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Ignorance Was Bliss: Lynne Truss, You Opened Our Eyes ... And May Have Ruined Our Lives

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Roundtable
Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation
Lynne Truss. (publication Info)

Ignorance Was Bliss: Lynne Truss, You Opened Our Eyes ... And May Have Ruined Our Lives

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Introduction
Jan Miller

Who would have ever thought that in a nation bred in the computer age, born in the chat room, and weaned on spell-check, a book about proper punctuation could make *The New York Times* Best Sellers List? Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots, & Leaves* has done just that. It became popular in the United Kingdom in 2002 and quickly piqued the interest of Americans to the point of holding a place on The New York Times Best Sellers List for twenty-nine weeks. Due to its popularity and merit , it is required reading for English 574: "Grammar and Teaching Grammar," at Western Michigan University and became a springboard for discussions and debates among in-service and future teachers alike. Opinions varied regarding this publication, and sharing these opinions became the focus of this *LAJM* roundtable. The contributors of this roundtable all agree that *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* has a place on educators' reference shelves. They also agree, however, that Lynne Truss has taken her crusade too far.

Bryce Cameron, the first contributor, points out that Ms. Truss refers to the history of punctuation marks, while at the same time calling for the halt to their evolution. Cameron sees this as counterproductive and draws comparisons to industrial and technological improvements that have occurred over time. Another contributor, Andrea Gottschalk, bemoans the fact that having read *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* has led to her inability to watch television or read newspaper advertisements without noticing grammatical errors. However, while Lynne Truss has made her hypersensitive to subject/verb agreement, Gottschalk appreciates the humor in Truss's book. Brandy Stone, the third contributor initially questioned her ability to become an English teacher because she does not share the same passion for grammar as Lynne Truss. Fortunately, Stone realizes that she will be a fine teacher, and *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* is merely a resource for raising grammar awareness. The last contributor, Melanie Yard, places herself and Lynne Truss on "different ends of the spectrum" in the area of perfectionism when it comes to punctuation. She takes pity on Truss who, as a child, corrected the grammar of her pen pal's letters. A redeeming quality of the book noted by a majority of the contributors is that it is one of few grammar textbooks written with humor; something that should have been done long ago.

As these responses suggest, Eats, Shoots & Leaves has a significant effect on those who read it. Whether people enjoy the book or not, a common outcome is certain. Lynne Truss makes teachers and teachers-to-be cognizant of the particulars of punctuating the English language. The following articles, written by future teachers of English, speak to the impact of *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*.

Editor's Note:
For more Roundtable reviews on *Eat, Shoots & Leaves*, see the WMU "Grammar Central" website at
http://homepages.wmich.edu/~jbush/esl.html

Ms. Truss also maintains a Eats, Shoots & Leaves website at:
http://www.eatshootsleaves.com

Response #1:
What's Wrong with the Interrobang?! With a Few Clucks of Her Tongue, Lynne Truss Sets It Straight.

Bryce Cameron

According to Lynne Truss, I am a bad person. In today's apparently unsound and ever-deteriorating grammatical climate, someone needs to stand up to the tyranny of misused apostrophes, to rebel against the cruelty of misplaced commas, and to rage, rage, rage against the dying of standard edited English. But try as I might, I just don't see the urgency in our current state of affairs. I have come to the satisfying conclusion that I am okay (is this form of the word acceptable, Ms. Truss, or should I employ the original, peculiar looking 'OK'?) with blunders. Misused apostrophes on store signs do not bother me. I am not fazed when I spot a take-out menu that reads, "Delivery Area 5 mile's radius." I cannot even muster up a few tears of desperate frustration upon seeing a sign for "Used Book's." Does this really make me a bad person? Does this mean I am not pulling my so-called weight as an English major? I don't think so, but Ms. Truss most definitely does.

As I read *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, Ms. Truss's alarmingly vehement soapbox rendition of a grammar primer, I contemplated my responsibilities as both a future English teacher and a human being. Should I be more upset by these grammatical aberrations? Should the mere idea of an ill-used punctuation mark fill me with a rumbling rage? Any way I thought about it, the answer was always the same: these things shouldn't bother me as much as they bother Ms. Truss with her grammatical purist mentality. As long as the general message is conveyed, who cares whether an apostrophe is in the right place? Even though the sign reads "Two Day's Sale," I know it isn't someone named Two Day who is putting on that sale. Different types of grammar govern different types of communication, so why should the informal, fragmented communication of a store sign adhere to the strict, pedantic rules of formal written grammar? Form affects content just as context affects the rules by which it is governed. Murder is wrong, but, in the context of war, murder is acceptable. It is no different with regard to grammar. The context of the message must be recognized and factored into the reading of the message, itself.

