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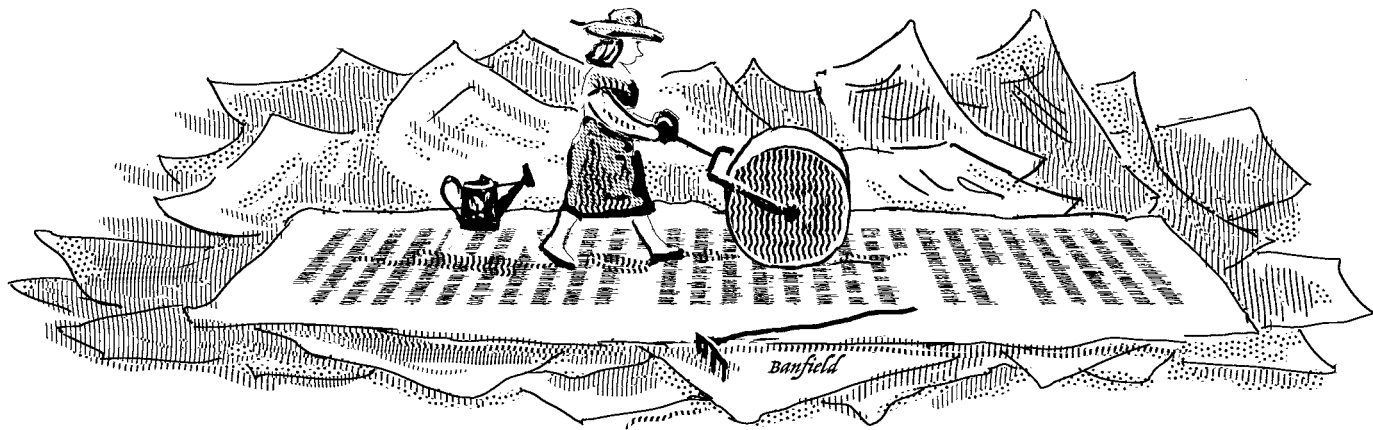
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Adventures among the Apostrophes

Between You and Me: Confessions of a Comma Queen, by Mary Norris.
W.W. Norton & Company, 240 pages, \$24.95 (cloth), \$15.95 (paper)



Mary Norris is a veteran copy-editor at the *New Yorker*—which is saying a very great deal. The magazine takes justifiable pride in its stylish prose and impeccable proofreading, and no one would remain there long enough to be called “veteran” without being meticulous, knowledgeable, and determined. I found myself thinking of a wonderful cartoon of some years ago (not a *New Yorker* cartoon, though) depicting an “eagle-eyed nitpicker, who can spot a wrong-font comma at 30 paces.”

In *Between You and Me*, Norris weaves her analyses of grammar and her (and the *New Yorker's*) preferences in punctuation and spelling together with her memoir of growing up in Cleveland, attending college in New Jersey, getting a master's degree in English at the University of Vermont, coming to New York, and landing a job at the *New Yorker*. She was not in time to work under the legendary, irascible founding editor, Harold Ross, but she came during the tenure of the equally, though oppositely, legendary William Shawn—as quiet as Ross was combustible.

Shawn had the decorum of his grandfather's generation. My late employer, Bill Buckley—who had been on friendly terms with Shawn for years, and who would, as he put it, “*tutoyer*” anyone he knew at all well—fell in with “Mr.” Shawn's formality and always so addressed him. He gleefully recalled a note Shawn once wrote him: “Mr. Buckley, I very much fear that you do not understand the use of the comma.” (Norris has something to say about that, in a section

on the two different ways of using commas: for strictly grammatical purposes, and as an indicator of how the sentence should be spoken—almost like musical notation. Bill was decidedly of the musical school.)

After two brief interregnums (under Robert Gottlieb and Tina Brown), the helm of the *New Yorker* has passed into the hands of David Remnick, who is, again, the polar opposite of his predecessor. Shawn quietly but purposefully worked to keep obscenities out of the *New Yorker's* pages, whereas Remnick, Norris tells us, once engaged in a contest with his writers to see who could stuff more instances of “f-k” into a particular issue.

She starts her autobiographical account with recollections of her days as a “foot checker” at the local swimming pool (inspecting all prospective swimmers for athlete's foot), as the assistant in a costume agency, and then as a milk deliverer. In this last role, she gives us a foreshadowing of her eventual vocation as an analyst and lover of language, as she recalls her efforts to decide, in those early days of modern feminism (the 1970s), what to do while leaving the milk on the customer's doorstep. Normally, one would shout “Milkman!” when making a delivery.

