



TOPICS

American Authors – Jack London; Our Gang and The Little Rascals; gruesome versus horrible versus disgusting; son of a gun; to lash out

GLOSSARY

adventure – an activity that is unusual and very exciting; an exciting activity with unexpected and perhaps dangerous experiences

* Lily knew that her cruise to Antarctica would be an adventure and she would see amazing things such as penguins and icebergs.

natural selection – the idea posed by Charles Darwin that animals that are the strongest or most able to stay alive give birth more and continue and change over time

* It is because of natural selection that many kinds of animals that lived thousands of years ago no longer exist on Earth.

genes – elements in a person's body that are passed on from parents to children, which determine characteristics of that person, such as how they look

* The only way that a person can have red hair is if both parents carry the gene for red hair and pass that on to their child.

socialism – a political belief that the way people produce, distribute, and share things in society should be owned or shared by the entire community

* If we embrace socialism for our organization, we'll need to discuss and agree on how rules are made and how they're carried out as a group.

to be disciplined – to be very controlled and well trained

* Olympic athletes must be very disciplined, eating special diets and practicing for hours each day.

sled – a vehicle that travels over snow and has no engine and is sometimes pulled by dogs

* The children took turns racing down the snow-covered hill on the new sled that their parents had given them.



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series – a group items, often films, television shows, books, or events that feature the same characters in different situations

* This six-volume book series is about a woman who is able to time travel through history.

gang – a group of people, usually young people, who often do things together

* Once the last person arrived, Bina said, “OK, the gang’s all here. Let’s go to dinner!”

short film – a movie that is shorter than a feature or main film but that is also shown in theaters

* Mo wanted to make a short film about a day in the life of a person in prison, so he followed a prisoner around for a day and filmed everything that happened.

cast – the group of actors in a film, television show, or play

* For the 20th anniversary of the hit television show, the cast got together and talked about what projects they were working on now.

to improvise – to create or do something without planning or thinking about it in advance

* Iman forgot her shopping list at home so she had to improvise once she got to the store.

rights – the permissions to produce, perform, or publish a story or work of art

* When the journalist was freed from being held prisoner in another country, several movie studios wanted to buy the rights to her story to make a movie.

gruesome – something that causes horror or disgust

* This horror movie is too gruesome, with dead bodies and blood in every scene.

horrible – something very shocking and upsetting; extremely bad or unpleasant

* We’ve received horrible news that the storm destroyed our house.

disgusting – something very unpleasant to see, smell, taste, consider, and more, that causes one to feel slightly sick

* A cheese, mustard, and liver sandwich sounds disgusting.

son of a gun – a funny or affectionate way of addressing or referring to a friend, usually a male friend; an expression used to show surprise

* Hey, you son of gun. Where have you been?



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to lash out – to strike out or hit others to defend oneself or in an attack, physically (using the body) or verbally (using speech)

* Despite problems at work, Manny tries not to lash out at his wife and children when he gets home.

WHAT INSIDERS KNOW

Jack London Square and Heinhold's First and Last Chance Saloon

Jack London Square is an entertainment and business area located along the water in Oakland, California. It was named after the author Jack London.

If you visit Jack London Square, you will see many shops and restaurants. People who go there can visit the night markets, watch “outdoor” (outside) movies, “kayak” (go down a river using a long, lightweight boat with a small opening at the top for a person to sit in), and bicycle along the “waterfront” (area along the water).

In Jack London Square, you will also find the “historic” (important in history) “saloon” (old-fashioned term for a bar) Heinhold's First and Last Chance Saloon. The saloon's name, “First and Last Chance,” refers how, in the old days for “sailors” (people who work on boats and ships), this bar was their first and last chance of drinking alcohol when they “disembarked” (got off a ship) and return to it.

The saloon is also famous because this was where Jack London spent his time gathering ideas for his most famous novels. The owner, Johnny Heinhold, had lent some money to Jack London, after London told him about his plans to attend the university to pursue a career in writing. London only “made it through” (completed) his first year in college, but it was in this bar that Jack London met sailors who “eventually” (later) “inspired” (cause someone to think about) and influenced his writing.

