

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



Episode #623
James Boswell, Samuel Johnson, and the Greatest
Biography Ever Written
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Transcript

[00:00:04] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to fascinating stories and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge, and today we are going to talk about James Boswell and Samuel Johnson.

[00:00:28] It's a story about a strange friendship between two very different men, and about how one insecure young Scotsman changed the way we write about other people's lives.

[00:00:42] So, let's not waste a minute and get right into it.

[00:00:48] It is November 1762. James Boswell is twenty-two years old, and he has just arrived in London.

[00:00:59] He is not yet famous for anything. He is the son of a Scottish lord, which gives him a name and a certain kind of introduction in polite company, but not much money and no particular prospects.

[00:01:15] He is charming, good-looking, and **consumed by**¹ an ambition of a **vague**² and **restless**³ kind.

[00:01:24] From the moment he arrives, he writes everything down. It's not a boring list of what he had for lunch or who he saw at the theatre, although he does go into plenty of those sorts of details. It is a **frank**⁴ and often funny account of what it felt like to be a young man trying to **make his mark**⁵ on a city he has dreamt about since he was a boy.

[00:01:50] He writes about parties, theatres, dinners, and the people he wants to impress.

[00:01:57] But he also writes about the things most men of his class would have carefully hidden: the **intimate**⁶ details of his **encounters**⁷ with prostitutes on Westminster Bridge, a conversation where he accuses a lover of having given him gonorrhoea.

¹ completely taken over by

² not clear or exact

³ unable to relax, anxious

⁴ honest and direct

⁵ become successful or well known

⁶ very personal or private

⁷ meetings or experiences

[00:02:15] He writes about falling in love with women who do not love him back, about his [recurrent⁸ bouts⁹](#) of low spirits, his deep sense of guilt about not being able to [restrain¹⁰](#) his [libido¹¹](#), and about his fear that he will never become the person he wants to be.

[00:02:34] His words were never [intended for¹²](#) an [external audience¹³](#), and [indeed¹⁴](#) his journals weren't discovered until the 1920s, 150 years later.

[00:02:45] But in those pages you can already see the gift that would later make him famous: the ability to watch life closely, remember speech, and turn personality into [prose¹⁵](#).

[00:03:02] Now, before we get more into Boswell the writer, we need to understand the world he has walked into.

⁸ happening again and again

⁹ short periods

¹⁰ hold back, control

¹¹ sexual desire

¹² meant for

¹³ other people

¹⁴ in fact

¹⁵ ordinary writing that is not poetry

[00:03:12] In 1762, we are [bang in the middle](#)¹⁶ of the Enlightenment.

[00:03:18] London is a city of roughly three quarters of a million people. It is the largest city in Europe, and it is loud, overcrowded, and [seething](#)¹⁷ with ideas.

[00:03:32] The coffee house is the engine of intellectual life. Merchants gossip about trade. Politicians argue about the American colonies. Writers read each other's work aloud and [tear it apart](#)¹⁸.

[00:03:48] There are also clubs. Literary clubs, dining clubs, [debating societies](#)¹⁹ where men argue about philosophy for hours and then walk home through streets ankle-deep in mud.

[00:04:01] The professional writer is a new kind of creature. Before this, writers depended on wealthy [patrons](#)²⁰.

[00:04:09] Now, increasingly, they write for the public, which means they [live and die](#)²¹ [by](#)²¹ whether the public buys what they produce.

¹⁶ exactly in the middle

¹⁷ full of

¹⁸ criticise it very strongly

¹⁹ groups where people met to discuss and argue ideas

²⁰ rich people who gave support or money

²¹ depend completely on

[00:04:19] Into this world, young Boswell walks, diary in hand.

[00:04:25] The man he most wants to meet is called Samuel Johnson.

[00:04:31] If this is [ringing some bells²²](#) and you are a particularly dedicated listener to this show, you may remember that back in March 2020 we made an episode about Johnson's dictionary, the most famous early dictionary of the English language. It's episode number 39, if you'd like to listen to that one afterwards.

[00:04:54] But if you haven't, or as a reminder, here's the background on Johnson.

