

Eats, Shoots & Leaves

– The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation

Reviewed by Lynne Bereza, AMM Communications Coordinator

For a book aimed at, in author Lynne Truss's words, "the tiny minority of British people who love punctuation and don't like to see it mucked about with," the success of this book is remarkable. What began as a little book about grammar became a runaway bestseller in the UK and that success has followed suit in North America. The title of the book comes from the following joke:

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 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."

The book is reprinted exactly the way it was in its original British edition, complete with British examples, spellings and punctuation. Truss points out some of the subtle differences between British and American punctuation and even spelling. As Canadians, we fall somewhere in between – we too would take exception to the mis-spelling of the word "glamor" on a British shop sign (an Americanized version of the proper British and Canadian spelling of "glamour" with a "u"). However, in terms of punctuation, we tend to be more similar to the Americans – we both call the dot at the end of a sentence a "period," rather than the British "full stop", for example.

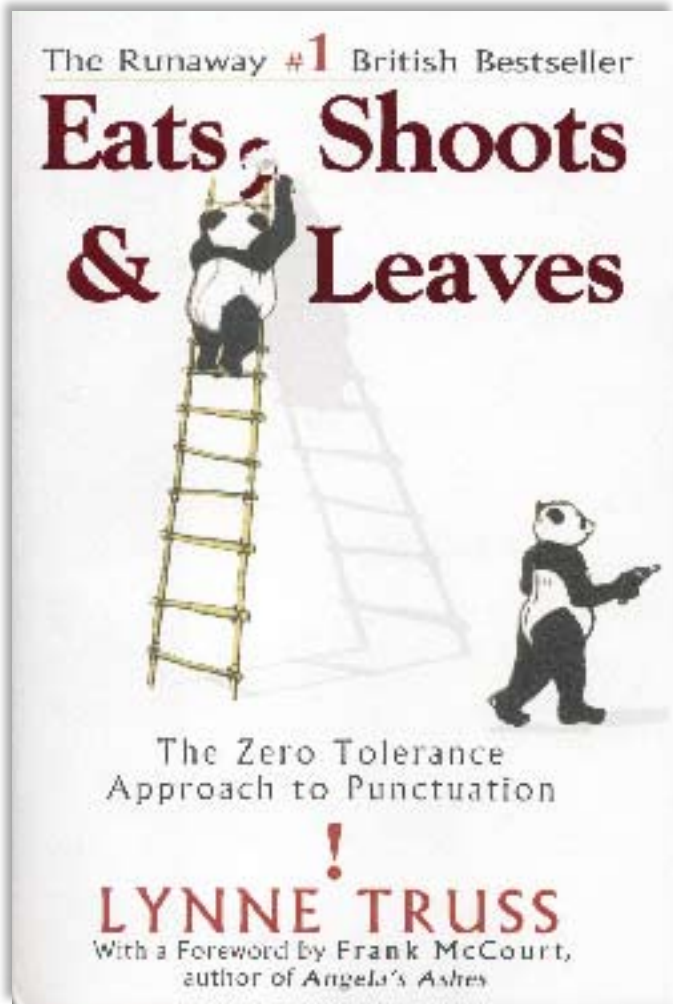
Truss humourously describes those who love punctuation as "sticklers" and sticklers as having a "seventh sense" – "instead of seeing dead people, we see dead punctuation" (p. 3). "No one understands us seventh-sense people," she writes. "They regard us as freaks. When we point out illiterate mistakes, we are often aggressively instructed to 'get a life' by people who, interestingly, display no evidence of having lives themselves" (p. 4). That's not to say that people who aren't sticklers about punctuation won't benefit from this book. Truss's many examples of the way punctuation can alter the sense of a string of words will make readers stop and actually think about how punctuation communicates *meaning*. Consider this example (p. 9):

A woman, without her man, is nothing.

A woman: without her, man is nothing.

While Truss's dry British humour makes this book infinitely enjoyable to read, it contains a great deal of practical, useful information at the same time. The chapter on the apostrophe (p. 35) makes clear everything you would like to know about this most frustrating mark, including the famous "it's." The chapter devoted to comma usage (p. 68) is quite lengthy and, like the other chapters, includes a history of the punctuation mark. However, it also cleared up one of my often wondered questions about comma usage in lists – is a comma required before the "and" on the end of a sentence? It turns out that's another example of British usage and American usage differing (meaning, it's a matter of preference – one tends to use it, and one does not!)

Truss originally wrote her book with a definite target audience in mind – the aforementioned "sticklers." Even her mother suggested that the publisher print on the front of the book, "For the select few." However, as Truss points out, grammatical sticklers are the worst people for finding common cause because it is in their nature to pick holes in everyone! That is what makes the book readable by almost



everyone. Within any workplace, people have differing ideas about what is correct punctuation and what is not. Add in the great many confusing "rules" of punctuation, some of which are hard and fast and others a matter of preference, and it's easy to see why this book is a bestseller.

Proper use of the colon, semi-colon, ellipsis, hyphen, dash, question mark, exclamation point, and quotation mark, to name a few, is all covered in this relatively short (204 pages) book. Truss also discusses, in her final chapter, the trend of "netspeak" and how computer-generated communication is affected by the lack of punctuation often seen in email and instant-messaging.

The book jacket states that, "This is a book for people who love punctuation and get upset when it is mishandled," but it's not *only* for those people. Anyone who struggles with punctuation will benefit greatly from reading this book. Conversely, those who can't understand why some people are so hung up on proper punctuation will be enlightened. In short, and according to Truss (p. 201), it all comes down to this:

"We have a language that is full of ambiguities; we have a way of expressing ourselves that is often complex and allusive, poetic and modulated; all our thoughts can be rendered with absolute clarity if we bother to put all the right dots and squiggles between the words in the right places." ♪