On January 12, 1998, the saloon was added to the Literary Landmarks Register, an official listing of important sites or places relating to writers and literature. On September 1, 2000, the United States Federal Government listed Heinhold's First and Last Chance Saloon on the National Register of Historic Places, a national list of important buildings and places in history.



COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

You're listening to ESL Podcast's English Café number 494.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast's English Café number 494. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California.

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On this Café, we're going to talk about an American author, Jack London. We're also going to talk about a comedy series from the 1920s and '30s that is famous, or at least used to be famous in the United States when I was growing up, [Our Gang](#). And as always, we'll answer a few of your questions. Let's get started.

Jack London was born on January 12th, 1876, in San Francisco, California. You may know that San Francisco is in the northern part of the state of California and Los Angeles is in the southern part. Jack London was born in the northern part, in San Francisco. However, he didn't have the name Jack London when he was born. Like many authors, like many artists, he changed his name later. His real name was John Griffith Chaney.

Now, "Jack" (Jack) is a common short name, or nickname, for "John." A "nickname" (nickname) is a short or familiar name that someone is called instead of their real name. So for example, instead of "Francis," we might call someone "Frank" or "Frankie." If someone has the first name "Thomas," we might call that person "Tommy" or "Tom." "Jeffrey" is my full name, but most people call me "Jeff" (or as my mother called me, "Number 11" or just "Hey, you").

London's mother and father were not married, and his father, William Chaney, was not involved in the young boy's life. When he was still just a baby, his mother, Flora Wellman, married a man named John London, and both the mother and the son changed their names to London after the new husband.

Jack London grew up in a poor neighborhood in Oakland, California. Oakland is very close – about 11 miles, or 18 kilometers – to San Francisco. It's still a city with a lot of poor neighborhoods. London's family was poor, and London began



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working to earn money when he was only 10 years old. This was not unusual, of course, for the late nineteenth century.

When he was 14 years old, London left school to work and to travel the world. He wanted to get away from the poverty that he saw at home, and he wanted, as I suppose all young people do, some adventure. “Adventure” means doing something that is unusual or exciting. So, London rode on trains around the U.S., taking different jobs in different locations. When he was 17 years old, he joined a ship that was traveling far into the Pacific Ocean in order to hunt animals called seals.

London had always been interested, however, in books, but it wasn’t until he returned to California after this trip to the Pacific that he focused on his education. Once back in San Francisco, he went to the most important educational institution in any country: a library. He went to the public, or free, library and educated himself by reading the books he found there. He studied the works of famous thinkers of the nineteenth century, including Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and the philosopher Frederick Nietzsche.

Through his studies, London became a strong believer in Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection. “Natural selection,” very generally, is the idea that animals find ways to survive in their environments by changes in their physical composition that allows them to live longer and to be stronger. Again, I’m speaking in very general terms here. This is not a scientific explanation of the theory of natural selection. Of course, what changes in one’s composition in one’s body are the genes that one has. Not the “jeans” (jeans) that you wear as pants, but the “genes” (genes) that determine your biological makeup.

London was also a fan of Karl Marx and was a fan or a believer in socialism. “Socialism” has, among other things, the belief that members of a society should be equal, or more or less equal, owners of the economic benefits and resources in a society. London believed that socialism was the way to get rid of the poverty that he experienced growing up.

In 1897, London applied to the University of California, Berkeley. The University of California, Berkeley, like Oakland, is very close to the city of San Francisco. It’s only about 14 miles or so. The University of California has nowadays many different locations, but the original, or first, location was located in this small town of Berkeley, north of San Francisco. It is nowadays considered perhaps the best University of California institution, or campus, and one of the best universities in the United States.



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London studied at Berkeley for one year, but then he left the school to go to Alaska. He wanted to travel to Alaska at this time because other people were going to Alaska and trying to get rich by finding gold. He went to what was called the “Klondike,” an area in southeastern Alaska on the border of British Columbia in Canada. Gold was found there in 1896, and within one year, more than 30,000 people had traveled to the area with the hopes of finding gold for themselves.

This was one of the famous gold rushes in American history, when someone finds gold in a certain place and everyone rushes or goes there very quickly in order to try to find gold and become rich. Well, London was one of these people. However, life was not easy in what was then just the territory of Alaska. Back in the late nineteenth century, many people had no food. They were sick. Many people froze to death or died in accidents because of the cold ice and snow. London didn’t find much gold. That was true for most people who went to the Klondike. He left the area as poor as when he arrived.