[00:05:01] He was born in 1709 in the English Midlands, so he is thirty-one years older than Boswell.

[00:05:09] He was an incredibly bright young boy, and won a place at Oxford, only to have to drop out after his first year because his parents could not afford the fees. He moved to London in his late twenties with almost nothing, and spent the next two decades writing for newspapers and magazines, but essentially living in poverty.

[00:05:35] Then, in 1755, he got his [big break²³](#), with the publication of his Dictionary of the English Language. He had worked on it for nine years. It was not the first English

²² sounding familiar

²³ the opportunity that led to success

dictionary, but it was **far and away**²⁴ the most thorough, the most **witty**²⁵, and the most alive.

[00:05:59] And almost overnight, it made him famous, but not immediately rich. That came afterwards, it was only in 1762, seven years later, that he received a **pension**²⁶ from the Crown, and for the first time in his adult life he did not have to worry about money.

[00:06:21] He is free to think, to talk, to be himself.

[00:06:26] And who is he, who is Samuel Johnson?

[00:06:31] Well, he is quite the character.

[00:06:34] Physically, he is immediately **striking**²⁷.

[00:06:37] He is large, tall and overweight, and his face is covered in scars from a childhood disease. He is partly blind and partly deaf. He rocks backwards and forwards

²⁴ clearly and by a large amount

²⁵ clever and original

²⁶ regular money paid after retirement or by the government

²⁷ very noticeable

when he thinks, makes odd noises under his breath, and has this [superstition](#)²⁸ that makes him touch every wooden post he passes in the street.

[00:07:03] He is deeply [melancholic](#)²⁹, and were he around today, he might well be diagnosed with clinical depression or [bipolar disorder](#)³⁰.

[00:07:14] He got married at the age of twenty-five, to a widow of forty-six. It is an unusual match, but he remains dedicated to her, and even after her death, when he is only forty-two, he refuses to remarry and continues to mourn her for the rest of his life.

[00:07:36] He is, in other words, a man of extraordinary [peculiarities](#)³¹.

[00:07:42] But he is incredibly intelligent, great company, and known as the finest [conversationalist](#)³² in England.

[00:07:51] In practice, this means he likes to debate, to argue a point.

²⁸ a belief not based on reason or science

²⁹ often sad

³⁰ a mental health condition that causes extreme changes in mood

³¹ unusual habits or characteristics

³² someone who was very good at talking with people

[00:07:57] And when Johnson argues, he argues to win. He does not aim for [nuance](#)³³ in conversation; he aims for total [demolition](#)³⁴. He will defend a position he does not privately hold simply because he finds it more interesting to argue that way.

[00:08:16] Now, this doesn't make him mean or nasty, unkind to those less fortunate than him. He is famously [charitable](#)³⁵, and there is one account of him giving his last coins to a beggar asleep in the street in the middle of the night, sitting beside the man until he woke up, and then giving him more.

[00:08:37] He is a walking [bundle of contradictions](#)³⁶.

[00:08:41] Which, as it turns out, makes him the ideal subject for a biography.

[00:08:47] Now, back to Boswell.

[00:08:50] James Boswell is the eldest son of a Scottish judge with high expectations and very little patience for his son's enthusiasms. Their relationship is one of the great

³³ a small difference in meaning or opinion

³⁴ complete destruction

³⁵ kind and willing to help others

³⁶ a person with many opposite qualities

tensions of Boswell's life: his father wants him to be a respectable Scottish lawyer; Boswell wants to be a writer, a [wit](#)³⁷, a [man about town](#)³⁸.

[00:09:16] He wants to be taken seriously in London. He wants, if he is honest, to be famous.

[00:09:23] But he is deeply flawed, as he admits to himself in his diary. He is [vain](#)³⁹. He drinks too much. He is always visiting prostitutes, feeling terrible about what he has done and praying for forgiveness, and then doing the same thing all over again. He falls in love [impulsively](#)⁴⁰ and unwisely.

[00:09:45] He is, by many measures, a mess.

[00:09:49] The extraordinary thing is that Boswell does not hide this from himself. He records his [vanity](#)⁴¹ and weakness almost as carefully as he records other people's brilliance.

