

Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation by Lynne Truss
(Profile Books, R159)

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Superficially, one would not expect a book on punctuation to be even readable, let alone entertaining. But in practice writers on apparently dry-as-dust subjects like grammar and usage are often highly readable: one of the delights of Fowler's *Modern English Usage* or Eric Partridge's *Usage and Abusage* is the unexpected humour enlivening the stern caveats and prohibitions. Besides, caring deeply as they do about the business of writing, these people can *write*.

Lynne Truss is a worthy if irreverent successor to Fowler, Gowers and Partridge. She has staked off a much smaller territory than theirs, concentrating as she does on the business of punctuation – and if you thought an apostrophe could never be entertaining, think again, or, better still, read this book.

Truss announces from the outset that her book is intended for that small minority of people who go about grinding their teeth and shaking their fists at monstrosities like “Tomatoe’s” and “Potatoe’s”. These people are the “sticklers”, and they have a lonely time of it in a world where the text message has become the stylistic norm and the semicolon is an alien: “We are like the little boy in *The Sixth Sense* who can see dead people, except that we can see dead punctuation.”

Although Truss is self-confessedly a fanatic, she is not driven by a spirit of sterile pedantry: she believes, and demonstrates, that punctuation is a useful, indeed indispensable, aid to clarity and style. She realises that punctuation, like language in general, changes over time; what she is concerned about is that the changes should be governed by considerations of clarity and style rather than by ignorance. To her, punctuation is a form of good manners to the reader: “Truly good manners are invisible: they ease the way for others, without drawing attention to themselves.”

It follows, presumably, that bad punctuation is a form of bad manners, which is debatable. True, often it is a matter of can't be bothered, but frequently, of course, it's a question of sheer ignorance.

Truss blames the prevalence of bad punctuation, in England at any rate, on educational practice that from 1960 until quite recently “upheld the view that grammar and spelling got in the way of self-expression” (a view that in this country is still solemnly propounded). She argues that the timing of this “grammatical apathy” was particularly bad, in that nobody could have predicted the explosion in written communication brought about by the new technologies: “People who have been taught nothing about their own language are ... spending all their leisure hours attempting to string sentences together for the edification of others.” These people, busily tapping out web pages and blogs are, according to Truss, disseminating the ignorance that their schooling equipped them with. *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, in other words, is not one of those namby-pamby “Guides” that tell you that if a mistake is made often enough it becomes standard usage: gently tolerant on some points, it digs in its heels on others with all the determination of a stickler at bay. But it is more than a gripe about the dreadful punctuation habits of others: it is also an extremely useful and sensible, no-nonsense guide to some common quandaries in punctuation.

The comma, for instance, is notoriously prone to causing “knock-down fights ... in editorial offices”, because its grammatical function is often at odds with its stylistic function “to point up – rather in the manner of musical notation – such literary qualities as rhythm, direction, pitch, tone and flow.” She leaves latitude for this creative difference of opinion, but nevertheless does not shy away from providing the reader with what she regards as the rules governing the use of the comma.

On the colon and the semicolon Truss waxes lyrical: to her they are “the thermals that benignly waft our sentences to new altitudes – that allow us to coast on air, and loop-the-loop, suspending the laws of gravity”. A bit rich? Maybe; but it’s difficult to resist such enthusiasm, indeed passion. Furthermore, when she gets down to it, she is very good at explaining the difference between these misunderstood and underrated punctuation marks.

And so on, in a single chapter, for the dash, the lamentably over-used exclamation mark (known in newspaper offices, Truss tells us, as a dog’s cock), the question mark, italics and brackets (“there is a certain amount of anxiety created once a bracket has been opened that is not dissipated until it’s bloody well closed again”). Receptive as Truss is to the idea of grammatical changes, she is adamant on the need for “the rights dots in the right places”: “Proper punctuation is both the sign and the cause of clear thinking.”

There is the danger, of course, that she is preaching to the converted. If, like her, you shudder when a writer joins two complete sentences with a comma, you will be cheered by her decrying of this barbaric practice; if, on the other hand, you don’t know what the fuss is about, you are unlikely to be persuaded by her book to change your ways.

At most this book will afford comfort to sticklers; but that is in itself a worthwhile achievement. Sticklers have a hard time of it, and deserve all the encouragement they can get.

But perhaps one should be more hopeful than this: the sheer high spirits of Truss’s book might just recommend it to people who don’t necessarily share her passion for the semicolon; and, coming to be entertained, they may end up being enlightened. One can only hope that it is also read by people who really need it, like editors and sub-editors who make it their business to deprive sensitive and caring writers of their semicolons (and their brackets!).

And the title? All I will reveal is that it involves a pistol-bearing panda. Work it out for yourself, or, better still, buy this delightful book.