

KENNINGS : long words, little riddles

Over a thousand years ago, before the Norman Conquest, poets loved writing riddles. They wrote in a language we now call Old English, and which takes a bit of practice to understand. This is a modern version of one of those Old English riddles, which the poet Jacob Polley made in under 140 characters, so that it could be tweeted (we call them 'twiddles').

*Far out I saw a
wave grinning
white, a billow
turned to bone.*

What do you think the poet was talking about? Hint: they were good sailors in those days and sometimes travelled far into the Arctic Circle, where it can get very cold.

As well as writing riddles, Old English poets also liked to put two familiar words together to make a new, compound word. Sometimes you can't always tell straightaway what the compound word means.

So *hwael*, meaning 'whale' could be combined with *weg*, meaning 'path' (our modern English 'way'). But what is a 'whale-path' (*hwaelweg*)? Perhaps you can figure out that this is a poetic way to say 'the sea'. Although it's a barrier to us, to a whale the sea is a great road, across which it makes its life journeys.

These poetic compounds are called 'kennings', and are a special type of metaphor; we have to pause and puzzle out their meaning. They are like mini-riddles, little word-knots in the middle of a poem, which we must stop to untie before we read on.

Although they were most common in Old English poetry, kennings are not completely unknown to us today. Tall buildings do not really scrape the sky, yet we are quite happy to talk about them poetically with the compound metaphor 'skyscraper'. Your computer probably has a security filter to protect it against threats from the internet, but there is no actual wall inside its circuit boards, nor is it defending against fire, yet we call it a 'firewall'.

Can you think of any other 'modern kennings' that we use in modern English?