[00:10:02] But he has a unique talent, though at first he does not seem fully aware of it.

³⁷ a person noted for the ability to express himself intelligently in a playful or humorous manner

³⁸ a man who spends a lot of time socialising and going to events

³⁹ too proud of his looks or abilities

⁴⁰ without thinking carefully first

⁴¹ too much pride in himself

[00:10:09] He has an incredible ability to observe a situation, notice the smallest details that other people might miss, and then go home and write the entire thing down, reconstructing the conversation from memory, sometimes hours of talk, in extraordinary detail.

[00:10:31] And he is not sitting silently in the corner like a note-taker. He is in the conversation, laughing, [flattering⁴²](#), interrupting, being insulted, and then going home to reconstruct it.

[00:10:45] This is the talent that will produce, eventually, the greatest biography in the English language. But first, he needs his subject.

[00:10:56] And you will win no prizes for guessing who it's going to be.

[00:11:01] The first meeting between Boswell and Johnson happens on the 16th of May, 1763. Boswell is in the back parlour of a bookshop in Covent Garden when Samuel Johnson walks through the door.

[00:11:17] Boswell has been trying to engineer this meeting for weeks. It's now eight years since the publication of the famous dictionary, and Johnson is the most celebrated literary figure in London.

[00:11:32] Boswell is a young Scotsman who has published nothing. He is nervous, not least because he knows that Johnson is famously rude about the Scots.

⁴² giving praise or expressing admiration to make someone feel good

[00:11:43] The owner of the bookshop, Thomas Davies, makes the introduction. Boswell tries to be funny, confronting the Scottish [elephant in the room](#)⁴³ [head-on](#)⁴⁴, saying "Mr Johnson, I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it."

[00:12:01] Johnson looks at him, and says, [deadpan](#)⁴⁵: "That, Sir, is what a very great many of your countrymen cannot help."

[00:12:11] It is not an [auspicious](#)⁴⁶ start, and Boswell is, in his own words, "much [disconcerted](#)⁴⁷."

[00:12:19] But this will be the start of one of the most [improbable](#)⁴⁸ friendships in literary history.

[00:12:27] Johnson is fifty-three, Boswell is twenty-two.

⁴³ an obvious problem or issue that people avoid discussing

⁴⁴ directly and without avoiding it

⁴⁵ showing no emotion while saying something funny or surprising

⁴⁶ showing signs that something would go well

⁴⁷ confused, embarrassed, or upset

⁴⁸ unlikely to happen or be true

[00:12:30] Johnson is English; Boswell is Scottish, which is a significant [handicap](#)⁴⁹ in this particular relationship.

[00:12:38] Johnson is a man of deep religious [conviction](#)⁵⁰ and apparent sexual [abstinence](#)⁵¹ after the death of his wife; Boswell is a regular among the prostitutes of Westminster Bridge, and seemingly incapable of changing his behaviour.

[00:12:56] Johnson is the city's most famous writer; Boswell is essentially a tourist and a nobody.

[00:13:04] And yet they form one of the most unlikely friendships in literary history.

[00:13:10] Much has been written as to why, and you can of course come to your own conclusion by reading the incredibly detailed accounts Boswell kept of their two-decade-long friendship.

[00:13:22] There is surely an element of father-son relationship to it. Johnson is thirty-one years older, with no family or children of his own. Boswell has a very difficult relationship with his own father, and is far happier in Johnson's company than he is in his father's.

⁴⁹ something that made the situation more difficult

⁵⁰ strong belief

⁵¹ choosing not to have it

[00:13:43] For Boswell, being around the incredibly witty Johnson is clearly very enjoyable. He takes great pride in recording how Johnson had [ridiculed](#)⁵² someone over dinner, and is even happy to record how Johnson insults him, as long as it is witty enough.

[00:14:03] And for Johnson, well, he can see that Boswell [adores](#)⁵³ him, and who doesn't like to feel wanted?

[00:14:12] Now, the friendship was not always continuous. After their first meetings in London, Boswell spent long periods away: back in Scotland, completing the legal training his father demanded, as well as travelling in Europe.

