

Subscriber Only Books

Aphorisms are the oldest written art form on the planet, perfectly suited to our digital age

Cultural observations have always been going viral, from the oral cultures of the ancient world to the visual cultures of today



James Geary speaks about his new book *The World in a Phrase: A Brief History of Aphorisms*. Photograph: Stephanie Mitchell/Harvard

James Geary

Wed Nov 12 2025 - 04:12 • 7 MIN READ



At the height of his internet fame in the mid-2010s, Eric Jarosinski would sneak off to the bathroom while on dates, not to call his mistress, but to write another Hegel joke and post it on Twitter.

Jarosinski discovered the dopamine-dispensing social media platform while writing his PhD dissertation on contemporary German culture, research he hoped would lead to a book that would, in turn, lead to tenure, preferably at a US Ivy League

institution. But time spent on Twitter soon displaced his work on the dissertation altogether. He started posting sardonic comments on modern culture using the @Nein-Quarterly handle. He created a fictitious philosophical journal – Nein Quarterly: A Compendium of Utopian Negation – and invented a grim-looking, monocle-wearing online avatar loosely resembling German philosopher Theodor W Adorno. Tweets like:

“Admiration, n. Our polite recognition of another’s resemblance to ourselves.”

“Ideology: The mistaken belief that your beliefs are neither beliefs nor mistaken.”

READ MORE

The Celebrity Traitors final review: A thriller ending worthy of a fascinating series



100 great restaurants, cafes and places to eat around Ireland for winter 2025



Brianna Parkins: I’ve nothing against Irish men. I keep one myself. But I recommend Irish women



The posts won him tens of thousands of followers, at the time making him social media’s most popular aphorist.

Aphorisms — short, witty, philosophical sayings — are the oldest written art form on the planet. The Chinese were writing them more than five thousand years ago; the ancient Greek philosophers, the Old Testament authors, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad were all early practitioners, too. In some ways, this most ancient of literary genres is perfectly suited to our digital age of short-form communication, same-day delivery, and fractured attention spans. Twitter, after all, has the word ‘wit’ in it.

But Twitter has the word ‘twit’ in it, too. Now known as X, it marks the spot where byte-sized chunks of outrage reign. Our feeds are clogged with trash talk and gauzy inspirational quotes, hot takes that inflame but shed no light, information bubbles bloated by confirmation bias, and artificial intelligence generating genuine stupidity.

This is all the opposite of aphorisms. Aphorisms are for thinking through, not shouting down. They force you to parse arguments, not default to partisanship. As generative AI programs like ChatGPT promise to reduce our cognitive loads to zero and

TL;DR becomes the catchphrase of a generation, aphorisms remain the ultimate deep dives. Aphorisms are short, yes. But, like Jarosinski's sayings, they prompt long-term reflection and introspection, just what we need at time when too often the loudest voices and hottest takes rule.

Here are a few aphorisms selected from the recent history of the form that are worth putting down the phone and closing the computer screen for...

Kevin Kelly calls himself a "radical optimist," a rare profession these days. He's expressed this perspective on our technological and cultural future through his work in the late 1980s as publisher and editor of the *Whole Earth Review*, a journal of unorthodox conceptual news; as co-founder of *Wired* magazine in the early 1990s; and as founding board member of The Long Now Foundation, which is building a clock and library designed to last 10,000 years inside a mountain in western Texas. On his 68th birthday, Kelly wrote 68 bits of advice for his adult children, which ultimately became a collection of some 450 aphorisms called *Excellent Advice for Living*. One of Kelly's most timely bits of advice:

Choose not to be outraged today.

It can be hard not to be outraged when so many around us are outraged and there is, in fact, so much to be outraged about. Stanisław Jerzy Lec faced a similar predicament as a dissident living under Soviet rule in 1950s Poland. And his outrage was difficult and dangerous to express, since criticism in the Soviet Union was not greatly appreciated by the regime in Moscow. So he turned to satire, publishing his aphorisms in newspapers and weekly magazines as parodies of the feel-good platitudes and propaganda put out by the Communist Party machine. His mischievous wordplay and deft deployment of metaphor allowed him to land repeated blows for free speech without the censors ever knowing what hit them, as in this denunciation of standard political practice, whether in dictatorships or democracies:

Politics: a Trojan horse race.

Dissidents, social critics, and activists have long used aphorisms to speak truth to power. In *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, his 1961 study of the brainwashing techniques used by the Chinese Communist Party in the 1950s, psychologist Robert Jay Lifton defined what he called the "thought-terminating cliché" as language that is "repetitiously centered on

all-encompassing jargon, prematurely abstract, highly categorical, relentlessly judging, and to anyone but its most devoted advocate, deadly dull.”

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s insistence that his barbaric war against Ukraine be called a “special military operation” is a classic example of the thought-terminating cliché at work. There can be no thought of war — or its catastrophic human toll — if the word itself is banned from use. The person controlled by this kind of language is “linguistically deprived”, Lifton argued, “and since language is so central to human experience, his capacities for thinking and feeling are immensely narrowed”.

Aphorisms are the antidote to thought-terminating clichés.

In early September, Xi Jinping, president of the People’s Republic of China, presided over a military parade in Beijing. Putin and North Korean dictator Kim Jung Un stood by Xi’s side as tanks and ballistic missiles rumbled past and Chinese soldiers marched in lockstep barking political slogans — “Follow the Party! Fight to win! Forge exemplary conduct!”

The evening before the parade, in Chongqing, about 1,000 miles southwest of Beijing, aphorisms started appearing on a building in the city’s university area:

Freedom is no gift — take it back.

