

## Roundtable

*Eats, Shoots and Leaves* By Lynn Truss. New York, NY: Penguin Group Inc., 2003.

### **Punctuation Prowess: Lynne Truss' Pedagogical Power in *Eats, Shoots and Leaves***

*Amanda O'Neil*

In *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, Lynn Truss details with deliciously scathing humor both punctuation's past as well as the longstanding human war of words (and sometimes ashtrays) that has circled 'round the writing world for centuries. She is passionate about the importance of her subject: the rampant misuse of periods, commas, and especially the apostrophe, but she understands the power of humor to defuse and define a potentially incendiary argument.

As a self-proclaimed punctuation "stickler," Truss enters the fray of ideas regarding punctuation armed with wit and a keen understanding of the emotional power this subject carries. Especially for those in the editorial and educational realms, punctuation's proper use (and annoying lack thereof in pop-culture) has generated more and more distraction and debate. Publications are bombarded with letters from readers criticizing the use of hyphens, blasting the placement of colons, and despairing over the lack of commas. Educators, those brave souls charged with instructing future generations in the correct use of periods and parentheses, often find themselves the scapegoat for "what ails" the modern world of writing.

For the past four months I have had the opportunity to study the current state of punctuation and grammar instruction under the excellent direction of Western Michigan University's Dr. Jon Bush. Throughout his course "Grammar in Teaching Writing," Dr. Bush successfully leads a mixed class of undergraduate and graduate English Education students through the complex labyrinth of grammar rules and grammar instruction. A secure understanding of grammar's conventions is foundational to the course, and a major component of that instruction includes the reading and discussion of *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*.

While Truss' book is not an academic education text, nor should it be used as such in a secondary classroom, it is valuable as an informational resource for those entering into formal English Education. For undergraduate students especially, it has the potential to become a great ally in their struggle to unite correct knowledge of the inner workings of our language with instructional methods that successfully pass on this knowledge. Three such undergraduates explore the specific and surprising lessons they learned from Truss in the remainder of this article. Mike Murray, Laurel Powell, and Christin Davis present varying opinions on Truss' style and methods - not to mention her sanity - but all agree that the personal punctuation knowledge gained from the British grammar guru will serve them in good stead as they face the final preparations of "teacher training" at Western Michigan.

### **What's the Exclamation Point?**

*Mike Murray*

*Eats, Shoots and Leaves* is a book about grammar written by a crazy Englishwoman. "How on Earth did it become a British bestseller and an American sensation?" you may ask. The simple answer is...because it's a riot. But the long answer? That's a little more complicated. The problem stems from the fact that Lynne Truss's (Truss' / Trus's / Trusse's / Trus?) book is misunderstood. See? Right there, I wasn't sure what the proper rule was on apostrophes in a name ending with a double "s." Lynne would be so upset with me if she read this. You might wonder why, as an author of a book about grammar, she wouldn't revel in the prospect of teaching me the proper usage, but you also would be misunderstanding the purpose of *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*. TofuNinja and D. McShane, both of whom review the book on Barnes and Noble's website, were also apparently confused. Those reviews are provided here:

TofuNinja, Bzzagent, November 2, 2004.

“I Laughed so Hard”

As a teacher and former student, I know how boring the English language can be. All the grammar and what not. So why in the world would ANYONE want to read a book on grammar and punctuation? Well because this book is funny and teaches through humor. We all love a good blooper here and there. And this book provides many a blooper via the English Language and punctuation mistakes. This is a must read for anyone who deals with the English language on a daily basis. Teachers, students, and people who love to read and write will enjoy this book as a gift.

D. McShane, Teacher, September 28, 2004.

“Not for American Punctuation”

Why this is so popular in US is funny. The book is cutely written and taken as humor it's fine. But it is NOT for American punctuation. British punctuation is often very different than US. So if you give this to your kid and say learn, you could be causing him harm in school.

I include these reviews as an example of how people often misinterpret the purpose of a piece of writing. *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* is not a book about teaching grammar; nor is it a book about the sheer electricity of the English language. It is a book about how meticulous and boring writing conventions are to the majority, and how this boredom has led to the decline of grammatical standards in writing; Lynne Truss finds this a horrible tragedy. The work is a plea to the people of the English speaking world to rise up, red pen in hand, and correct the mistakes of the past, physically, metaphorically, and absurdly. The reality of Lynne's seemingly “certifiable” claim concerning the present precarious state of grammar can be seen in the two provided reviews which, I assume, were written by people who have read the book they are reviewing. If you don't already know what I'm talking about, stop reading this article now and go see if *The Simpsons* is on. If you're with me, then finish reading the article. Don't worry; *The Simpsons* will be on tomorrow. The question now becomes, “Why did Lynne Truss write this book, and what should I learn from it?” (Beyond the true leisure habits of the Panda.)