[00:14:27] In Europe he pursued famous men with the same [intensity](#)⁵⁴ with which he pursued Johnson, meeting Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and he even found time for a brief affair with Rousseau's lover.

[00:14:42] But whenever he could, Boswell would come to London, and there the primary attraction was Samuel Johnson. He takes notes. He records conversations. He writes down Johnson's views on everything from the American Revolutionary War to the existence of ghosts to the proper way to eat a peach.

⁵² laughed at or made fun of

⁵³ loves very much

⁵⁴ great strength of feeling or effort

[00:15:06] Johnson's feelings about Scotland and the Scots are a constant

[undercurrent](#)⁵⁵ in their friendship.

[00:15:13] To give you a few examples: "The noblest prospect which a Scotchman ever sees," Johnson says, "is the high road that leads him to England." Or "Much may be made of a Scotchman, if he be caught young."

[00:15:30] Johnson is [perennially](#)⁵⁶ rude about Scotland and the Scots, and it seems Boswell takes this as a challenge to bring Johnson to his home country and get him to see for himself.

[00:15:44] In the summer of 1773, he manages, and Johnson agrees to go on a tour through Scotland, with Boswell as his travelling partner.

[00:15:55] It is one of the more unlikely journeys in British literary history. Samuel Johnson is sixty-three, has spent most of his adult life in London and its immediate surroundings, and appears to have little interest in anything beyond the English border. He agrees to travel with Boswell through the Scottish Highlands and out to the Western Isles.

[00:16:19] They set off in August. They travel through Edinburgh, where Johnson is, to his slight surprise, received with enormous respect. They visit St Andrews and

⁵⁵ a hidden feeling or idea that continued through the situation

⁵⁶ always or repeatedly over a long time

Aberdeen. They push north into the Highlands and then west, taking a boat to the Isle of Skye.

[00:16:37] The landscape does something to Johnson. He has never seen anything remotely like it. The vast, treeless mountains, the lochs, the sheer emptiness.

[00:16:50] He is also deeply moved by the poverty he sees, and the ruins of the old clan system, which is already being [dismantled](#)⁵⁷ after the Jacobite rebellions.

[00:17:03] They make it out to the island of Iona, which is one of the most ancient Christian sites in Britain, where the abbey stands half-ruined among the graves of Scottish kings.

[00:17:15] Johnson, standing there, is quiet for a long time.

[00:17:21] "That man is little to be envied," he says eventually, "whose [patriotism](#)⁵⁸ would not gain force upon the plain of Marathon, or whose [piety](#)⁵⁹ would not grow warmer among the ruins of Iona."

[00:17:36] In other words, being physically in a place changes you, makes you see and feel things differently.

⁵⁷ taken apart or broken down

⁵⁸ love and support for his country

⁵⁹ strong religious feeling and behaviour

[00:17:45] And this is quite some admission from a man who had previously said the best thing a Scotsman could see was the road to England.

[00:17:55] Now, this was in late 1773. Johnson would live for another 11 years, but the end of his life was [characterised by](#)⁶⁰ ill health and depression.

[00:18:08] Johnson knew that his young friend had been keeping notes, and was planning to publish an account of his life, but he would have had no idea on quite how important it would be, and that it would come to be regarded as one of the greatest biographies ever written.

[00:18:27] Johnson died in 1784, and it wasn't until 1791, seven years after his death, that Boswell published his account of his friend's life.

[00:18:40] It wasn't the first biography of Samuel Johnson — several others have been [rushed out](#)⁶¹ to [capitalise on](#)⁶² the public interest in the immediate [aftermath](#)⁶³ of his death. But it is certainly the best, and it became the [blueprint](#)⁶⁴ for the modern biography.

⁶⁰ known for or marked by

⁶¹ produced very quickly

⁶² use the situation to gain profit

⁶³ the period after it

⁶⁴ a model or example that others followed

[00:19:00] Before Boswell, and before The Life of Samuel Johnson, biography often had a fairly clear purpose.

[00:19:09] You wrote about what a great person did: their battles, their political achievements, their public acts.

[00:19:17] You presented them as an example to admire or a warning to others.