Rise up, you who refuse to be slaves.

Qi Hong, the person who projected the sayings onto the building, had grown alarmed by the propaganda in his daughters’ textbooks and disgusted by the government’s suppression of free speech. He had read George Orwell’s *1984* and *Animal Farm* and decided to speak truth to the power of the Communist Party’s newspeak — by lighting up Chongqing with aphorisms of political dissent.

Like Qi Hong, Indian artist Shilpa Gupta puts aphorisms where people are — on the train, on the street, in the airport, and on social media. As culture becomes more visual, and as those visuals become more easily distributed via social media, Gupta is one of the contemporary aphorists combining text and image and using platforms like Instagram to share her work. Gupta uses digital and physical public spaces as forums to call out religious hatred, prejudice, and censorship. Her work has appeared as animated light installations in public parks and on top of buildings, along the path to Haeinsa Temple on Mount

Gaya in South Korea, and as downloadable instructions on the internet.

Borders are a recurring metaphor for Gupta. In her Motion Flapboard series, she adopts the technology of travel — the signage in airports and railway stations that tells travelers at which gate to board their plane or from which platform their train departs — to highlight the social and political subtexts of crossing borders.

The black rectangular board cycles through a sequence of numbers, letters, and words in fifteen- to thirty-minute loops. As the individual segments of the board flip, the cascading ticks and clicks sound like dice rattling in a cup. Sometimes there are just seemingly random mash-ups of numbers and letters, but gradually sentences form, sentences like this one that address the increasing prevalence of xenophobia and anti-immigrant fervor around the world:

“You detain me but for others to fear you.”

Gupta’s aphorisms are arguments for being “more porous, more open, so we can inhabit different worlds and different viewpoints,” she says. They are site specific, placed in the real world to make us confront these issues in daily life. And they are sight specific, making the case that we only really see ourselves when we see others.

Aphorisms have always been going viral, from the oral cultures of the ancient world to the visual cultures of today. The media through which aphorisms are delivered may be changing, but the message is the same. Aphorisms are thought-generating phrases that help us cope with the avalanche of partisan propaganda and hashtag claptrap — online and in real life — designed for the sole purpose of preventing us from thinking for ourselves. In a world of disinformation and deepfakes, the aphorism still speaks to the power of fresh debate over tired dogma and of inconvenient truths over comfortable lies.

*James Geary is the author of [The World in A Phrase: A Brief History of the Aphorism](#), out now from the University of Chicago Press; *Wit’s End: What Wit Is, How It Works and Why We Need It*; and *I Is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor*, among other books.*

James Geary’s favourite aphorisms

- Misfortune, n. The kind of fortune that never misses. — Ambrose Bierce
- Love is that short period of time when someone else holds the same opinion of us as we do of ourselves. — Magdalena Samozwaniec
- No snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible. — Stanislaw Jerzy Lec
- If the future had known what lay ahead, it would never have come. — Urszula Zybur
- Be like a postage stamp. Stick to one thing until you get there. — Josh Billings
- One oppression does not justify another. — Audre Lorde
- Uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination. — Ludwig Wittgenstein
- Baldness is the gradual transformation of the head into an ass, first in shape and then in content. — Faina Ranevskaya
- Life is a maze in which we take the wrong turning before we have learnt to walk. — Cyril Connolly
- Life consists of what a person is thinking of all day. — Ralph Waldo Emerson

IN THIS SECTION



Aphorisms are the oldest written art form on the planet, perfectly suited to our digital age



Joseph O'Connor on Bread of Angels by Patti Smith: Vive la reine



Booker Prize 2025: David Szalay wins for Flesh



Ferdia Lennon wins 2025 Rooney Prize for Irish Literature for Glorious Exploits



Jason Burke's compelling new book charts the rise of modern terrorism

MOST READ >



Miriam O'Callaghan: 'I'm lucky to have eight children after suffering secondary infertility'

[Listen | 46:57](#)



Denis O'Brien says Ireland's graduates are 'entitled' and predicts economic downturn



Island of Ireland is 'not ready' for a unification referendum, says former tánaiste



In pictures: The inauguration of Catherine Connolly as the 10th President of Ireland



President Connolly and family attend State reception at Dublin Castle

LATEST STORIES >

The Music Quiz: Who is being sued over copyright for a song referencing Sydney Sweeney?



We may have longer night-rate tariffs, but Ireland’s EV charging costs remain stubbornly high



Miriam Lord: Connolly’s inauguration was a bit like a big Irish wedding, solemn and joyous



Bird flu: IFA warns ‘rogue operators’ now pose biggest risk in Ireland



President Catherine Connolly says she will be a ‘catalyst for change’ over next seven years



Israeli parliament advances death penalty Bill backed by far-right security minister



President Connolly and family attend State reception at Dublin Castle



Misconduct proven against doctor who allegedly failed to refer seriously ill boys to A&E



Subscribe

- Why Subscribe?
- Subscription Bundles
- Subscriber Rewards
- Student Subscription
- Subscription Help Centre
- Home Delivery

Support

- Contact Us
- Help Centre
- My Account

About Us

- Advertise
- Contact Us
- The Irish Times Trust
- Careers

Irish Times Products & Services

- ePaper
- Crosswords & puzzles
- Newspaper Archive
- Newsletters
- Article Index
- Discount Codes

OUR PARTNERS: MyHome.ie • The Gloss • Recruit Ireland • RIP.ie

THE IRISH TIMES

Terms & Conditions | Privacy Policy | Cookie Information | Cookie Settings | Community Standards |
Copyright | © 2025 The Irish Times DAC



