

THE NEW YORKER
THE CRITICS

BOOKS

BAD COMMA

by LOUIS MENAND

Lynne Truss's strange grammar.

Issue of 2004-06-28

Posted 2004-06-21

The first punctuation mistake in “Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation” (Gotham; \$17.50), by Lynne Truss, a British writer, appears in the dedication, where a nonrestrictive clause is not preceded by a comma. It is a wild ride downhill from there. “Eats, Shoots & Leaves” presents itself as a call to arms, in a world spinning rapidly into subliteracy, by a hip yet unapologetic curmudgeon, a stickler for the rules of writing. But it’s hard to fend off the suspicion that the whole thing might be a hoax.

The foreword, by Frank McCourt, contains another comma-free nonrestrictive clause (“I feel no such sympathy for the manager of my local supermarket who must have a cellarful of apostrophes he doesn’t know what to do with”) and a superfluous ellipsis. The preface, by Truss, includes a misplaced apostrophe (“printers’ marks”) and two misused semicolons: one that separates unpunctuated items in a list and one that sets off a dependent clause. About half the semicolons in the rest of the book are either unnecessary or ungrammatical, and the comma is deployed as the mood strikes. Sometimes, phrases such as “of course” are set off by commas; sometimes, they are not. Doubtful, distracting, and unwarranted commas turn up in front of restrictive phrases (“Naturally we become timid about making our insights known, in such inhospitable conditions”), before correlative conjunctions (“Either this will ring bells for you, or it won’t”), and in prepositional phrases (“including biblical names, and any foreign name with an unpronounced final ‘s’”). Where you most expect punctuation, it may not show up at all: “You have to give initial capitals to the words Biro and Hoover otherwise you automatically get tedious letters from solicitors.”

Parentheses are used, wrongly, to add independent clauses to the ends of sentences: “I bought a copy of Eric Partridge’s *Usage and Abuse* and covered it in sticky-backed plastic so that it would last a lifetime (it has).” Citation form varies: one passage from the Bible is identified as “Luke, xxiii, 43” and another, a page later, as “Isaiah xl, 3.” The word “abuzz” is printed with a hyphen, which it does not have. We are informed that when a sentence ends with a quotation American usage always places the terminal punctuation inside the quotation marks, which is not so. (An American would not write “Who said ‘I cannot tell a lie?’”) A line from “My Fair Lady” is misquoted (“The Arabs learn Arabian with the speed of summer lightning”). And it is stated that *The New Yorker*, “that famously punctilious periodical,” renders “the nineteen-eighties” as the “1980’s,” which it does not. *The New Yorker* renders “the nineteen-eighties” as “the nineteen-eighties.”

Then, there is the translation problem. For some reason, the folks at Gotham Books elected not to make any changes for the American edition, a typesetting convenience that makes the book

virtually useless for American readers. As Truss herself notes, some conventions of British usage employed in “Eats, Shoots & Leaves” are taboo in the United States—for example, the placement of commas and periods outside quotation marks, “like this”. The book also omits the serial comma, as in “eats, shoots and leaves,” which is acceptable in the United States only in newspapers and commercial magazines. The supreme peculiarity of this peculiar publishing phenomenon is that the British are less rigid about punctuation and related matters, such as footnote and bibliographic form, than Americans are. An Englishwoman lecturing Americans on semicolons is a little like an American lecturing the French on sauces. Some of Truss’s departures from punctuation norms are just British laxness. In a book that pretends to be all about firmness, though, this is not a good excuse. The main rule in grammatical form is to stick to whatever rules you start out with, and the most objectionable thing about Truss’s writing is its inconsistency. Either Truss needed a copy editor or her copy editor needed a copy editor. Still, the book has been a No. 1 best-seller in both England and the United States.

“I am not a grammarian,” Truss says. No quarrel there. Although she has dug up information about things like the history of the colon, Truss is so uninterested in the actual rules of punctuation that she even names the ones she flouts—for example, the rule that semicolons cannot be used to set off dependent clauses. (Unless you are using it to disambiguate items in a list, a semicolon should be used only between independent clauses—that is, clauses that can stand as complete sentences on their own.) That is the rule, she explains, but she violates it frequently. She thinks this makes her sound like Virginia Woolf. And she admits that her editors are continually removing the commas that she tends to place before conjunctions.

