

A MAN OF MANY WORDS

Freelance journalist and author Joshua Kendall is a self-confessed “word nerd.” So Kendall, 48, is the ideal author to tackle the story of Peter Mark Roget in **“The Man Who Made Lists: Love, Death, Madness, and the Creation of Roget’s Thesaurus”** (Putnam, \$25.95).

An English scholar, Roget’s insights on human vision played a role in the invention of the movies. His instinct for organizing knowledge resulted in acclaimed works. His masterpiece, Roget’s Thesaurus, is a reference that became so popular his name is now synonymous with synonyms.

With your strong background in psychology, were you drawn to the life of Roget in part because of the suicide, madness and depression that stalked his family and friends?

That was certainly enticing. I have a piece in this month’s *Psychology Today* about obsessive-compulsive personality disorder — people who are obsessed with rules and lists and have a strong moral sense. Roget had that obsessionality. There was all this madness around him and he had his own touch of madness, but he found this perfect solution, which was to channel his energy into [his thesaurus].

I never used a thesaurus as a kid because I thought of it as cheating.

Roget wanted to help you think about things more deeply. He didn’t want to give you a shortcut. Sylvia Plath called herself Roget’s strumpet.

Roget was a pretty dull kid — withdrawn, few friends, staying in his

room making lists.

I loved his adolescent diary. He himself had problems saying what he meant. That was one of my most exciting finds. Oh my God, this guy needs a thesaurus!

He did have a transformation and became a lively dancer, a conversationalist and one of the most eligible bachelors in London. How did this happen?

I think basically he got away from his mother. [Laughs.] After his uncle [committed suicide], Roget’s mother went crazy, but that somehow freed up Roget to build up his own life.

What’s your favorite synonym for the word “thesaurus?”

Let’s see. “Treasure house,” I think.

Michael Giltz

JOSHUA KENDALL