Despite the militant, overzealous, and rigid overtones emanating from each page, Ms. Truss does a wonderful job (for those who are interested) of categorically addressing numerous areas of grammar that lend themselves to confusion. She dives into the history of italics with excessive enthusiasm, sheds more than enough light on the shady area of commas, and hacks her way through the jungle of brackets, parentheses, and dashes. This may sound a bit boring, but it really isn't. Ms. Truss manages to salvage the driest of material with humor and knowledge, and she does so with the authority of an expert, the wit of an Irish satirist, and the spirit of an activist.

The book, itself, is useful (though some sort of glossary, index or detailed table of contents would have proved practical), and though I wouldn't use it as a textbook, I would recommend it as a helpful reference material. Anyone who has read multiple grammar textbooks will tell you that they are devastatingly boring, but *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* is as enjoyable a read as they come. The main problem with Truss's— this extra "s" is so strange to me— book is it seems to concede that if you don't know everything there is to know about the English language, you shouldn't be using it. Even as I write this review, I find myself questioning my every move. Is this a proper use of a dash? Can (or should I say, may?) I really use an exclamation point at the end of this sentence, or is Ms. Truss going to send me a nasty letter full of French words and semi-colons?

The most alarming statement Truss makes in her book has to do with the current state of grammar in the English-speaking world. It seems that she wants to bring five hundred years of grammatical

evolution to a screeching halt by advocating a kind of stasis, which, as paleontologist Charles Marsh so succinctly states (with regard to language and the arts), is tantamount to death. Lynne Truss confounds the great tradition of grammatical development by trying to gut it, stuff it, and place it on the proverbial mantle. Why would anyone ever want to stop grammar from evolving? It's simply unnatural to demand that such a useful tool remain the same forever. Should we forget about trying to develop cars that are more fuel-efficient simply because they already get us from point A to point B in a timely fashion? Should we all resist attempts made by engineers to improve the automobile? Should we call suggestions, such as electric cars, hybrid cars, and even carpooling, silly? Or should we keep an open mind and allow things to change?

So, what is wrong with the interrobang?! It seems to me that it served a purpose, however rare, trivial and short-lived that purpose was. Maybe it could have been a useful symbol. I know it would have saved me time when I was writing the title of this review. Maybe it's time to look ahead, Ms. Truss. Two hundred years ago, when few English speakers could read or write, and when, after a long day's work, people sat down, book in hand, by the warm, gentle glow of a hearth fire, they expected their reading experience, however exciting or mundane it may be, to last. Because of this, writers both great and average employed commas, as well as periods, to do the work of slowing down the text, which proved to be very effective, as well as time consuming. But this is not the way we writers do it in today's fast-paced world where time is important and arduous text is a thing of the past. Today, we let the comma take a little time off. We give it some time to kick back and relax, and I don't hear any complaints coming from you, Ms. Truss. I certainly don't hear any complaints from the comma.

Maybe the road to Hell isn't paved with bad grammar, after all. And maybe the changes our complex little friend, Grammar, are going through aren't as frightening as Ms. Truss would have us believe. Maybe the sticklers just need to calm down a little and allow the Winds of Change to blow. And maybe grammatical purity is a relativist pipe dream. In any case, change is developing all around us. Endangered periods are no longer found in their usual nesting grounds between letters like "C," "I," and "A." Even as I finish this review, the word "Google" is becoming a verb! Strange, you say? Of course it is, and transition is always strange, but—if history teaches us nothing else—change can benefit everyone.

Response #2

Hey Lynne! An Idea -- Can't Fun and Grammar Go Together?

Andrea Gottschalk

Why is *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* so popular? I know that I would have never read it if I hadn't been required. I'm sure there are a few people, like me, who were required to read this book. But a book does not get to the top of the bestseller list with just people that have to read it; otherwise, Introduction to Psychology would also be right up there at the top of the list. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* isn't too bad. It sure beats reading a dry textbook. What I don't understand is why people would read it if they don't have to. Maybe my mind is too simple to understand a genius like Lynne Truss, but even she confesses that "no one involved in the production of Eats, Shoots & Leaves expected the words, "runaway" and "bestseller," would ever be associated with it" (Truss xvii). People appear not to care about grammar; examples of bad grammar litter society. So, if people do not appear to care about grammar, why would a grammar book become a best seller in England, as well as the United States?

