



Thoughts from Linda:

Eats, Shoots & Leaves:
*The Zero Tolerance
Approach to Punctuation*

Lynne Truss
2003

The joke that makes a case for this book goes like this: (and let me note, I feel some pressure about my own punctuation choices as I write this!) A panda walks into a café. He orders a sandwich, eats it, then draws a gun and fires two shots in the air. "Why?" asks the confused waiter as the panda makes it towards the exit. The panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife manual and tosses it over his shoulder. "I'm a panda," he says at the door. "Look it up." The waiter turns to the relevant entry and, sure enough, finds an explanation. PANDA. Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves."

And so, the easy-going 99% vegetarian panda takes a bad rap being described as a violent creature due to the addition of a most inappropriate comma.

This joke is but one of many examples that Lynne Truss uses throughout the book that is a 'tour de force' for people everywhere who love the English language, which includes the way we write and punctuate it. She is keen to note that this "is not a book about grammar." She goes on to say, "I am not a grammarian. To me, a subordinate clause will forever be one of Santa's little helpers. A degree in the English language is not a prerequisite for caring about where a bracket is preferred to a dash or a comma 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." She says her purpose was to actually give those of us who do care about such topics as commas, periods, exclamation marks and their other friends in the world of literature, "permission to love punctuation."

Journeying through this book together, we can celebrate such things as "the unassailable period indicating the full stop and the apologetic apostrophe. We can unleash our own "inner stickler" that cringes at certain road and shop signs, such as "Children Drive Slowly" or "Come inside, for CD's, Video's and Book's."

Here is a book where we can find our 'peeps.' Ever since high school and my own experiences with two amazing English teachers: Mrs. Snow and Mrs. Baize, at Paris High School in the small town of Paris, Texas, I have joined others in what Lynne Truss calls "The Seventh Sense."

This is the title of one of her chapters, and just like the movie, *The Sixth Sense*, it refers to those who can 'see' certain things that others cannot. Just like the character played by Haley Joel Osment, who could see dead people, we can see what she calls "dead punctuation." She notes, "Dead punctuation is invisible to everyone else—yet we see it all the time. No one understands us, seventh-sense people. They regard us as freaks. When we point out illiterate mistakes, we are often aggressively instructed to 'get a life' by people..."

This book was written in 2003 and was a best seller in the UK, where the author lives and works. It was also on the NYT Best Seller list. She is an English author, journalist, and radio broadcaster. She has written several plays and books for children as well, including *The Girl's Like Spaghetti: Why, You Can't manage Without Apostrophes!* and *Twenty Odd Ducks: Why Every Punctuation Mark Counts*.

The book is hilariously written in a smart and very English manner and provides useful instruction and most interesting 'tidbits' about punctuation through the ages. For example, you'll learn about the earliest known instance of punctuation which was credited to Aristophanes of Byzantium (the librarian at Alexandria) around 200 BC. The comma, which has an entire chapter devoted to it called *That'll do, Comma*, comes from the Greek and means "a piece cut off." Early punctuation was intended often for actors and readers to understand how to best portray the meaning of the playwright or author and when to pause for breath. Here is a good example of her writing about this topic: "...when the word "comma" was adopted into English in the 16th century, it still referred to a discrete, separable group of words rather than the friendly little tadpole number-nine dot-with-a-tail that today we know and love."

She tells the fascinating story of Aldus Manutius the Elder (1450-1515), "the fabulous Venetian printer...who finally wrestled with the confusing issue of punctuation and brought it to the mat." Aldus Manutius the Elder of Venice invented the italic typeface and printed the first semicolon. His son continued with the tradition and transformed the use of the comma into what she describes "as a kind of scary grammatical sheepdog...having so many jobs as a "separator" –that it tears about on the hillside of language, endlessly organizing words into sensible groups and making them stay put: sorting and dividing; circling and herding; and of course darting off with a peremptory 'woof' to round up any wayward subordinate clause that makes a futile bolt for

freedom." She notes, "I will happily admit I hadn't heard of him until about a year ago but am now absolutely kicking myself that I never volunteered to have his babies."

You get the idea of her writing style.

The book is short, and a quick, fun read. She includes seven chapters entitled: The Seventh Sense, The Tractable Apostrophe, That'll Do, Comma, Airs and Graces, Cutting a Dash, A Little Used Punctuation Mark and Merely Conventional Signs.

I thoroughly enjoyed the examples of poor uses of commas and the resulting consequences, often serious in nature. Simple ones include:

1. The common sign that says, "No Dogs Please." She points out that actually, as a statement, "no dogs please" is a broad generalization that one would need to question as so many dogs do, in fact, please. As she says, "they rather make a point of it."
2. She tells a story of a friend who ran a production of Macbeth and heard a poor soul delivering incorrectly the following lines: "Go get him, surgeons!" It was supposed to read, "Go, get him surgeons!"
3. An example: "Leonora walked on her head a little higher than usual. "Of course, the comma here should go after "on" so it would read, "Leonora walked on, her head a little higher than usual."
4. Another: "The driver managed to escape from the vehicle before it sank and swam to the river-bank. "
5. And finally, "A woman, without her man, is nothing." Versus "A woman: without her, man is nothing."

You will also learn about the work of such writers as Chekov and his short parody of The Christmas Carol that starred winking exclamation marks, Dickens, George Bernard Shaw, T.H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf, who spoke eloquently about the semicolon being in a "different league" for writers.

As this book was written in 2003, it precludes much of what we see today with Twitter and the evolution of web-based norms, although the early signs were there even then.

She argues for the rules of punctuation to be kept and nurtured, with the degrading of them at our own peril. I appreciated her concluding definition of punctuation from Thomas McCormack. Mr. McCormack noted, "the purpose of punctuation is to tango

the reader into the pauses, inflections, continuities, and connections that the spoken line would convey. Punctuation to the writer is like anatomy to the artist: He learns the rules so he can knowledgeably and controlledly depart from them as art requires. Punctuation is a means, and its end is: helping the reader to hear, to follow.”

I highly recommend this book and believe, as Frank McCourt, the author of *Angela’s Ashes*, wrote in the Forward to this book, that we owe so much to punctuation as a process. Its rightful place is to emerge as “the Cinderella of the English language.”