

Canoe Painter

Barnacle Bob's Big Book of Beastly Boaty Balderdash.

Dear Word Detective: I am a canoe guide here in Colorado and have wondered for many years why we call the bow and stern lines (or ropes) on the canoe "painters." I had heard at one time



that they were used to hang the boat so it could be painted, but I'm not buying that. Perhaps you can shed some light on this. -- Ward S. Sear.

Arrrr, and I'll not be buyin' it neither, matey. It boils my bilge to hear the silly stories those scurvy landlubbers cook up about life on the bounding main. A taste of the cat is what the mongrels deserve. Keelhaul the lot of 'em I say.

Sorry about that. You're correct in judging that story about "painter" unlikely.

There are actually three separate kinds of "painter" in English, three words that share a common spelling and pronunciation, but entirely unrelated meanings and origins. The first sort of "painter" is, obviously, someone who paints, whether it be a fine art painter or the guy who paints your bathroom. Another sort of "painter" is the North American cougar, in which case "painter" is simply a regional pronunciation of the word "panther" (possibly influenced by the French "panthere"). Ogden Nash's famous advice, "If called by a panther, don't anther," seems a suitable prelude for an exceedingly odd citation for this sense from none other than Davy Crockett, who wrote, in 1834, "This alarmed me, and I screamed out like a young painter." King of the Wild Frontier, my foot.

The third kind of "painter" is the line attached to the bow of a boat, used to moor or tow the vessel, although when the word first appeared in the 15th century it meant the anchor chain or line of a boat or ship. There seems to be several theories about exactly how English acquired "painter," but fortunately all roads seem to lead back to Rome, in this case to the Latin verb "pendere," meaning "to hang." One of the descendants of that verb was the Old French "pentoir," meaning "strong rope" or "clothesline," which certainly brings us into the "line for tying up a boat" ballpark.

Painter or End Lines - Painters are short lines attached to each end of the canoe that can serve several purposes. You can use them as tie downs for a car top carrier, a shore tie up line or for towing by another craft. The American Canoe Association (ACA) recommends that lines should be 4.5 meters (15 feet) long, 9.5 millimeters (3/8 inch) in diameter, and made of a floating material like polypropylene. Painter lines should not allowed to dangle free while canoeing were they could entangle a person in the water. Keep the stowed at each end of the canoe. A bungee cord works well to secure them to the tops of the bow and stern, ready to use, but out of the way for normal activities. Be sure the line is securely fastened to the canoe and free of any knots that could hang up on objects in the water or cause entanglement.