[00:19:23] You did not typically record the moment they were rude to someone at dinner, or the odd things they said when they were only half-paying attention, or the way their voice changed when they were defending something they privately doubted.

[00:19:38] Boswell records all of this.

[00:19:42] His account runs to more than twelve hundred pages. It's built on twenty years of notes, letters, and reconstructed conversations. You can hear the words coming off the page, the very words Samuel Johnson spoke, not summarised, not [paraphrased](#)⁶⁵, but actually spoken.

[00:20:04] You learn that Johnson believed there was no point eating boiled mutton unless it fell from the bone.

⁶⁵ expressed in different words

[00:20:11] You learn that he was terrified of death, that he prayed in private with intense [fervour](#)⁶⁶, that he was capable of cruelty towards people he found dull and extraordinary generosity towards strangers.

[00:20:28] You learn that his opinions were delivered with complete confidence and often deliberate [provocation](#)⁶⁷.

[00:20:36] "Patriotism is the last refuge of a [scoundrel](#)⁶⁸."

[00:20:40] "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life."

[00:20:45] Judged by modern standards, Johnson can seem both shockingly [bigoted](#)⁶⁹ and [strikingly enlightened](#)⁷⁰.

[00:20:54] On the Americans seeking independence, he was firmly against it.

[00:20:58] On slavery, he was fiercely opposed.

⁶⁶ strong enthusiasm or passion

⁶⁷ something said or done to make people react

⁶⁸ a dishonest or unpleasant person

⁶⁹ having unfair and strong negative opinions about certain groups

⁷⁰ surprisingly open-minded and fair-thinking

[00:21:02] On the possibility of a woman preaching as well as a man: "Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all."

[00:21:16] Hinder legs, by the way, is an old way of saying "hind" legs, or back legs.

[00:21:23] In other words, Johnson is saying that a woman preacher is like a dog walking on its back legs: not good, not natural, but surprising enough to make people look.

[00:21:35] It is cruel, sexist and offensive, certainly. But it is also pure Johnson: [compressed](#)⁷¹, comic, [brutal](#)⁷², and impossible to forget.

[00:21:47] And this is what Boswell understood: A biography should not simply record events. It should [reveal character](#)⁷³. You should come away feeling not only that you know what a person did, but that you know what it was like to sit in a room with them.

[00:22:06] And in Johnson's case, that you had been insulted by him, been irritated by him, laughed at his jokes, watched him defend something he was privately not sure about simply because no one in the room had yet managed to defeat him.

⁷¹ expressed in very few words

⁷² very harsh or direct

⁷³ show what a person is really like

[00:22:22] Johnson himself was, in theory, opposed to this kind of biography. He thought private life should remain private. He thought biographers [intruded](#)⁷⁴ too far. He did not, perhaps, fully understand what Boswell was doing, even as Boswell was doing it right in front of him.

[00:22:45] So, to wrap up, Johnson lives today, more vividly than almost any other figure of his century, because of exactly that [intrusion](#)⁷⁵. Because Boswell refused to treat greatness as something smooth and respectable. He showed the contradictions. He showed the vanity, the fear, the [tenderness](#)⁷⁶, the cruelty, the jokes, the odd habits, and the [flashes of genius](#)⁷⁷.

[00:23:13] And we know all of this because, in November 1762, a young, anxious, ambitious, somewhat [dissolute](#)⁷⁸ Scotsman arrived in London with a notebook, a hunger for fame, and a [rare gift](#)⁷⁹ for paying attention.

⁷⁴ entered people's private life without permission

⁷⁵ unwanted entry into his private life

⁷⁶ kindness, warmth, and gentle feelings

⁷⁷ short moments of great intelligence or creativity

⁷⁸ lacking self-control, especially in drinking or sex

⁷⁹ an unusual and valuable natural ability

[00:23:33] OK then, that is it for today's episode on James Boswell, Samuel Johnson, and the strange friendship behind one of the greatest biographies ever written.

[00:23:42] Whether or not you've listened to that old episode from 2020, I hope this gave you a new way to think about Johnson, Boswell, and the strange friendship between these two peculiar men.