Many people in England and the United States fall into one of two categories. First, there are those who were taught by hard-core grammarians. Anyone who falls within this category can be classified as having achieved nothing other than hatred for grammar. Then, there are those who were taught by teachers that hate grammar because those teachers were taught hard-core grammarians. The

teachers in the second group have no idea how to teach grammar, so they don't. For the most part, I fall into the second category, with one particular exception: I was lucky to have a teacher in my sophomore year of high school who must be the distant cousin of Lynne Truss. When I read *Eats, Shoots & Leaves,* I can't help but hear my teacher's voice. He even has the same obsession with grocery stores that have "10 items or less" instead of "10 items or fewer." Of course, at the time I thought that he was crazy, but now I appreciate that I had a stickler for a teacher. If it were not for the stickler, I would not have the skills to manipulate my writing. If it were not for the stickler, I would still be trapped sounding like an idiot with my overuse of simple sentences. If it were not for the stickler, I would still not know my "apostrophe from (my) elbow," as Truss puts it. (xx) So thank goodness for the stickler! By appreciating my tenth grade teacher, I can appreciate Truss. A stickler is a stickler, and I have already established that having at least one stickler in one's life can be beneficial.

I suppose there must be many people that never had a stickler for a teacher. There are many people who have no concept of grammar, due in some way to the grammar Nazis of the past, and these people are embarrassed. Truss laments about the internet in relation to these individuals by saying that "people who have been taught nothing about their own language are (contrary to educational expectations) spending all their leisure hours attempting to string sentences together for the edification of others" (17). For these people, the options are limited to the red pen or simple sentences. What a dreadful life! Fortunately, there's hope. Truss provides a painless way to learn about grammar. The book uses dry British humor rather than being just plain dry. Yes, all of the information on grammar could be summed up in about ten pages, but there isn't any fun in that. Some people say that the book drags on, but I say that Truss needed to add all of the anecdotes so that people can remember what she has to say. Despite all of the "unnecessary" verbiage, it doesn't take long to read the book.

Although I like the book, I feel that it is my duty to warn: ONCE YOU READ THIS BOOK, YOU WILL NOTICE ALL GRAMMAR ERRORS. Oh, this seems like a harmless effect. You may think that you want to be able to notice grammar errors. Trust me, you don't. Grammar errors are all around. A simple drive turns into a scary trip down Bad Grammar Lane. A night of relaxing by the TV turns into listening to fingernails on a chalkboard. A little surfing on the internet turns into riding out a hurricane in a rowboat. Like Truss, my "exquisite sensitivities are assaulted from all sides, causing feelings of panic and isolation," but fortunately I have not reached the stage of being one of those "unattractive know-all obsessives who get things out of proportion and are in continual peril of being disowned by (their) exasperated families" (2, 5). I began to notice a transformation in myself while watching TV several days after reading *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*. I was confronted with a commercial for a grocery store that asks, "Why does so many people like to shop at _____?" Before I read this book, I would have heard this affront on grammar and thought it sounded funny, but I wouldn't have been deeply troubled by it. Now, I can't help but wonder what kind of idiot would listen to that cut and allow it to play on TV where people will hear it. As odd as it may sound, I have even considered writing to the company president to say that the commercial makes the store sound like a bunch of idiots. I can't go into the store without hearing "Why does so many people" repeatedly. It is enough to drive a person insane.

Insanity is what you risk when you read *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*. Yes, you will learn about grammar, but you will also learn much more than you ever wanted.

Response #3

Ignorance was Bliss ... Until Lynne Truss Ruined my Life: Am I Going to Become a Bad Teacher?

Brandy Stone

Eats, Shoots & Leaves is a unique book that has somehow stayed at the number four spot for twenty-nine weeks on the New York Times Best Seller List. When I—an English education major at WMU—first picked up this book from the bookstore, I was excited. It has an interesting cover, and its title sounds like something I would want to read. And then I started reading. It was downhill from there and, needless to say, I did not like the book.

Throughout most of the text, I kept wondering if I were going to become a bad teacher because some of the things she mentions do not bother me. For example, the movie title T*wo Weeks Notice* is missing an apostrophe and should read Two Weeks' Notice. Although I did notice this lack of punctuation, it never seemed to bother me. And then when I noticed that it didn't bother me, I wondered what that meant. I wondered if I was going to become a bad teacher. I don't tend to think less of people who make punctuation errors, but it appears that Lynne Truss does. Granted, an error in the title of a major motion picture, no matter how small the error, should have been caught by more than one person before the movie was presented to the public. But does that make all of America and Europe bad for not coming forward and being outraged by this?

Another "Am I going to become a bad teacher?" moment occurred when Truss brought up the "10 items or less" sign at the grocery store. This sign should read, "10 items or fewer." I see this type of sign all the time and never think twice about it. And then Lynne Truss points this out and I think to myself, "Hey, Stupid, that is not right and why doesn't it bother you? You're not going to be a very good teacher if this sign is okay with you." Not the best internal dialogue, but it makes me start to think other teachers notice these things, and I question if I am cut out to be a teacher. Ever since I read this book, I am no longer able to walk around like a normal person because I am noticing all these signs, and always questioning why it doesn't bother me.

