On Grammar in Writing

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I always tell my students that I'm not their language nanny. I'm an educator, and I deal with content. Ironically, however, I blue-pencil as many errors–mostly grammatical–as I can while checking their assignments. Mangled grammar turns me off. That's understandable. Writing initiates a verbal transaction between a writer and a reader. Grammar bridges the transaction. When the bridge is broken, no transaction transpires. Correct grammar, then, is a non-negotiable requirement in writing.Grammar lubricates comprehension; it reduces the possibility of misunderstanding, and it saves language from slipping into chaos. I see no reason why grammar should be treated as less important than other elements in writing. When I come across fractured syntax in my students' writing, I always suggest that they fix it. They do.But the grammar in the English language is such a hydra-headed monster that it is perennially intractable, and the learning and teaching of grammar can, if we're not careful, lead to a dead-end. It's a loss-loss situation for both students and teachers. So I don't ignore grammar. I don't attempt to teach it, either. There's nothing to teach here, when the focus is teaching writing.

Writing has its own grammar beyond the pedagogical grammar. Pedagogical grammar purges language of errors, but error-free writing is not always meaningful and powerful. The focus of writing is generating thoughts, which are unique, insightful, and interesting. Unless a writer learns to cultivate her deep thinking power, even excellent grammar fails to bring out writing that resonates. Grammar reduces writing to a formulaic drill, as if it were sufficient to master handy tips and tricks to writing. As if once grammar is in place, the act of writing is accomplished. But that's not the case. Steven Pinker claims in*The Language Instinct*thatthe word glamour comes from grammar. It's not the essence of writing. It takes care of the cosmetic aspects of writing. Pinker proposes that one needs to have a "mental grammar" that stretches the limits of prescriptive grammar. Grammar is finite, but one must learn to generate infinite number of thoughts by using the finite rules of grammar. Good writing embodies grammar; inevitably, it expands grammar, too. Grammar is a tool-box of transcription. Writing, on the other hand, is a means of thinking. When grammar consumes a writer, she ceases to think.Trying to be perfect in one's grammar can cripple a potential writer.

Being prissy about grammar in writing shifts the focus of writing from *revision* to *editing*. Editing takes care of the linguistic litter in a piece of writing. It discovers and fixes the mechanical slips of a piece of writing. It's a mop-up operation performed on a piece of writing generally at the end of a writing process. But while editing is a critical component in the process of writing, it can't revive flaccid prose. Revision can. Revision is a complex, creative undertaking. It operates under the assumption that no piece of writing is perfect, that every piece of writing can be further improved. Writing requires cohesion, clarity, and concision besides mechanical precision. Writing is aligning language with thought, but thought is recursive and generative. Ideally, writing draws upon that evolutionary process of thinking. As composition scholars claim (Maxine Hairston, for example), a piece of writing needs to be beaten about three to four times before the final version emerges. Revision takes care of clutter and clichés as well as unwieldy syntax and semantics in a piece of writing. Revision reduces prose to its bare basic, and it gets the most from the least. Editing–which is grammar specific–doesn't take care of such nuances of composing.

Grammar is all about being right. And Steven Pinker claims in *The Sense of Style* that writing is all about getting it right. But competence in grammar and competence in writing are not the same things. Writing requires a writer to communicate with her readers in a way that is easy to follow and difficult to misunderstand. There's no algorithm to do that. It's a metacognitive exercise, when a writer thinks about thinking to draw upon the reservoir of her experience, observation, and intuition. She weights her mechanical, semantic, and rhetorical options to determine the tone and texture of her communication compatible to the expectations of her readers. She grapples with a creative tension that asks for unique thoughts and original expressions. Nothing formulaic suffices here. Grammar is just too basic and trite to seize such creative and intellectual properties of writing. What is easel to an artist is grammar to a writer. It is buta prop.

If this position sounds a little stern, it has its advocates. Stephen Krashen, one of the leading lights in Applied Linguistics, has argued vehemently against grammar in language teaching and learning throughout his career. Ideally, he argues, we *acquire* language; we don't *learn* it. Regarding writing, Krashen claims in*Writing: Research, Theory, and Application* that the only way to learn writing in a language is through reading. Because writing is a learned skill–and some scholars argue against an inevitable correlation between reading and writing–Krashen sounds a little insular regarding the acquisition of writing skills. His perspective, however, disconnects grammar from writing. Krashen disregards grammar teaching altogether in any form of language acquisition. As we can see by the grammar similarities in language groups that originated independently in widely disparate parts of the world, the human brain craves the grammar of nouns and verbs, of singulars and plurals, of conjunctions and prepositions, as a tool for sharing information. But most of us have reduced grammar to linguistic theories. Writing is not linguistic, per se. Writing is meta-linguistic. Writing requires an advanced knowledge of and sensitivity to language. Grammar is limited and limiting to activate and utilize such abundances of a language that good writing generally exhibits. Grammar requires conformity. Good writing demands creativity and moxie. Correct grammar, as such, is not synonymous with good writing. But as Kathleen Briedenbach claims in her essay, "Practical Guidelines for Writers and Teachers," neither will a few errors spoil a fine piece of writing.

