

## Punctuation (?) Makes its Mark in a Best-Seller(!)

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This is yet another review in an irregular series devoted to books and Internet sites that are popularly classified as reference source material

*Eats, Shoots and Leaves / Lynne Truss / 209 pp. incl. introduction and bibliography / Gotham Books (U.S. printing of the original British version), April 2004 / \$17.50, hardbound / ISBN 1-592-40087-6*

So, the title is weird. What is more weird is that this modest (in size) book has created such a stir in the current book scene. Fresh from a best-seller run in England, it now has become available in what the Brits like to call “the colonies.” The publisher has been scrupulously careful in keeping intact even those peculiar—to us—additions of “u” to words such as “favourite.” Forget the spellings, though, and concentrate on the punctuation. This is a winsome, comfortable excursion into that dangerous territory populated with commas, dashes, parentheses, apostrophes, and other devices that need to mate with the alphabet. The problem is the everlasting confusion as to finding their proper place. Lynne Truss has taken the initiative in a modern-day campaign to expunge the errant marks where unnecessary and install, where required, those that have strayed elsewhere or simply disappeared.

Who is this Ms. Carry Nation individual—wielding not a hatchet in pursuit of alcoholic beverages but rather a rod to rap the knuckles of the careless and the clueless? She is a popular book reviewer for the *Sunday Times* (London) and a former editor and journalist. The genesis of the book dates to her stint as host for a short series on punctuation presented by the BBC in 2002. In this slim volume, she delves into the history of our now-familiar marks, inserts usage examples (including some howlers), and then proceeds to lecture the reader, firmly but encouragingly, on handling the merchandise. She artfully accomplishes her mission with the self-confidence that only authority can muster. The chapters cover not only the expected comma, apostrophe, dash, and hyphen, but also the colon and semi-colon.

About the book’s title, there aren’t any doubts as to its appropriateness. It stems from a punctuation incident that morphed into a popular anecdote. Seems that a panda wandered into a café, ate some food, fired pistol shots into the air, and scampered away. Headlines followed: “Panda eats, shoots and leaves!” What Truss did was to simply exploit an example of The Misplaced Comma. The wording actually belonged to an encyclopedic entry about the animal’s appetite— eats shoots and leaves.

The author has added a subtitle for the benefit of those who stare befuddled at the bold cover title. In small type, the contents are labeled as “the zero tolerance approach to punctuation” and accompanied by an extra-large exclamation point. In her preface to readers in America, she deflects the British claim that the U.S. is primarily responsible for the erosion of language, saying that there is ample evidence in her homeland to weaken such accusations. Differences in word use between the two English-speaking domains are of far less concern than the mayhem in punctuation that is common to both.

You readily can detect the intelligence in her logic as she confronts the punctuation offenders. Her book goes beyond a collection of anecdotes and definitions. The bulk of it deals with usage and rules commingled with explanations and deductive reasoning. Don’t squirm—the tone is friendly, if not always calm, and the gestures at educating are neither bothersome nor intimidating. Whether you decide to add this engaging volume to your own reference library or choose to sample it on the sly in a busy bookstore, don’t fail to make its acquaintance. And you do know what they say about “its”? For every apostrophe omitted from an *it’s*, there is an extra one put into an *its*. Right on!