When London got back to San Francisco, however, he began writing. He was a very disciplined writer who was able to write large amounts of text and many stories and poems in a very short time. When we say someone is “disciplined” (disciplined), we mean the person has a very good sense of control and organization. Someone who is “well-disciplined” is someone who is often well-trained, someone who knows how to be focused and get things done.

London used both his experiences traveling as well as his reading about natural selection and socialism as part of his stories. He used them in creating stories – stories that became very popular with readers of that time. His first story was called “The Son of the Wolf” and was published in 1900. It was based on his adventures, his travels in Alaska. The story quickly became successful, and over the next 10 years, London would write three more books based on his time in Alaska. His most famous book, The Call of the Wild was published in 1903, followed by White Fang, and Burning Daylight.

Many people believe that The Call of the Wild is London’s greatest story. It’s the story that is often given to American high school students to read, so a large number of Americans even today have read this story. It’s a story of a dog who is sent to Alaska to help pull a sled. A “sled” (sled) is basically a vehicle that is used in the snow, that has no motor, no engine. It’s usually pulled – in Alaska, anyway – by a team of dogs. Of course, it’s a very difficult life for the dog, and in London’s story, the dog learns to become more like a wolf than a dog.



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London also wrote books that were more autobiographical. When we say something is “autobiographical,” we mean that it is about the person, him or herself. Some of the books that London wrote that really reflect his own life and experiences include The Road, Martin Eden, and John Barleycorn. All of these were published in the early 1900s. In the 16 years that his works were published, London wrote over 50 books and short stories. He was, in fact, the highest paid author in the United States during the early twentieth century.

Even so, London spent more money than he made, and so he was always trying to write more so that he could earn more money. This is a common pattern among some writers and artists. They make a lot of money, but then they spend a lot of money. Another famous American writer, F. Scott Fitzgerald, had a similar problem. In 1910, London built a home in Glen Ellen, California, which he called the Wolf House. Glen Ellen is about 50 miles, or 80 kilometers, north of San Francisco.

Unhappily, London died at his home when he was only 40 years old, on November 22nd, 1916. He died of kidney disease. When he died, he left behind, or had living still, two daughters, Joan and Bess. These were daughters from his first marriage. London divorced and married again to a woman by the name of Kettredge.

London’s books and stories continue to be popular in the United States and around the world. As I mentioned previously, The Call of the Wild is often assigned in American schools for children to read. Like his other works, it is in fact a much more complicated piece of writing than it may seem, and definitely has the themes of nature and survival that were very important to London as a writer and thinker.

I read The Call of the Wild when I was in school. I don’t think I really liked the story a lot, although I did have a friend who loved Jack London and read almost all of his books and short stories. If you love nature, if you love the outdoors, then I think perhaps Jack London might be the kind of author that you would enjoy. I am not one of those people, as you might know.

Now let’s turn to our next topic, which is a comedy series from the 1920s and ’30s called Our Gang (gang). A “gang” is, in this case, an informal term for a group of friends. Our Gang was what we would call a “series” (series) of films. A “series” of something is, when we are talking about film or television, a group of or collection of stories or productions that are all related one to the other. So, you



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have, for example, the Jason Bourne series. These are movies all about the same character, usually written by the same person.

Our Gang comedies were short films that were made about a similar group of characters. The characters were all children – poor children living in a neighborhood where they had interesting adventures with children who were richer, who came from wealthier families. The creator of the series was a man by the name of Hal Roach. Hal Roach was one of the most popular men in Hollywood, here in California. He was a producer, a director, as well as a writer. He was known especially for creating successful comedy movies such as the Laurel and Hardy films. Laurel and Hardy were two famous comedic, or funny, actors from the '20s and '30s.

One day, Hal Roach was looking out the window from, I imagine, his office, and he saw a group of boys playing with sticks in the street. After watching the boys fight and play for more than 15 minutes, he had the idea to make a comedy about a group of children doing everyday things and getting into trouble, as children do. So, Roach decided to produce this series of short films, or short movies, about a group of children. The films were only about 20 minutes long, so they were more like short television shows nowadays.