I wasn't a man, but I didn't like the word “lady”—it seemed not feminist—so I wouldn't holler “Milk lady!” and “milkmaid” was a little too fanciful. I settled for “milkwoman,” which was a bit too

anatomically correct and made me sound like a wet nurse. I mused the last syllables.

After graduate school she headed to New York, where her brother had made friends with Jeanne Fleischmann, the wife of the *New Yorker's* chairman of the board. She soon met the Fleischmanns, and before long had landed a job with the magazine, which she had discovered several years before. She describes her job in glowing terms, which I imagine will resonate with anyone who really loves the craft of editing:

One of the things I like about my job is that it draws on the entire person: not just your knowledge of grammar and punctuation and usage and foreign languages and literature but also your experience of travel, gardening, shipping, singing, plumbing, Catholicism, midwesternism, mozzarella, the A train, New Jersey. And in turn it feeds you more experience. In the hierarchy of prose goddesses, I am way, way down the list. But what expertise I have acquired I want to pass along.

And soon, she comes back to the vexed question, which she first raised in describing her milk route, of masculine and feminine designations. After reporting on several authors' suggestions for gender-neutral pronouns, each more fanciful and improbable than the last, she writes: “Pronouns are deeply embedded in the language, and all

these imposed schemes are doomed: the more logical they are, the more absurd the idea of putting them into practice. Rather than solve anything by blending in, the invented pronouns stand up and wave their arms around just when they should be disappearing.”

Nor is using “their” an answer:

I hate to say it, but the colloquial use of “their” when you mean “his or her” is just wrong. It may solve the gender problem, and there is no doubt that it has taken over in the spoken language, but it does so at the expense of number. An antecedent that is in the singular cannot take a plural pronoun. And yet it does, all the time—certainly in speech. It’s not fair. Why should a lowly common-gender plural pronoun trump our singular feminine and masculine pronouns, our kings and queens and jacks? If we didn’t make such a fuss about the episcene, the masculine pronoun would just blend in and disappear: the invisible he.

As, I might add, it did until, historically speaking, the day before yesterday, when some activists started making a fuss about it.

Then we move into the nuts and bolts of grammar—a metaphor many writers on language have used, but Norris delves into it and gives it its due:

To understand how the language works...—to master the mechanics

of it—you have to roll up your sleeves and join the ink-stained wretches as we name the parts, being careful to define them in a way that makes them simpler instead of more complicated, and see how they work together. Bear with me while I find the little hook that holds the hood in place and prop it open with this stick. I am going to attempt to diagnose one of the most barbaric habits in contemporary usage.... Just between you and me, I swear, and the whole body of the English language shudders, when, say, a shoe salesman trying to gain my trust leans forward and says, “Between you and I....”

She then leads us through bright gardens of commas, hyphens, apostrophes, and dashes (Emily Dickinson “used dashes for everything, and sometimes for two things at once. If a different size and style of fork were assigned to each of her various dashes, the table setting would require not just dessert forks and fondue forks and those tiny forks used for teasing out snails but also tuning forks and pitchforks.”), before concluding with her “Ballad of a Pencil Junkie.” This latter was inspired by the fact that the *New Yorker* insists on presenting its composers with pristine proofs—no cross-outs, and even erasures have to be done as unsmudgily as possible. (When I first came to *National Review*—in the days when we still had those wonderful Linotype compositors instead of do-it-yourself electronic typesetting—we mostly used

pens, though if it was an editorial day, when Bill Buckley would be in the office, we had to be careful not to use a red pen, his exclusive prerogative.)

When Norris is writing strictly about grammar and usage, I am with her all the way. But when I got to page 102, I thought our rapport was over, as she wrote, “During the Reagan administration everyone knew that Reagan had some form of dementia.” No, everyone did not know that—because it wasn’t true.

I have one other disagreement with Norris. Early on, she writes, “My fondest hope is that just from looking at the title you will learn to say fearlessly ‘between you and me’ (not ‘I’), whether or not you actually buy the book and penetrate to the innards of the objective case.” I don’t think so. I seriously doubt that anyone who doesn’t know that that pronoun has to be in the objective case will suddenly see the light just on reading her title. If such a reader could bring himself to read her chapter on case, he would surely be convinced—but I doubt that many people who don’t already care deeply about grammar would put in the effort.

But for those who do care, Mary Norris’s unfoldings and embellishments are a true delight.

Linda Bridges is an editor-at-large at National Review and the co-author (with John R. Coyne, Jr.) of Strictly Right: William F. Buckley Jr. and the American Conservative Movement (John Wiley & Sons).

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