Why would a person who is not just vague about the rules but disinclined to follow them bother to produce a guide to punctuation? Truss, a former sports columnist for the London *Times*, appears to have been set a-blaze by two obsessions: superfluous apostrophes in commercial signage (“Potatoe’s” and that sort of thing) and the elision of punctuation, along with uppercase letters, in e-mail messages. Are these portents of the night, soon coming, in which no man can read? Truss warns us that they are—“If we value the way we have been trained to think by centuries of absorbing the culture of the printed word, we must not allow the language to return to the chaotic *scriptio continua* swamp from which it so bravely crawled less than two thousand years ago”—but it’s hard to know how seriously to take her, because her prose is so caffeinated that you can’t always separate the sense from the sensibility. And that, undoubtedly, is the point, for it is the sensibility, the “I’m mad as hell” act, that has got her her readers. A characteristic passage:

For any true stickler, you see, the sight of the plural word “Book’s” with an apostrophe in it will trigger a ghastly private emotional process similar to the stages of bereavement, though greatly accelerated. First there is shock. Within seconds, shock gives way to disbelief, disbelief to pain, and pain to anger. Finally (and this is where the analogy breaks down), anger gives way to a righteous urge to perpetrate an act of criminal damage with the aid of a permanent marker.

Some people do feel this way, and they do not wish to be handed the line that “language is always evolving,” or some other slice of liberal pie. They don’t even want to know what the distinction between a restrictive and a non-restrictive clause might be. They are like people who lose control when they hear a cell phone ring in a public place: they just need to vent. Truss is their Jeremiah. They don’t care where her commas are, because her heart is in the right place.

Though she has persuaded herself otherwise, Truss doesn't want people to care about correctness. She wants them to care about writing and about using the full resources of the language. "Eats, Shoots & Leaves" is really a "decline of print culture" book disguised as a style manual (poorly disguised). Truss has got things mixed up because she has confused two aspects of writing: the technological and the aesthetic. Writing is an instrument that was invented for recording, storing, and communicating. Using the relatively small number of symbols on the keyboard, you can record, store, and communicate a virtually infinite range of information, and encode meanings with virtually any degree of complexity. The system works entirely by relationships—the relationship of one symbol to another, of one word to another, of one sentence to another. The function of most punctuation—commas, colons and semicolons, dashes, and so on—is to help organize the relationships among the parts of a sentence. Its role is semantic: to add precision and complexity to meaning. It increases the information potential of strings of words.

What most punctuation does *not* do is add color, texture, or flavor to the writing. Those are all things that belong to the aesthetics, and literary aesthetics are weirdly intangible. You can't taste writing. It has no color and makes no sound. Its shape has no significance. But people say that someone's prose is "colorful" or "pungent" or "shapeless" or "lyrical." When written language is decoded, it seems to trigger sensations that are unique to writing but that usually have to be described by analogy to some other activity. When deli owners put up signs that read "Iced' Tea," the single quotation marks are intended to add extraliterary significance to the message, as if they were the grammatical equivalent of red ink. Truss is quite clear about the role played by punctuation in making words mean something. But she also—it is part of her general inconsistency—suggests that semicolons, for example, signal readers to pause. She likes to animate her punctuation marks, to talk about the apostrophe and the dash as though they were little cartoon characters livening up the page. She is anthropomorphizing a technology. It's a natural thing to do. As she points out, in earlier times punctuation did a lot more work than it does today, and some of the work involved adjusting the timing in sentences. But this is no longer the norm, and trying to punctuate in that spirit now only makes for ambiguity and annoyance.

One of the most mysterious of writing's immaterial properties is what people call "voice." Editors sometimes refer to it, in a phrase that underscores the paradox at the heart of the idea, as "the voice on the page." Prose can show many virtues, including originality, without having a voice. It may avoid cliché, radiate conviction, be grammatically so clean that your grandmother could eat off it. But none of this has anything to do with this elusive entity the "voice." There are probably all kinds of literary sins that prevent a piece of writing from having a voice, but there seems to be no guaranteed technique for creating one. Grammatical correctness doesn't insure it. Calculated incorrectness doesn't, either. Ingenuity, wit, sarcasm, euphony, frequent outbreaks of the first-person singular—any of these can enliven prose without giving it a voice. You can set the stage as elaborately as you like, but either the phantom appears or it doesn't.

When it does appear, the subject is often irrelevant. "I do not care for movies very much and I rarely see them," W. H. Auden wrote to the editors of *The Nation* in 1944. "Further, I am suspicious of criticism as the literary genre which, more than any other, recruits epigones, pedants without insight, intellectuals without love. I am all the more surprised, therefore, to find myself not only reading Mr. Agee before I read anyone else in *The Nation* but also consciously looking forward all week to reading him again." A lot of the movies that James Agee reviewed between 1942 and 1948, when he was *The Nation's* film critic, were negligible then and are forgotten now.

