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Although the origin of a word (its etymology) does not necessarily indicate anything of its current meaning, the stories behind words can throw fascinating light on the way in which people perceive similarities of meaning and draw links between meanings.

Hurt. The word *hurt* is related to the modern French *se heurter contre* “to bang into”, and is thought to come originally from a Germanic word for a ram “male sheep”. The link between the animal and banging into things may be easy to see. The link between banging into things and being hurt takes the relationship and looks at it the other way round: if you hurt the door (by banging into it) it hurts you, and the resultant bruise hurts, too.

Hurtle is a related word. Originally it meant to keep banging into things over and over, and many modern dictionaries comment that hurtling involves noise (presumably, originally, the sound of collisions). These days, though, it is the speed of movement that is to the fore, rather than the banging which such speed might give rise to.

Tenterhooks. A *tenter* is a framework



The curious origins of words

Language Matters

on which cloth is stretched after being woven to prevent it from shrinking while drying. The cloth was fastened to hooks along the edges of the frame and stretched. *Tenter* was sometimes used for the hook itself, rather than the frame, and the hook was not necessarily for stretching cloth, but also for hanging meat.

If you are on tenterhooks, therefore, you are stretched and strained in a painful manner, or you are in suspense.

The word *tent* comes from a Latin word originally meaning “stretched”, and the canvas for making tents was stretched on a *tenter* in the manner described above.

Pink. Today we think of *pink* as basically a colour term. But like *orange*, the colour is named after a thing (in the case of *pink*, a flower, which in New Zealand is now usually called *dianthus*, at least in garden shops), rather than vice versa. But where does the name of the flower come from? One clue is given by the word *pinkeye* (conjunctivitis), which seems to match with the colour meaning of *pink*. But another effect of untreated



conjunctivitis is that it makes the eyes look small, and it seems that *pinkeye* originally meant “small eye”.

The *pink* bit comes from a Dutch word *pinck* (which no longer exists in modern Dutch) meaning “small”. There is still a Dutch word *pinken* meaning “blink” which is related to this, and a similar form is found in Scotland. We still have traces of that meaning in the word *pinkie*, used in many parts of the English-speaking world for the little finger, and there is another use of *pink* meaning “minnow, small fish”. The *pink* (the flower) must originally have been seen as a small version of the carnation. The French word *oeillet* (“carnation, pink”) literally means “little eye”, and is also used for an eyelet.

Words often change their meanings drastically over time, and it takes real detective work on the part of the etymologist to discover what they originally meant and how they got their present meanings.

Laurie Bauer is the author of more than 20 books on language topics, and winner of the 2017 Royal Society of New Zealand’s Humanities/Aronui medal.

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THE SCOTSMAN

Is this film truly a bat out of hell?

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by *Stuff* newspapers.

A film so bad that it will not be released? Wow, if that really is the reason, then *Batgirl* must be spectacularly awful, given the movies that have made it to the silver screen.

Somehow films as terrible as *Return to the Blue Lagoon*, *Sex Lives of the Potato Men* and *Showgirls*, all secured their release. Or perhaps they just escaped. Is it possible that *Batgirl* could be even worse? If so, then that is truly remarkable.

According to the *New York Post*, when audiences saw it in test screenings, they responded so badly that there were fears it could damage the DC Comics franchise.

The blame does not appear to lie with *Batgirl*

Viewpoint

herself, with reports the studio plans to continue to work with Leslie Grace, who played the title role. And we are confident it was nothing to do with Glasgow’s portrayal of Gotham City. So the full reasons it was quite so terrible may remain shrouded in mystery.

However, on rare occasions, films can be so bad that they are actually, sort of, good. *The Room*, dubbed the “*Citizen Kane* of bad movies”, became such a cult classic that its filming was the basis for James Franco’s (excellent) 2017 movie *The Disaster Artist*. All of which leads to an obvious conclusion: come on, Warner Bros, we need to see it. *Batgirl* may not be quite what you had hoped, but you need to set it free.