

personal english



Word #18

Serendipity

Serendipity means '**fortunate happenstance**' or '**pleasant surprise**'. The word was coined by **Horace Walpole**, who, in a letter dated 1754, explained an unexpected discovery he had made by reference to a Persian fairy tale, **The Three Princes of Serendip**. The princes, he explained to his correspondent, were "always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of".



The notion of serendipity is a common occurrence throughout the history of scientific innovation such as **Alexander Fleming's** accidental discovery of **penicillin** in 1928, the invention of **Velcro** by **George de Maestral** in 1941, or that of the **microwave oven** by **Percy Spencer** in 1945.

In June 2004 a British translation company voted the word to be one of the ten English words hardest to translate. However, due to its sociological use, the word has since been exported into many other languages.