, in ironic counterpoise, an ordinary task can turn into an adventure when one performs it badly.

All adventures, large and small, are driven by desires: for secrecy, wealth and power, political success, military advantage, survival, or the simple pleasure of beating the game or opponent. The absence of desire being a form of death, nothing speaks to the texture of life more than adventure, even when it is without apparent purpose — hence the appeal of sports, for example, which at once mean everything and nothing in a given moment.

Adventure is challenge and reward, risk and redemption. It doesn't have to be physical or violent. There are romantic adventures, aesthetic, intellectual, and philosophical ones, and spiritual challenges of all kinds. But even in an expected kind of adventure, such as a military mission or a mountain climbing expedition, the elements of danger and risk dominate the consciousness and the unfolding narrative. No amount of preparedness can be equal to the demands of contingency.

My own favorite condensation of this curb-your-enthusiasm wisdom is attributed to heavyweight boxer Mike Tyson: "Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth."

Most of us, as Thoreau said, lead lives of quiet desperation, not the noisier kind. Which helps explain the tremendous appeal of action and adventure novels, movies, and video games. Fiction unites our dreams with daily occurrence and offers narrative to shape what is so often messy and inconclusive in the real world. Moreover, fiction offers that curious admixture of solitude and community: Each reader experiences a book or film in their own way, but the story itself is common property, a gift economy. Those who know the same book or movie form an ad hoc gang, a fellowship of the story. We share, even without knowing one another, what recent slang would call squad goals.

Writer and semiotician Joshua Glenn has collected more than 500 adventure-related terms from Shakespeare, military and biker jargon, hip-hop and surfer slang, survivalist and gamer subcultures, extreme sports, and beyond. A selection of words and definitions from "The Adventurer's Glossary" follow.

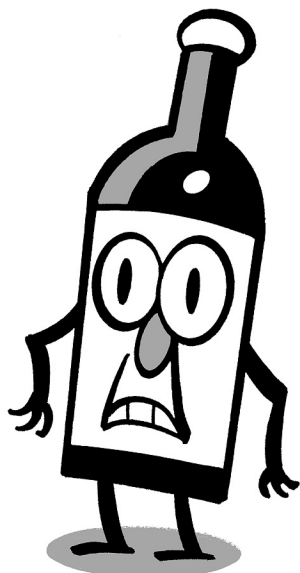
— MARK KINGWELL

## ADVENTURE

An adventure is a risky endeavor whose outcome is unknown. That last bit is crucial; every true adventure involves not merely action but a venturesome, hopeful X factor — a risk to be dared, a discovery to be made, a puzzle to be solved, a mystery to be cracked. Derived from the Latin *advenire* ("arrive"), the term developed the sense of "that which happens or befalls unexpectedly." Viewed through this lens, absurd coincidences and lucky occurrences are features, not bugs, of adventure stories.

## BOTTLE

Possibly derived from older slang terms like *bottle-swagger* ("drunkard's courage"), the still-popular 1950s-era British colloquialism *bottle* means "courage, spirit." To lose one's bottle is to lose one's nerve. According to folk etymology, the term is derived from the Cockney phrase *bottle and glass* ("arse"), and as such implies sphincter control under harrowing conditions.



## GONZO

The South Boston Irish slang term *gonzo* — meaning "gone," that is, extremely drunk and therefore prone to erratic, possibly violent behavior — was first applied to the journalist Hunter S. Thompson's eccentric, first-person-participatory writing style by Bill Cardoso of this newspaper. Thompson adopted the term and popularized it via his semi-autobiographical 1971 novel "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas."



## JACK

The nickname *Jack* has been employed since the 18th century as slang for tough, hard-working types, including *lumberjacks*, *jack tars*, and *jacks of all trades*. Going further back, English and American legends, fairy tales, and nursery rhymes — "Jack and the Beanstalk," "Jack Frost," "Jack the Giant Killer," etc. — are replete with clever young adventurers of that name. There's a theory that the name is Celtic in origin, meaning "healthy, strong, full of vital energy."

## LOOK TO WINDWARD

The nautical directive *look to windward* means "keep an eye out for enemies," because enemy ships seeking tactical advantage would attempt to approach from the direction from which the wind is blowing. Iain M. Banks's sci-fi novel "Look to Windward" borrows its title from an ominous line in T.S. Eliot's 1922 poem "The Waste Land," warning sailors "who turn the wheel and look to windward" that disaster can strike at any time.

## MACGUFFIN

A *MacGuffin* is "the mechanical element that usually crops up in any [adventure] story," Alfred Hitchcock explained about his 1935 film "The 39 Steps." "In crook stories it is always the necklace and in spy stories it is always the papers." Like a game, an adventure story has "mechanics" — rules and procedures that define the player's objective and create satisfying challenges — some of which are more obviously artificial than others. Postmodern adventures, like Pynchon's "V." and Tarantino's "Pulp Fiction," often feature obtrusively meaningless MacGuffins.



## NOMAD

The 16th-century term *nomad* is taken from the Latin word for "member of a people that travels from place to place to find fresh pasture for its animals." (The Latin term is itself derived from the Greek for "pasturage.") In an adventure context, a nomad is an itinerant drifter: "A nomad I will remain for life," the courageous cross-dressing Swiss explorer Isabelle Eberhardt wrote in her diary, "in love with distant and uncharted places."

## PICARESQUE

The fictional adventures of a roguish, low-class, yet appealing hero who lives by their wits in a corrupt society is known as a *picaresque*. Its protagonist, the *picaresco* — the Spanish term means "rogue, scoundrel" — seeks escape not only from the strictures of an enlightened, modern social order but, in a metatextual sense, from the imposition of narrative structure itself.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY SETH

## WIND (IN THE)

A fugitive or escaped person is sometimes said to be *in the wind*. The phrase likely derives from the 16th-century expression *have in the wind*, which is to say, of hunting dogs, "be on the scent or trail of, be in search of." Reminder to fugitives: Always stay downwind of the dogs!

*Joshua Glenn is a writer, semiotician, and a former editor of the Ideas section. Mark Kingwell is a professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto. Their previous collaborations include the books "The Wage Slave's Glossary" (2011) and "The Idler's Glossary" (2008). Seth is a Canadian cartoonist, the creator of the series "Palookaville," and author of the graphic novel "It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken."*

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