Each of these short films told the story of a group of children, but the stories weren't connected. You didn't have to watch one film to understand another in the series. What was in common was the cast of characters – the children in the movies. When we talk about “the cast” (cast) of a movie, we're talking about the actors in a movie – or a television show or a play. However, instead of getting professional actors for his movies, Roach found children from a real neighborhood, a poor neighborhood in Los Angeles, and had them be the stars of the films.

Roach and other writers would create stories for each film, but then the children would be asked to improvise. “To improvise” (improvise) means to create something in an artistic performance that isn't prepared in advance. You sort of use your own intelligence, your own creativity, to come up with something in the moment. This is how the Our Gang films were made. Roach would take this group of children and he would give them an idea, then the children would in essence make up things or invent things as part of the story.

The director of these films helped the children while they improvised to be sure that it followed Roach's general idea and that, of course, it was funny. The first film was called Our Gang and was a big success. After that, the series continued



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on under other names. Our Gang was one name, but it was also called Hal Roach's Rascals. A "rascal" (rascal) is a poorly behaved or perhaps mean person – someone who causes a lot of trouble.

From 1922 until 1931, all of the films in the Our Gang series were silent, but after sound was introduced to movies in the late '20s, the Our Gang films started to be made with sound. The actual actors in the Our Gang movies changed over the years as, of course, the children grew older and they had to bring in new actors. One of the most interesting things about the Our Gang films was that the films included both black, or African-American, children as well as white children. In fact, Our Gang was one of the first films to show whites and African Americans not only in the same movie, but being more or less equal in the movie – equal as characters.

The most famous characters joined the show in the second half of the series, and these are the characters that most Americans associate with the Our Gang films, including characters with names such as Spanky, Alfalfa, Porky, and Butch. Over the years, different children played these characters. Once a child got to be too old to be in the films, Roach would put a different child in their place. Over the 22 years that the Our Gang films were produced, more than 40 children were cast in the movies.

Hal Roach directed Our Gang until 1938, when he sold the rights of the films to one of the large studios here in Los Angeles, MGM. The "rights" (rights) are the permissions to use the movies and to use the characters and ideas of the movie. MGM continued to produce Our Gang films until the end of World War II, around 1944. By that time, there were 220 short Our Gang films, including one full-length film, one longer movie. Now, most Americans of my generation know about the Our Gang comedies not because we saw them in the movie theater, but because we saw them on television.

Beginning in 1955, American television started to show these short films often on Saturday or Sunday mornings. I remember growing up in the 1970s seeing Our Gang short films on Sunday mornings. I don't know if they were on Saturday mornings. In the United States, Saturday morning is the most popular time for television stations to show programming or shows for young children because, of course, the young children are home, not at school, and they need something to do. So, we have them watch television. That's at least what my parents did.

In 1994 there was a movie called The Little Rascals which was made featuring some of the same characters from the original Our Gang films. It wasn't a very



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successful movie, but it was popular among children at that time, or at least that's what I'm told. I wasn't a child in 1994. The comedy of the Our Gang films is nowadays probably considered somewhat dated – that is, somewhat old-fashioned. You might not find them funny the way people found them funny in the '20s and '30s (or even I found them funny in the 1970s), but if you look up on the Internet "Our Gang" or "Little Rascals," you can probably find some examples of these short films.

In some ways, they're perhaps easier to understand, because the films had little children who weren't using very complicated vocabulary, and also because movies back in the '20s and '30s and '40s were much slower in pace – they didn't have a lot of quick dialogue. There was often a certain pause between each sentence or each line of the film. So in some ways, some of the older movies may be easier for non-English speakers to understand. Well, you can give it a try.

Now let's answer some of the questions you have sent to us.

Our first question comes from Gunther (Gunther) in Germany. The question has to do with three words: "gruesome," "horrible," and "disgusting." What a happy question, Gunther. Let's see if I can help answer it for you.

"Gruesome" (gruesome) is something that causes you to react very negatively to a situation. Usually it's someone who has been killed, or there's a lot of blood involved – something that you would find very unpleasant, that you wouldn't want to look at or hear about, even. It's an adjective usually used to describe a murder or some other situation where there was a lot of, perhaps, pain and blood and suffering involved.