[00:23:54] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:23:59] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Consumed by	completely taken over by
Vague	not clear or exact
Restless	unable to relax, anxious
Frank	honest and direct
Make his mark	become successful or well known
Intimate	very personal or private
Encounters	meetings or experiences
Recurrent	happening again and again
Bouts	short periods
Restrain	hold back, control
Libido	sexual desire
Intended for	meant for
External audience	other people

Indeed	in fact
Prose	ordinary writing that is not poetry
Bang in the middle	exactly in the middle
Seething	full of
Tear it apart	criticise it very strongly
Debating societies	groups where people met to discuss and argue ideas
Patrons	rich people who gave support or money
Live and die by	depend completely on
Ring in some bells	sounding familiar
Big break	the opportunity that led to success
Far and away	clearly and by a large amount
Witty	clever and original
Pension	regular money paid after retirement or by the government
Striking	very noticeable
Superstition	a belief not based on reason or science

Melancholic	often sad
Bipolar disorder	a mental health condition that causes extreme changes in mood
Peculiarities	unusual habits or characteristics
Conversationalist	someone who was very good at talking with people
Nuance	a small difference in meaning or opinion
Demolition	complete destruction
Charitable	kind and willing to help others
Bundle of contradictions	a person with many opposite qualities
Wit	a person noted for the ability to express himself intelligently in a playful or humorous manner
Man about town	a man who spends a lot of time socialising and going to events
Vain	too proud of his looks or abilities
Impulsively	without thinking carefully first
Vanity	too much pride in himself
Flattering	giving praise or expressing admiration to make someone feel good

Elephant in the room	an obvious problem or issue that people avoid discussing
Head-on	directly and without avoiding it
Deadpan	showing no emotion while saying something funny or surprising
Auspicious	showing signs that something would go well
Disconcerted	confused, embarrassed, or upset
Improbable	unlikely to happen or be true
Handicap	something that made the situation more difficult
Conviction	strong belief
Abstinence	choosing not to have it
Ridiculed	laughed at or made fun of
Adores	loves very much
Intensity	great strength of feeling or effort
Undercurrent	a hidden feeling or idea that continued through the situation
Perennially	always or repeatedly over a long time
Dismantled	taken apart or broken down

Patriotism	love and support for his country
Piety	strong religious feeling and behaviour
Characterised by	known for or marked by
Rushed out	produced very quickly
Capitalise on	use the situation to gain profit
Aftermath	the period after it
Blueprint	a model or example that others followed
Paraphrased	expressed in different words
Fervour	strong enthusiasm or passion
Provocation	something said or done to make people react
Scoundrel	a dishonest or unpleasant person
Bigoted	having unfair and strong negative opinions about certain groups
Strikingly enlightened	surprisingly open-minded and fair-thinking
Compressed	expressed in very few words
Brutal	very harsh or direct

Reveal character	show what a person is really like
Intruded	entered people's private life without permission
Intrusion	unwanted entry into his private life
Tenderness	kindness, warmth, and gentle feelings
Flashes of genius	short moments of great intelligence or creativity
Dissolute	lacking self-control, especially in drinking or sex
Rare gift	an unusual and valuable natural ability

Language spotlight

1. Make his mark

- **Meaning:** To become successful, important, or well known.
- **Synonyms:** achieve success, gain recognition, become known
- **Antonyms:** remain unnoticed, fail, be forgotten
- **Examples:**
 - The young scientist quickly **made her mark** in the field of medical research.
 - He moved to London hoping to **make his mark** as a writer.

2. Tear it apart

- **Meaning:** To criticise something very strongly.
- **Synonyms:** criticise harshly, attack, find fault with
- **Antonyms:** praise, admire, approve of
- **Examples:**
 - The film reviewers **tore the movie apart** after its release.

- During the meeting, several managers **tore the proposal apart** because they thought it was unrealistic.

3. Live and die by

- **Meaning:** To depend completely on something for success or failure.
- **Synonyms:** rely on, depend on, be governed by
- **Antonyms:** be independent of, ignore, disregard
- **Examples:**
 - Small businesses often **live and die by** customer reviews.
 - Many professional athletes **live and die by** their physical fitness.