The ideological disposition of a writer can account for infractions in grammar, too. A grammar grump might want to stick to the rules of grammar with the zeal of a fundamentalist. To such grammarians, language becomes sacred, and violating its codes risks eternal damnation. No language, however, is a protocol legalized by an authority. Languages change as peoples ceaselessly bend these languages to their needs. A language is open to intervention and invention. Grammar discourages–even resists–the evolving nature of a language. The grammar in the English language is particularly porous and spotty. It has never been a monolith. There were–and are–always some differences between the two sides of the Atlantic: the U.S.A. and the U.K. When a starchy Englishman bemoans a violation of grammar, a disinterested Yankee might claim that this is informal usage and that informal English is not synonymous with bad grammar. Steven Pinker in *The Sense of Style* claims that the many of the "rules" of English grammar are frozen historical accidents based on myths and misunderstandings. He points out that many of these "rules" are also the results of a secret handshake among the elites of the 16thcenturyinaplace that we today call London. Grammar, then, is ideological and elitist. Writing, on the other hand, is an egalitarian craft. That's why the obvious correlation between grammar and writing is contested.

As I reflect on my development as an English language learner, I notice some shifts from the prescriptive version of grammar. For example, I don't remember when I stopped using "shall" altogether. I shifted to "will" across contexts. These days, even "will" has fallen out of favor. I use "would" indiscriminately. I have never got used to using "gotten." It appears a little dated and priggish. "Whom" has never been my favorite. "Who" is.I have stopped caring about the fine-line of distinction between "whom" and "who." I avoid "whom" altogether both in writing and speaking. These are deviations, but they are not howlers. Who should Ihave to apologize for these deviations, a self-proclaimed prophet of grammar? There have always been many, not one. And they have preached from different Bibles!

For all these disconnections between grammar and writing, I don't want to attend a grammarian's funeral. I want her immortal. Incorrect grammar corrupts a common source of communication. Grammar has been the bulwark against the constant battering of a language by careless and unscrupulous folks. Someone occasionally needs to remind us that "our Language is extremely imperfect," as Jonathan Swift did in the 18th century in his essay, "A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue." Such a warning doesn't portend the death of a language. It implies that a language needs attention and informed intervention for its sustenance and improvement. Ignoring grammar altogether is consequential. One of my common comments on my students' assignments is "Think critically and write correctly." That's that!

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Star REVIEWS

A Bibliophile's Review of Bargain Buys: *The Life and Times of Hercule Poirot*

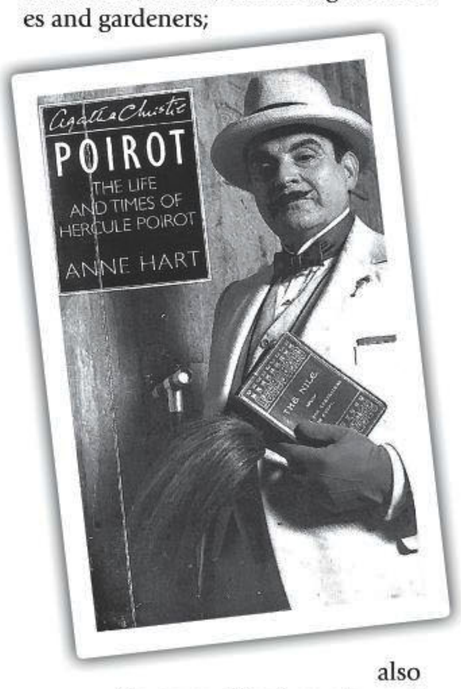
Anne Hart. ISBN: 9783502181187. Harper Collins, 1997

REVIEWED BY RAANA HAIDER

The Queen of detective fiction (1890-1976) was in 1971 bestowed the title - Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire for her contribution to literature by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. As with the British reigning monarch, Agatha Christie's reign continues uninterrupted. Outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare, Christie remains the best-selling novelist in history. It was John Ruskin in *Sesame and Lilies* (1865) who declared: " All books are divisible into two classes: the books of the hour, and the books of all time." Her first novel was *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* in which she introduced Hercule Poirot in 1921. In her creation of the illustrious, dandified, egoistic Belgian detective, she has immortalised Hercule Poirot. Yet, this character of brilliance and discretion also led her to exclaim: "There are moments when I have felt: 'Why-Why did I ever invent this detestable, bombastic, tiresome little creature?...Eternally straightening things, eternally boasting, eternally twirling his moustaches and tilting his egg-shaped head'...I point out that by a few strokes of the pen...I could destroy him utterly. He replies, grandiloquently: "Impossible to get rid of Poirot like that! He is much too clever." Anne Hart adds: "Indeed he was. Poirot knew a supreme story-teller when he found one and never let go. For him she set her most perfect puzzles, thereby achieving immortality for them both."