"Horrible" (horrible) is an adjective used to describe something that is very shocking, something very bad or unpleasant that happened that shocks you. Now if something is "gruesome," it would definitely also be considered "horrible" or described as such. However, "horrible" can be used to describe situations that aren't bloody or that don't involve pain and suffering. You could talk about the "horrible weather outside," meaning something very bad, weather that is causing problems – very hot or very cold.

You could talk about your boss being a "horrible person," a person who is mean, who is not nice, who doesn't let you go to lunch for more than an hour at a time. You know, horrible bosses like that. "Horrible," then, is a more general term that can be used to describe a lot of shocking or upsetting negative situations.



“Disgusting” (disgusting) is something that is very unpleasant to see, to smell, to taste, or to think about. Often something that is disgusting makes you feel sick, makes you feel ill. “The food in this restaurant is disgusting.” That would be a case where you’re describing food that makes you sick, that is really bad tasting. Or you could have a “disgusting smell” – something that is very unpleasant, something that might make you sick, even.

Sometimes, we describe someone’s action or behavior as being disgusting. Often, when it involves situations where the person is doing things – sexually, for example – that we don’t approve of or that might cause us to be shocked, to be surprised in a very negative way.

Our next question comes from Gabriel (Gabriel) in Brazil. Gabriel wants to know the meaning of the expression “son of a gun.” “Son (son) of a gun (gun)” is sort of a funny way of showing surprise. It can also be a way of describing someone who is bad or mean, someone perhaps you don’t like.

Although “son of a gun” used to be used in some circumstances to express surprise, nowadays if you hear it at all (and it’s not as common now as it was 50 years ago), I would say “son of a gun” is used as a polite way of saying something that would be considered too vulgar or too rude to say in “mixed company,” as we would say – that is, in front of children or in a formal situation. The word “gun” sometimes substitutes in this expression for a word beginning with a “B” – a vulgar word, “bitch” (bitch).

If you refer to someone as a “son of a gun,” you are often referring to this person in a negative way, in describing this person as being mean or evil or having done something wrong or something to you. It is then perhaps a politer way of referring to someone than using the more vulgar expression, which I don’t recommend you use in describing someone: “son of a bitch.”

That’s a very vulgar term. It’s not one that you would hear on television, usually. It’s not one that you would use with young children or children in general. It’s not one that you would want to use at work, and if you used it to describe someone, it would be a very insulting term that might end up getting you in trouble, physically or otherwise. But you could use “son of a gun” in those situations. You could say, “Oh, that son of a gun. He stole my money.” That would be acceptable in most situations. Well, not the stealing of the money, but the use of the phrase “son of a gun.”



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Finally, Amir (Amir) from Iran wants to know the meaning of the phrasal verb “to lash out” (out). “To lash out” means to either physically strike or hit another person, or to attack another person verbally using words. The most common use of this phrasal verb nowadays is when we’re talking about someone attacking another person verbally by yelling at them or by saying things to them that are meant to be negative, to be attacking the other person.

People may lash out when they’re angry, when they’re upset, when perhaps, you’ve said or done something to the person that makes that person angry at you. Sometimes people can lash out when they’re under a lot of stress, when they’re going through a difficult time emotionally. Usually it means a very sudden or unexpected attack – when someone starts yelling at you and you didn’t expect it, or perhaps the person had been silent for a long time and then suddenly they lash out at you.

One more question, this one from Artur (Artur) in Poland. Artur wants to know the pronunciation of three words that are spelled differently. The first one is “seen” (seen). The second one is “scene” (scene), and the third one, pronounced differently than the first two, is “sin” (sin). The first word, pronounced “seen,” is related to the verb “to see.” The second word, pronounced “scene,” is related to an area, or perhaps a part of a play or film. The third word, “sin,” is related to doing something wrong, to committing some act that violates an ethical or religious principle or law.

We don’t want to hear about your sins, but if you have some questions about English, you can definitely email us at eslpod@eslpod.com.

From Los Angeles, California, I’m Jeff McQuillan. Thank you for listening. Come back and listen to us again right here on the English Café.

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