4. Ring a bell

- **Meaning:** To seem familiar; to make someone think they have heard or seen something before.
- **Synonyms:** sound familiar, remind someone, be recognisable
- **Antonyms:** be unfamiliar, mean nothing, be unknown

- **Examples:**

- That name **rings a bell**, but I can't remember where I heard it.
- Does the address **ring a bell** for you?

5. Elephant in the room

- **Meaning:** An obvious problem or issue that everyone knows about but avoids discussing.
- **Synonyms:** awkward issue, obvious problem, taboo subject
- **Antonyms:** openly discussed issue, clear topic of discussion, acknowledged problem
- **Examples:**
 - Nobody wanted to mention the company's financial troubles, even though it was the **elephant in the room**.
 - During dinner, his resignation became the **elephant in the room** that everyone tried to ignore.

Quiz

Listening Comprehension Multiple Choice Questions

1. When Boswell first arrived in London, he was:
 - a) Already a famous writer
 - b) The son of a Scottish lord with little money and no clear prospects
 - c) A wealthy businessman
 - d) A university professor

2. What happened to Boswell's private journals?
 - a) They were discovered in the 1920s, about 150 years later
 - b) They were burned by his family
 - c) They were published immediately
 - d) They were translated into French

3. Why did Samuel Johnson leave Oxford?
 - a) He was expelled for bad behaviour

b) He wanted to travel Europe

c) He had already finished his degree

d) His parents could not afford the fees

4. What did Boswell say when he was introduced to Johnson in the bookshop?

a) "I have read all your books."

b) "Mr Johnson, I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it."

c) "I hope you will remember me."

d) "Scotland is superior to England."

5. What major achievement of Johnson's was published in 1755?

a) A novel

b) A history of Scotland

c) A dictionary of the English language

d) A book of poems

True or False

6. Boswell carefully hid his weaknesses and bad behaviour from his private diary.
(True/False)
7. The podcast describes London coffee houses as centres of intellectual life during the Enlightenment. (True/False)
8. Johnson became rich immediately after publishing his dictionary in 1755.
(True/False)
9. Boswell and Johnson remained close friends for roughly two decades.
(True/False)
10. Boswell's biography of Johnson was published before Johnson died.
(True/False)

Fill in the Blank

11. In 1762, we are ____ in the middle of the Enlightenment.
12. It was not the first English dictionary, but it was far and ____ the most thorough, the most witty, and the most alive.
13. He is deeply melancholic, and were he around today, he might well be diagnosed with clinical depression or bipolar _____.

14. His father wants him to be a respectable Scottish lawyer; Boswell wants to be a writer, a wit, a man _____ town.
15. He showed the vanity, the fear, the tenderness, the cruelty, the jokes, the odd habits, and the _____ of genius.

Vocabulary Practice

16. In the podcast, what does **frank** mean?

- a) Secretive and cautious
- b) Rude and aggressive
- c) Honest and direct
- d) Confused and uncertain

17. What does **restrain** mean?

- a) To encourage someone
- b) To stop yourself from doing something
- c) To explain something clearly
- d) To punish someone

18. What does **witty** mean?

- a) Clever and funny
- b) Quiet and shy
- c) Serious and thoughtful
- d) Angry and impatient

19. What does **deadpan** mean?

- a) Speaking with strong emotion
- b) Speaking very quickly
- c) Speaking in a whisper
- d) Speaking without showing emotion

20. In the phrase **bundle of contradictions**, what is meant?

- a) A collection of written arguments
- b) A person with many opposite qualities
- c) A package containing different objects

d) A group of people who disagree

Answers

1. b) The son of a Scottish lord with little money and no clear prospects
2. a) They were discovered in the 1920s, about 150 years later
3. d) His parents could not afford the fees
4. b) “Mr Johnson, I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it.”
5. c) A dictionary of the English language
6. False
7. True
8. False
9. True
10. False
11. bang
12. away
13. disorder
14. about
15. flashes
16. c) Honest and direct
17. b) To stop yourself from doing something
18. a) Clever and funny
19. d) Speaking without showing emotion
20. b) A person with many opposite qualities