*Eats, Shoots and Leaves* outlines some of the more common mistakes made regarding punctuation usage, and gives guidelines for the proper use of these marks. As a future English teacher, one of my greatest fears has been my knowledge, or lack-there-of, regarding correct usage of English grammar, especially punctuation. Personally, I learned a great deal about punctuation from reading Lynne Truss' book. I learned the true uses of the semicolon and colon, marks that I used to altogether avoid. I learned that the difference between when to include a comma or a semicolon hinges on whether or not a coordinating conjunction is used (not to mention just what the heck a coordinating conjunction *is*). I learned how, when, and why to use a hyphen as opposed to a dash, as well as Virginia Wolfe's less than complimentary attitude towards these marks. I learned that a question mark/exclamation mark combination is called an “interobang,” just in case the category ever comes up on *Jeopardy!*. I learned about England's Apostrophe Royal; an honest to God government position created by Queen Elizabeth I that remains in existence today. I even learned the epistemology of the emoticon (I was going to add a smiley after this sentence, but I can't bring myself to stoop that low). What's more...I learned about the ellipsis. See...I'm using one right now. Need one more...here you go. Above all else, I learned that a lot of people out there are missing vital information regarding punctuation's proper use, and that Lynne Truss isn't going to take it anymore.

If you are one of the many lost soles out there who need a refresher course in English grammar, buy a reference book. But, if you want to learn a whole lot about grammar, including absurd, useless facts about the history of the subject, and you're not afraid to feel inadequate at least a couple of times; read *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*. Just don't agree to be Lynne pen pal. Whatever you do, don't agree to be Lynne Truss' pen pal.

## **A Learning Experience: A Response to Lynne Truss and Punctuation**

*Laurel Powell*

Reading Truss' book, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, was a huge eye opener for me as a college student and as a teacher in training. I have always been a little shaky when it comes to grammar. I think this is due to the fact that I have not had a formal grammar lesson since I was in elementary school, and that was a long time ago. Truss' book looks at punctuation conventions and breaks them down into comprehensible material that can be used by teachers and those training to become them. Her wit and humor make this grammar book enjoyable as well as educational.

I walked away from the book with more knowledge about grammar than I ever thought possible. There were times when I was reading that I thought, "How stupid am I for not knowing this stuff?" Even though I felt stupid at some points, at the end I realized that I learned an enormous amount about English punctuation. As an educator in training, I have taken a lot from this book that I can put into use one day in my own classroom.

There are many forms of punctuation that are a bit hazy for me, and I'm sure that they are a bit hazy for others too. According to Truss, who is a stickler for proper punctuation, this is unacceptable. One form of punctuation that I learned a great deal about was the semicolon. I always thought that I had a pretty good grasp on where and when to use a semicolon, but I was mistaken in some cases. Truss goes deep into the roots and the many uses of the semicolon. For instance, on page 121 she states, "The main place for putting a semicolon . . . is between two related sentences where there is no conjunction such as "and" or "but", and where a comma would be ungrammatical." Now this was something that I knew, but Truss isn't finished. There is another way that a semicolon be put to use. As she says, "it performs the duties of a kind of Special Policeman in the event of comma fights." What she means here is that when there is a sentence that is full, overflowing, with commas, the semicolon can come in and make more sense out of what is taking place on the page.

I was shocked to learn grammarians are fretting that the semicolon is becoming endangered. They are worried, and with ample reason Truss believes, because some writers of the contemporary sort are replacing the semicolon with the dash . Truss believes that writers are tending to use the dash more because it is less formal than the semicolon. She does believe that there is a place for the dash, just not in the place where a semicolon should be! She writes, “Whereas the semicolon suggests a connection between the two halves of each of these sentences, the dash ought to be preserved for occasions when the connection is a lot less direct, when it can act as a bridge between bits of fractured sense.” This is a great way for a teacher to explain the difference between the two to his or her students. The semicolon is a very important part of our punctuation in Truss’ eyes, as well as mine. I just don’t see it going anywhere any time soon.

Another convention that I really feel that I learned a lot about is the exclamation mark, or point as we say it here in the United States. When I was a child learning punctuation, I was taught that the exclamation point went on the end of a sentence when you meant to be “loud,” whether with excitement, fear, happiness or anger. Truss gives six different uses of the exclamation point. This was very surprising to me. As a teacher in training I was baffled that there were so many uses and that I didn’t know all of them. For instance, it can be used in a sentence to salute or invoke. When I read the example sentence it made perfect sense, I just didn’t know that it was saluting or invoking. Other usage was to deflect potential misunderstanding of irony. This really threw me for a loop, but once I read on I understood. That is the beauty of Truss; she explains until you understand what she means. She does this by giving examples, being witty, and just plain explaining the usage in clear English.

