

Hook, Line and Sinker I

Have you ever been so beguiled by a believable lie, or so smitten by a fabulous story that you swallowed it, *hook, line, and sinker*? This familiar verbal formula suggests gullibility and misplaced trust.

The inspiration for this expression is, of course, angling. It compares a gullible person to a hungry fish that devours the baited hook, and the rest of the tackle as well. A naïve innocent who swallows a tale *hook line and sinker* is metaphorically “landed” like a fish by the clever raconteur.

It turns out that this phrase is a true-blue American idiom. It first appeared in print in the 1830s, but it was likely in verbal circulation some time before that date. It, in turn, may have been inspired by an older British English idiom *to swallow a gudgeon* (a small European bait fish). On the other side of the Atlantic, this phrasal verb was once a metaphor for gullibility—to *swallow a gudgeon*.

Another American idiom using three nouns with the conjunction “and” is *lock, stock and barrel*. This expression means everything, all the parts, the entirety, as in “we moved the household, the kids and the pets, *lock stock and barrel*, to a cabin in the mountains.”

Next time: the biography of this American cliché.