On a positive note, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* does contain chapters that show the incorrect and correct way to use certain punctuation marks. Some examples include commas, dashes, and the previously mentioned apostrophe. Lynne Truss does a good job of giving many examples to show how these commonly misused punctuation marks appear in everyday life. This positive note, however, leads to a negative one because when I saw some of her examples, I noticed that some of them are errors that I commit in my own writing without thinking twice. Will making these mistakes lead to me becoming a bad teacher? What kind of teacher am I going to become if I make mistakes that, according to Lynne Truss, are inexcusable and wrong?

It makes me uncomfortable that a book can get in my head as much as this one did. I assume what most authors strive for is the ability to get into their readers' heads, stick with them, and make them think. For that reason, I would recommend this book for other teachers or teachers-to-be. It makes you look at all of your surroundings differently and more intensely. I do not believe that this is a valuable classroom resource, but it is still a book that teachers should read as a way to "open their "eyes," as the saying goes, and think about the world around them.

Response #4

Lynne Truss: You Changed Me Forever ... into a Grammarian

Melanie Yard

I did not realize that when I bought books for my fall semester, that I obtained a book that should have burnt my fingers and said, "Step away from the panda!" The cover was thought provoking. It was humorous, with one panda bear holding a gun and the other one on a ladder, painting over the comma that was misplaced between *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*. However, it joined other books for school in a pile labeled, "Will read when the syllabus tells me to."

When the day finally came that I began reading, I immediately knew I was about to be exposed to a piece of literature about grammar that was unlike anything I had ever read. In the introduction , the author, Lynne Truss, states that CD's, VIDEO'S, DVD's, and BOOK's evoke a "gasp of horror or quickening of the pulse." This physiological reaction did not occur for me. As a future teacher, I felt guilty as I read on. Truss rattled on about her inner stickler in regards to grammar. Punctuation used incorrectly actually causes her pain. The only time punctuation ever caused me pain was in high school when I was forced to fill in worksheet after worksheet correcting grammar and punctuation.

As I continued reading, I discovered that Truss and I were on different ends of the spectrum when it comes to being a perfectionist for punctuation. She is a true stickler at heart. Even as a young child, she attempted to "enlighten" others to become a stickler replica of her. For example, she shares with the reader her own pen-pal experience; this one is certainly much different from my simple letters that discussed what I did that day or my favorite color. Truss replied to her pen pal's letter with harsh corrections of every punctuation mistake she had made and then sent the letter back. What a poor child!

As you may have heard, the author of *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* has a dry, British sense of humor that only some may actually find funny. She maintains this approach throughout her book, which enhances her unique rendition of the importance of punctuation. It takes the topic of punctuation and puts it in a dramatic light, which to my knowledge has never been done previously. In my opinion, this should have been done decades ago.

The world in which a groan is sounded in a classroom when a teacher mentions "punctuation" must end. Grammar requires humor in order to be effective for people who are not like Truss. These people do not naturally feel the need to vomit at the sight of a misplaced apostrophe. Truss's book will help these people become aware of the importance of punctuation and how punctuation can encourage proper communication.

For those of you who feel the need to brush up on your grammar in a different way, Truss's book is for you. She refreshes her readers on the rules of using punctuation marks ranging from the exclamation point to the semi-colon. She presents it with the grace of a comedian, bringing to life explanations of the complicated, dull rules of punctuation For example, she explains the colon in terms of the "yes!" and the "ah" colon. The explanations she gives are useful and effective for most of the general public who desire to understand the use of certain punctuation marks but do not want to have nightmares of worksheets.

In addition to the general public, however, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* can be useful to educators. Teachers can use the book for a quick and easy reference to the rules of common punctuation marks and mistakes. It puts into perspective why punctuation is important, with examples that are so accessible that high school students can also understand and apply. If a teacher would like to use innovative techniques to teach grammar, but still believes that the traditional ways are important, this book fits right into that category. Truss is an obvious stickler and traditionalist, yet her integration of humor communicates to the reader her realization that grammar is changing.

Whether educators keep this book on their resource shelves, it is certainly a good book to experience. In addition to refreshing readers on punctuation rules and adding humor to grammar, it reinforces the fact that grammar is constantly evolving. Grammar has evolved to fit each generation's needs. Today, technology is changing grammar at an increasingly high rate, and it is important to be aware of this as an educator. Grammar is a written dialect, which frequently switches codes to fit the needs of the situation. Educators must communicate this idea to their students, as well as discuss the positive and negative aspects of this code switching.

Reading Truss's book has ruined my lack of "grammar awareness." Like Truss, I now take note of signs, advertisements, and e-mails in a way that usually frustrates me. I long for my past days in which I walked down the street and did not care if a sign was punctuated incorrectly. I understand the meaning of the saying, "Ignorance is bliss." However, this enlightenment is truly for the better. As a future educator, I believe that being a stickler is part of being a teacher. Lynne Truss may have essentially ruined my ignorant life, but her ideas have created a new and improved future educator.

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