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DIVISION OF RICHLINE SERVICES

Book review of a language usage manual for the newsletter of a professional writers' organization

Language "Lessons" Styled the L.A. Way

Reviewed by Richard L. Eastline

Grammar Snobs (Are Great Big Meanies) / Jane Casagrande / 200 pp. incl. source list / Penguin Books, 2006
(small format paperback) / \$14.00 list / ISBN 0-14-303683-1.

If you ever entertained thoughts that Los Angeles operates in a different, but parallel universe from our own, this new twist on a language guide will help to confirm your acuity. So, how can a book devoted to grammar and (especially) punctuation be so different from others already on the shelf? Actually, it can't inasmuch as it covers the same blueprints of writing construction as have so many others. Keep in mind, though, that language rules are somewhat constant. It's the authors who aren't. Jane Casagrande writes a column about words out there on the West Coast where nothing is ever as it seems to be.

So, then, in true Hollywood style, there must be a gimmick, a different slant on the vernacular. In this case, we meet up with an approach that is possibly tailored to the "like," "sucks," and "yuck" generation. Lord knows, this is *the* generation that truly is lost when it must navigate the choppy waters of grammatical construction. The problem is so many of its constituents don't even try. To ignore is a comfortable disguise for ignorance.

Whatever the circumstance, the author plays her role as a mentor to this audience without missing a beat (or rap) throughout more than three dozen short chapters. Her content is organized with logic and presented in a very self-effacing delivery. No insults, no threats, but lots of *mea culpa*. The exposition is at all times valid and conventional with the exception of some slight rule-bending or discarding that will annoy purists and even those a notch below.

The guide abounds in samples of tortured grammar that make one recall the choice examples in that runaway British bestseller, *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves*, proving perhaps that exposing literary idiocy is a treat savored on both sides of the Atlantic. Casagrande also finds special delight exposing the chinks in the grammatical armor worn by Establishment experts such as William Safire and James Kilpatrick. She does this in her opening chapter so as to inform her readers right from the beginning that she's not part of *that* crowd (understandable, considering the geographic separation).

From there on, things tone down and she's up and running with a full list of tasty items, all clearly defined explanations (nothing wishy-washy here) for appropriate usage of punctuation as well as avoiding a number of terrors residing in word choice. The chapter content ranges from pronouns to prepositions; commas, colons, and conjunctions; short cuts for Internet usage; words conjoined and verbs conjugated; along with several instances of really troublesome oddballs—double possessives, mishaps with quotation marks, and the hyphen / dash rivalry.

The author also ventures into that expansive area of misused words, those that seem to be equal alternatives but aren't, including several of the "problematic pairs"—"advisor" vs "adviser" or "titled" vs "entitled." They're classics but, regrettably, are only a sampling of wonders in this category.

Reasonably thorough as it is, this compact volume doesn't offer any new insights into the topics, other than revealing the personal stance of the author. And, to a degree, there is an annoyance factor in some of the writing itself. Most of all, it's the combination of "with it" text phrasing and low-grade TV zingers for chapter titles that make you wince. While not a reference book intended for posterity, it's a useful guide for any who wouldn't come near the *Chicago Manual of Style* or the classic *Elements of Style*. One needs to believe that Casagrande is chuckling to herself as she removes her role-playing makeup after the tutoring ends. Still, this *is* Los Angeles. ©2006