But you can still read his columns with pleasure. They continue to pass the ultimate test of good writing: it is more painful to stop reading them than it is to keep going. When you get to the end of Agee's sentences, you wish, like Auden, that there were more sentences.

Writing that has a voice is writing that has something like a personality. But whose personality is it? As with all art, there is no straight road from the product back to the producer. There are writers loved for their humor who are not funny people, and writers admired for their eloquence who swallow their words, never look you in the eye, and can't seem to finish a sentence. Wisdom on the page correlates with wisdom in the writer about as frequently as a high batting average correlates with a high I.Q.: they just seem to have very little to do with one another. Witty and charming people can produce prose of sneering sententiousness, and fretful neurotics can, to their readers, seem as though they must be delightful to live with. Personal drabness, through some obscure neural kink, can deliver verbal blooms. Readers who meet a writer whose voice they have fallen in love with usually need to make a small adjustment afterward in order to hang on to the infatuation.

The uncertainty about what it means for writing to have a voice arises from the metaphor itself. Writers often claim that they never write something that they would not say. It is hard to know how this could be literally true. Speech is somatic, a bodily function, and it is accompanied by physical inflections—tone of voice, winks, smiles, raised eyebrows, hand gestures—that are not reproducible in writing. Spoken language is repetitive, fragmentary, contradictory, limited in vocabulary, loaded down with space holders (“like,” “um,” “you know”)—all the things writing teachers tell students not to do. And yet people can generally make themselves understood right away. As a medium, writing is a million times weaker than speech. It's a hieroglyph competing with a symphony.

The other reason that speech is a bad metaphor for writing is that writing, for ninety-nine per cent of people who do it, is the opposite of spontaneous. Some writers write many drafts of a piece; some write one draft, at the pace of a snail after a night on the town. But chattiness, slanginess, in-your-face-ness, and any other features of writing that are conventionally characterized as “like speech” are usually the results of laborious experimentation, revision, calibration, walks around the block, unnecessary phone calls, and recalibration. Writers, by nature, tend to be people in whom *l'esprit de l'escalier* is a recurrent experience: they are always thinking of the perfect riposte after the moment for saying it has passed. So they take a few years longer and put it in print. Writers are not mere copyists of language; they are polishers, embellishers, perfecters. They spend hours getting the timing right—so that what they write sounds completely unrehearsed.

Does this mean that the written “voice” is never spontaneous and natural but always an artificial construction of language? This is not a proposition that most writers could accept. The act of writing is personal; it *feels* personal. The unfunny person who is a humorous writer does not think, of her work, “That's not really me.” Critics speak of “the persona,” a device for compelling, in the interests of licensing the interpretative impulse, a divorce between author and text. But no one, or almost no one, writes “as a persona.” People write as people, and if there were nothing personal about the result few human beings would try to manufacture it for a living. Composition is a troublesome, balky, sometimes sleep-depriving business. What makes it especially so is that the rate of production is beyond the writer's control. You have to wait, and what you are waiting for is something inside you to come up with the words. That something, for writers, is the voice.

A better basis than speaking for the metaphor of voice in writing is singing. You can't tell if someone can sing or not from the way she talks, and although "natural phrasing" and "from the heart" are prized attributes of song, singing that way requires rehearsal, preparation, and getting in touch with whatever it is inside singers that, by a neural kink or the grace of God, enables them to turn themselves into vessels of musical sound. Truss is right (despite what she preaches) when she implies, by her own practice, that the rules really don't have that much to do with it. Before Luciano Pavarotti walked onstage at the opera house, he was in the habit of taking a bite of an apple. That's how he helped his voice to sound spontaneous and natural.

What writers hear when they are trying to write is something more like singing than like speaking. Inside your head, you're yakking away to yourself all the time. Getting *that* voice down on paper is a depressing experience. When you write, you're trying to transpose what you're thinking into something that is less like an annoying drone and more like a piece of music. This writing voice is the voice that people are surprised not to encounter when they "meet the writer." The writer is not so surprised. Writers labor constantly under the anxiety that this voice, though they have found it a hundred times before, has disappeared forever, and that they will never hear it again. Some writers, when they begin a new piece, spend hours rereading their old stuff, trying to remember how they did it, what it's supposed to sound like. This rarely works; nothing works reliably. Sooner or later, usually later than everyone involved would have preferred, the voice shows up, takes a bite of the apple, and walks onstage. ✦