

Even in — especially in — the Google era, a massive book of quotes never gets old

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When asked about various aspects of his record, Baseball Hall of Fame inductee Casey Stengel would often reply, “You could look it up.”

But if you do look it up in “Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations,” you won’t find the phrase attributed to the memorable manager who led the New York Yankees to seven World Series championships.

Instead, you’ll learn that the quote originated with cartoonist, writer, and humorist James Thurber. It was actually the title of a 1941 short story he wrote about a 3-foot-tall baseball player trying to get a walk from a pitcher who couldn’t find the strike zone against such a small target. Stengel didn’t become manager of the Yankees until 1948.

Published since 1855, “Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations” — or BFQ, as it is often called by those who use it — remains the go-to source for checking who said what, when, and where. The massive manual of missives and mottos has enabled writers, students, and even gamblers (“Bet you don’t know who said . . .”) to get it right.

Edited by Geoffrey O’Brien, the new and improved 19th edition hits bookstores and online retailers Oct. 25. The updated book — clocking in at 1,446 pages — includes some 3,000 new quotes by personalities such as the late Supreme Court Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, tidying-up expert Marie Kondo, and former first lady Michelle Obama. (Ginsburg, for example: “People ask me sometimes, when — when do you think it will be enough? When will it, when will there be enough women on the court? And my answer is when there are nine.”)

BFQ has earned its reputation for being authoritative. Researchers comb thousands of sources, write to authors, check original documents, and otherwise certify the veracity of a quote.

The book was originally published by John Bartlett, who was born in 1820 in Plymouth, Mass., and later owned University Book Store in Cambridge before becoming senior partner of Little, Brown, and Co., publisher of BFQ. He died in 1905.

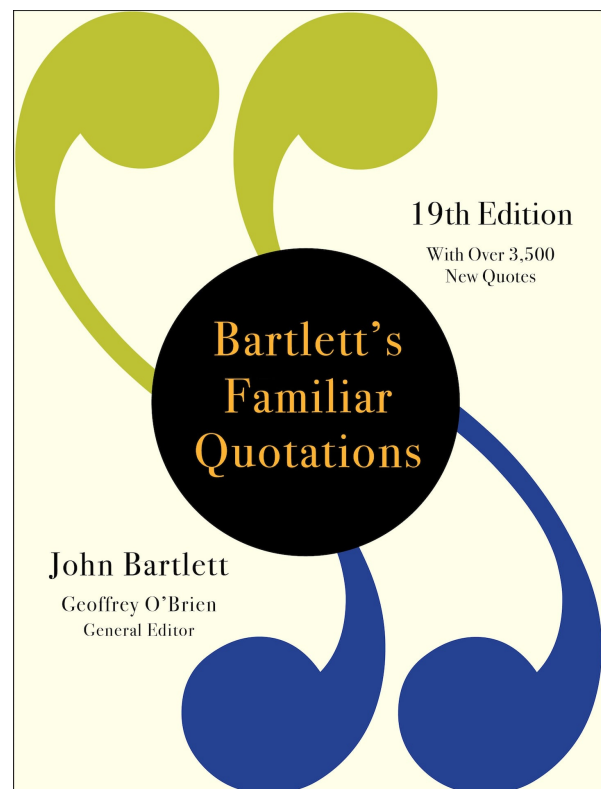
Legend has it that curious individuals would walk into Bartlett’s shop near Harvard and inquire as to who had made a particular statement. The staff would reply, “Ask John Bartlett.” The literary expert answered so many of these queries that he decided to compile his

answers and publish them in a book.

Ken Gloss, the owner of Boston's Brattle Book Shop — founded in 1825 — sells several copies of BFQ, though he's fresh out of first editions, which can go for \$500 to \$1,000.

The legacy of "Bartlett's Familiar Quotations" endures even in a time when people can go online to look up sayings and authors ad nauseam. Its staying power probably is due to the wisdom imparted by a popular meme attributed to Abraham Lincoln: "Don't believe everything you read on the Internet." To no surprise, BFQ does not cite the 16th president as the source of that quote.

You could look it up.



The 19th edition hits bookstores and online retailers Oct. 25. Little, Brown, & Co.

Other quotes you might think you know (but probably don't)

"There's a sucker born every minute." — It's attributed to P.T. Barnum, though that is unsubstantiated. According to BFQ, the original phrase may have actually come from a 19th-century song: "There's a jay [meaning a rube or mark] born every day."

"If you have to ask the price, you can't afford it." — This one is attributed to fabled financier J.P. Morgan, but that's not exactly what he said. BFQ reports the actual quote as "Any man who has to ask about the annual upkeep of a yacht can't afford one."

"Let them eat cake." — It is possible this was said by Marie Antoinette, wife of King Louis XVI of France, but not under the circumstances we assume today. According to Bartlett's book, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote about her in 1767: "At length I recollected the thoughtless saying of a great princess, on being informed that the country people had no bread, replied, 'Let them eat cake.'" But the historically accurate BFQ points out that the future queen did not arrive in France until 1770.

"One picture is worth a thousand words." — Often attributed to Confucius, the phrase was originally "One look is worth a thousand words," written by English illustrator Fred R. Barnard in a 1926 edition of "Printers Ink" magazine. He changed it in 1927 to the current quote and labeled it a Chinese proverb "so that people would take it seriously."

“Do not fire until you see the whites of their eyes.” — This old chestnut has been spoken around Boston since 1775. Though there is no proof, Colonel William Prescott of Massachusetts is believed to have said that at the Battle of Bunker Hill. However, some historians think the phrase may have originated with his commanding officer, Colonel Israel Putnam of Connecticut. BFQ quotes Frederick the Great of Prussia as having uttered “By push of bayonets, no firing till you see the whites of their eyes” at the Battle of Prague in 1757.

Dave Kindy is a freelance writer and author living in Plymouth. His work has been featured in such publications as The Washington Post, Smithsonian Magazine, and Air & Space.