Another punctuation mark that I learned more about is the hyphen. I have always been lost when it comes to hyphen usage. I think that this is why I have neglected to use them. I never use the hyphen when I write, and that is probably why I don’t know very much about its usage. After reading Truss’ chapter “A Little Used Punctuation Mark,” I

realized that I have been misusing the hyphen, or not using one when I needed to. In her explanation she states, “traditionally it joins together words, or words-with-prefixes, to aid understanding; it keeps certain other words neatly apart, with an identical intention.” This was another punctuation mark that I didn’t know had so many uses. I did not know that hyphens were used to avoid ambiguity. I never knew that the words reformed and reformed were so very different in meaning. I learned that a hyphen is used to link a noun with a noun as well as an adjective with an adjective. Then there were uses that I recognized. One was that hyphens are used when spelling out numbers. Another was when certain words are to be spelled out when they are read. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of English*, the hyphen is another punctuation mark that might be headed for extinction. This amazed me even though I do not use it and hardly ever see it used anymore. I always thought that *someone* out there was using it. I guess that I was ignorant in my belief that our punctuation is here to stay, even if it is not used all the time.

Truss is a great teacher in her book. (Even if she is a little anal most of the time.) She knows that there aren’t many people out there like her, and she isn’t afraid to tell those people where to go and when. She makes the book fun to read and easy to understand for all types of people. She always gives the background information for each punctuation mark. As well as doing that, she explains the usage of the mark and shows examples. Another fun thing that she does is make sure that she sprinkles all of these punctuation marks into the book. This is another great way to see the punctuation marks in action. This book is of great help to many teachers as well as anyone who needs or wants a refresher in punctuation.

**Lynne Truss: The Sarcastic Sentence Stickler**  
**Christin Davis**

The book *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves* was not an enjoyable book for me to read. Lynne Truss, the sarcastic sentence stickler, wrote the book based primarily on how she feels about grammar. While reading this book I tried to find different ways in which this book could be useful to me and my future teaching career in English; at first I could not identify any. Truss simply rambled on throughout the entirety, talking

about her pet peeves of grammar. Her sarcastic attitude towards people who do not speak or write the English language as she does was rude and I did not find it amusing.

Well, enough Brit bashing for now. I guess I did learn something from this book. I never realized there was so much history behind grammar and punctuation. Lynne Truss complains about how often apostrophes are used incorrectly and comments about why apostrophes were first created and used. On page thirty-seven, Truss discusses where and when the apostrophe originated in the English Language. The apostrophe was adopted into the English Language in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The word and mark were created in ancient Greece; in the Greek language apostrophe means “turning away.” After reading this I suddenly understood that apostrophes are not just a simple punctuation mark used to show ownership; they became so much more. I would have ever known that punctuation marks have meanings that date back hundreds, even thousands of years.

Truss states that originally, apostrophes were used in English to take the place of letters omitted from words. She provides a few examples from Shakespeare on pages thirty-seven and thirty-eight. “’Tis a consumption devoutly to be wish’d”; and “I am too much i’ the sun”. Truss reasons that the use of the apostrophe in the latter phrase was clearly the author’s decision to employ a new punctuation mark for the fun of it. Throughout the apostrophe section in Truss’ book she makes a point to show that apostrophes have a variety of different uses, and that, in her opinion, some of the modern uses are wrong. It makes sense if you study where apostrophes are used today on billboards and signs. Today the English language primarily uses apostrophes in contractions and to show ownership, the possessiveness of words. However, sometimes people use them in strange ways, because they don’t know the correct place to put an apostrophe.

Another interesting fact that Truss discusses is how punctuation has evolved over time. I agree with her statement on page seventy-three when she says that most of the marks used by early scribes look bizarre to us now. I always thought that the punctuation used today in the English Language has remained the same since the day it was invented. The truth about punctuation, though, is that it has changed very much over time just as English grammar has evolved over time. I know that thought seems very juvenile, but that is an aspect of grammar that isn’t really taught or discussed in education. Perhaps it should be.

Certain punctuation marks were originally used to guide actors and readers through their scripts. On page seventy-three, Truss talks about how punctuation marks were used to enable actors and readers to know when to pause in their reading and how long of a pause they should take. For instance, the backslash (/) and the number seven (7) were used as punctuation symbols. The (/) was called a virgula suspensiva. This punctuation mark was used to mark the briefest pause or hesitation. Paragraphs never used to be indented and the number seven was used to indicate the end of a piece of text.

Punctuation not only changes with time, it also changes with the country that is using it. Truss really threw me off when she began talking about the half stop and the full stop as punctuation symbols. I was quite confused as to what these punctuation symbols were, but after using some context clues I understood what punctuation marks Truss was talking about. She was referring to a period and a comma by their British names. These names make sense if you think about English punctuation evolving from marks used in scripts to indicate how long a reader should stop speaking/reading. The brief pause is taken when arriving at a comma hints at the name half stop. The longer pause is taken when arriving at a period, hints at the name full stop.

Even though I may not have enjoyed Lynne Truss’ sarcastic, sentence stickler humor in *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves*, and found it to be very distracting, I did learn several lessons that will help me with my own understanding of grammar and punctuation. I understand why some of the punctuation marks that are used in the English Language were created. I was very enlightened by the history of punctuation and I understand punctuation a little more than I did before.