PostScript

BOOK REVIEW

Eats, Shoots & Leaves


Most writers punctuate. Not everyone punctuates correctly. Few punctuate well.

Lynne Truss’s best-seller, Eats, Shoots & Leaves is certain to raise each reader’s writing one large notch. As a bonus, it is a great read; witty, caustic, and wise. If only I had written this review before the book’s meteoric climb to the top best-seller lists (where it remains). Had I done so this would not now be in the company of the hundreds of other reviews, mostly positive, ranging from warm praise to exuberance. Only a few—notably that by Louis Menand in the New Yorker (June 28, 2004, pp 102-4)—are profoundly critical. (Methinks Menand must be a sourpuss.)

This is a book to be read for fun and profit. If all contributors to this and other journals read it and took it to heart, how much more readable and enjoyable even the most arid scientific papers would be! I read Eats, Shoots & Leaves as a writer who is constantly struggling to improve his style and as an editor who is compelled to improve that of his contributors. (And, as I wrote that, I asked myself “Should there be a comma before the ‘and’?”)

This book is a cri de coeur of a “writer and journalist who started out as a literary editor with a blue pencil, and then got sidetracked”. Truss is a self admitted stickler. She hectors and mocks but does so with such a relatively light touch that even the most careless writer is unlikely to be offended. Her mission is, nevertheless, a serious one: she is determined to improve writing by focusing attention on the most neglected element in the holy trinity of style—punctuation (the others are structure and words).

How can you not chuckle when someone stakes out her position as follows: “In some matters of punctuation there are simple rights and wrongs; in others, one must apply a good ear to good sense… Eats, Shoots & Leaves is not a book about grammar. I’m not a grammarian. To me a subordinate clause will forever be… one of Santa’s little helpers. A degree in English language is not a prerequisite for caring about where a bracket is preferred to a dash, or, needs to be replaced by a semicolon. If I did not believe that everyone is capable of understanding where an apostrophe goes, I would not be writing this book.”

In the Introduction punctuation is defined and described in various ways. One is by using the analogy of stitching: “punctuation as the bustling that holds the fabric of language in shape”. Another writer tells us that punctuation marks are “the traffic signals of language: they tell us to slow down, notice this, take a detour, and stop”. Or, “Punctuation herds words together, keeps others apart. Punctuation directs you how to read, in the way musical notation directs a musician how to play.” Quoting a newspaper style guide, punctuation is “a courtesy designed to help readers to understand the story without stumbling”.

The book has seven sections: An Introduction—The Seventh Sense; The Tractable Apostrophe; That’ll do, Comma; Airs and Graces (the colon and semicolon); Cutting a Dash: A Little Used Punctuation Mark (the hyphen); and Merely Conventional Signs (a sort of wrap-up). There is also a bibliography, but no index.

Alongside the fun, prods, and instruction, Truss has another treat in store for readers addicted to punctuation: segues on the history of various punctuation marks and indeed, on the history of books on the topic. Only one word of caution: it helps greatly if you know something about words and phrases familiar to English-speakers who live in Britain—such as Truss’s favorite candy “Opal Fruits” (one of my favorites, too).

Frank McCourt (author of Ange/la’s Ashes) writes in the Introduction, “… pause a moment, dear reader, and imagine this page of deathless prose, the one you’re reading, without punctuation”. If you cannot imagine it, rush out and buy a copy before the stock disappears from the shelves of your favorite bookstore. You will be amply rewarded.

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2005 (US) National Injury Prevention and Control Conference

Canadian Multidisciplinary Road Safety Conference

19th International Technical Conference on the Enhanced Safety of Vehicles Conference (ESV)

14th International Safe Communities Conference

1st World Congress on Sports Injury Prevention
23–25 June 2005, Oslo, Norway. The 1st World Congress on Sports Injury Prevention will provide an overview of how injuries in sports can be effectively prevented. The second announcement and programme are now available at the conference website http://www.ostrc.no/congress2005.

3rd Asian Regional Conference on Safe Communities

3rd New Zealand Injury Prevention Conference

3rd (Canadian) National Conference on Injury Prevention and Control
6–8 November 2005, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. The theme is “Evidence to Action ’05: Injury, Violence and Suicide Prevention”.

8th World Conference on Injury Prevention and Safety Promotion

RoSPA Road Safety Congress
28 February–2 March 2005, Brightton, UK. The theme of the 70th Road Safety Congress is “Driving Deaths Down”. Visit the road safety section of the http://www.rospa.com for more information.

Preventing violence: from global perspectives to national action

CALENDAR

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