**EATS, SHOOTS AND LEAVES**

***—a book review***

The title of Eats, Shoots and Leaves refers to a famously misplaced comma in a wildlife manual that ended up suggesting a panda rather violently 'eats, shoots and leaves' instead of eating shoots and leaves. The author of this book, journalist Lynne Truss, is something akin to a militant linguist, dedicating this 'zero tolerance' manifesto on grammar to the striking Bolshevik printers of St. Petersburg who, in demanding the same remuneration for punctuation as they received for letters, ended up setting in motion the first Russian Revolution.

Some of the book involves humorous attacks on erroneous punctuation. There is the confused Shakespearian thespian who inadvertently turns a frantic plea: 'Go, get him surgeons!' into the cheerful encouragement of 'Go get him, surgeons!' Street and shop signs have a ubiquitous presence. A bakery declares 'FRESH DONUT'S SOLD HERE' and a florist curiously announces that 'Pansy's here!' (Is she?). The shameless title of a Hollywood film Two Weeks Notice is reeled in for criticism—'Would they similarly call it One Weeks Notice ?', Truss enquires—and sometimes, as in the case of signs promoting 'ANTIQUE'S' and 'Potatoe's'—one questions whether we are bearing witness to new depths of grammar ignorance, or a postmodern caricature of atrocious punctuation. Eats, Shoots and Leaves is not just a piece of comedy and ridicule, however, and Truss has plenty to offer on the question of proper grammar usage. If you have ever wondered whether it is acceptable to simply use an 'em dash' 1 in place of a comma—the verdict from Truss is that you can. 'The dash is less formal than the semicolon, which makes it more attractive,' she suggests. 'It enhances conversational tone; and...it is capable of quite subtle effects.' The author concludes, with characteristic wry condescension, that the em dash's popularity largely rests on people knowing it is almost impossible to use incorrectly. Truss is a personal champion of the semicolon, a historically contentious punctuation mark elsewhere maligned by novelist Kurt Vonnegut Jr., as a 'transvestite hermaphrodite representing absolutely nothing'. Coming to the semicolon's defense, Truss suggests that, while it can certainly be over-used—she refers to the dying words of one 20th century writer: 'I should have used fewer semicolons'—the semicolon can perform the role of a 'a kind of Special Policeman in the event of comma fights'.

Truss has come under criticism on two broad points. The first argument criticises the legitimacy of her authority as a punctuation autocrat. Louis Menand, writing in the New Yorker , details Eats, Shoots and Leaves' numerous grammatical and punctuation sins: a comma-free non-restrictive clause; a superfluous ellipsis; a misplaced apostrophe; a misused parenthesis; two misused semicolons; an erroneous hyphen in the word 'abuzz', and so on. In fact, as Menand notes, half the semicolons in the Truss book are spuriously deployed because they stem from the author's open flouting of the rule that semicolons must only connect two independent clauses. 'Why would a person not just vague about the rules but disinclined to follow them bother to produce a guide to punctuation?' Menand inquires. Ultimately, he holds Truss accused of producing a book that pleases those who 'just need to vent' and concludes that Eats, Shoots and Leaves is actually a tirade against the decline of language and print that disguises itself, thinly and poorly, as some kind of a style manual.

Linguist David Chrystal has criticised what he describes as a 'linguistic purism' coursing through Truss' book. Linguistic purism is the notion that one variety of language is somehow more pure than others, with this sense of purity often based on an idealised historical point in the language's development, but sometimes simply in reference to an abstract ideal. In The Fight for English: How Language Pundits Ate , Shot and Left , Chrystal—a former colleague of Truss—condemns the no-holds-barred approach to punctuation and grammar. 'Zero tolerance does not allow for flexibility,' he argues. 'It is prescriptivism taken to extremes. It suggests that language is in a state where all the rules are established with 100 per cent certainty. The suggestion is false. We do not know what all the rules of punctuation are. And no rule of punctuation is followed by all of the people all of the time.'

Other detractors of Truss' 'prescriptivism' are careful to disassociate needless purism from robust and sensible criticism, an oppositional stance they call descriptivism. 'Don't ever imagine,' Geoffrey K. Pullum on the Language Log emphasises, 'that I think all honest attempts at using English are just as good as any others. [Bad] writing needs to be fixed. But let's make sure we fix the right things.' In other words, we do not require a dogmatic approach to clean up misused language. Charles Gaulke concurs, noting that his opposition to 'prescriptivism' does not require contending with the existence of standards themselves, but questioning whether our standards should determine what works, or whether what works should determine our standards.

Ultimately, it is unlikely the purists and pedagogues will ever make absolute peace with those who see language as a fluid, creative process within which everyone has a role to play. Both sides can learn to live in a sort of contentious harmony, however. Creativity typically involves extending, adapting and critiquing the status quo, and revising and reviving old traditions while constructing new ones. Rules must exist in order for this process to take place, if only for them to be broken. On the flip side, rules have an important role to play in guiding our language into forms that can be accessed by people across all manner of differences, so it is vital to acknowledge the extent to which they can be democratic, rather than merely autocratic in function. Nevertheless, all the regulations in the world cannot stem the natural spring of language, which bursts through rivets and snakes around the dams that linguistic authorities may try to put in place. We should celebrate rather than curse these inevitable tensions.