With such an opening paragraph in the Preface, any ardent Agatha Christie admirer remains hooked.

The author has sifted through 33 novels and 56 short stories, to present her biography of Hercule Poirot, a character that amuses, beguiles, challenges, engulfs and fascinates his followers. After all, "My name is Hercule Poirot and I am probably the greatest detective in the world." Who is there to challenge him? His "own little grey cells" solve some of the most intriguing crimes in his times. Engrossing, Poirot is always on the hunt for the compelling mystery murderer. The suave sleuth of small stature, impeccably dressed, loves himself. We are told by Sir Charles Cartwright in "Three Act Tragedy" that "The fellow is the most conceited little devil I ever met." In the short story "Poirot and the Regatta" first published in 1943, the smooth operator regarding a missing diamond declares: "Will you call again in three days time? I think the whole thing will be quite satisfactorily cleared up by then." "Are you joking, M. Poirot?" "I never joke on professional matters" said Poirot with dignity. "This matter is serious. Shall we say Friday at 11:30?" As Poirot's professional fame expands, he finds himself on call by the chosen-few of the English country-side cultural nexus. Yet, the inquisitive Belgian is more interested in what goes on inside the manor house than the country-life style surrounding it, remarks the author. "Poirot never could appreciate the English mania for the country life" we are told in *Evil Under the Sun*. And then there was the upstairs/downstairs element. While lords and ladies were aplenty; so were butlers, chauffeurs, maids, nannies, governesses and gardeners;



also the poor distant cousin, a disgruntled employee, a spurned admirer. And thereby lay the scenario that brought out the best of the Belgian's meticulous whodunnit skills. His credo: "Trust no one, suspect everyone." *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* was the novelist's swan song delivery. Agatha Christie, dubbed the "Queen of Crime" "buried" Poirot in the 1940s. However, the indomitable individual refused to rest in eternal sleep. The book made a publishing debut in 1975, ironically some months prior to the author's own demise in 1976. Hercule Poirot, the feisty fictional detective and one of the most enduring characters in all of fiction received a front page obituary along with a portrait in the New York Times daily of 6 August 1975.

A comprehensive inclusion appears following Anne Hart's last chapter "The Curtain Falls." Titled *A Poirot Bibliography*, the first publication entry is *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* published in 1921. Equally impressively informative for all Hercule Poirot fans is the following appendix *Poirot Films and Television*. In 1931, the film *Alibi* with Austin Trevor as Hercule Poirot was adapted from *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Austin Trevor continued his role as the one and only Hercule Poirot in another three films in the 1930s. Albert Finney took over in 1974 as the demanding detective in the cinematic adaptation of *Murder on the Orient Express*. The first film version had appeared in 1934. Peter Ustinov remains for many the face of Poirot; having portrayed him in *Murder on the Orient Express* in the 1978 release, in *Evil Under the Sun* in 1982 and in 1988 in *Appointment with Death*. Into the twenty-first century, Poirot remains very much alive and kicking. Famed British director and actor, Kenneth Branagh starred as the mastermind sleuth in the latest screen version (2017) of *Murder on the Orient Express*. Due for release in 2020, Branagh holds both roles of director and detective. The first film of this landmark novel was released in 1937.

Rs. 175 was handed over to the salesperson at Faqir-Chand & Sons, established in 1951 in the Khan Market, New Delhi for the 341 page paper-back that features the inimitable Monsieur Hercule Poirot on its cover. He would be mortified to find himself; discounted and relegated to the back corner of a book-store. Notwithstanding this humiliating placement, Poirot would be smugly delighted and continue to twirl his moustaches knowing that the accompanying book page marker states: "I HAVE BEEN TO TAJ-MAHAL AND FAQIR-CHAND & SONS."

My deep bucket list of books now includes Anne Hart's first book, *Agatha Christie's Miss Marple*. Here I expect to follow in the footsteps of the other legendary fictional detective character - Miss Marple. It was been hailed as "the perfect companion...an engaging work with much of the fascination of an Agatha Christie mystery and a charm of its own."

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