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SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

Steven Pinker's 'The Sense of Style'

By CHARLES McGRATH OCT. 17, 2014

Steven Pinker, the Harvard linguist and psychologist, is one of that new breed of top-flight scientists and teachers, like the physicist Brian Greene and the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, who also write uncommonly well. To those of us who try to write for a living and couldn't pass a science course, let alone teach one, such people are a little annoying. And now, not content with just poaching, Pinker has set himself up as a gamekeeper of sorts; he's bringing out a manual, telling the rest of us how writing ought to be done. The title, "The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century," suggests it's even meant to supplant that classic text "The Elements of Style," by Will Strunk and E. B. White.

Though still revered, "The Elements of Style," to be honest, is a little dated now, and just plain wrong about some things. Strunk and White are famously clueless, for example, about what constitutes the passive voice. Their book also has some of the hectoring, preachy tone that creeps into so many discussions about writing, though it's not as extreme as Lynne Truss's "Eats, Shoots & Leaves," which declares that people who misuse apostrophes "deserve to be struck by lightning, hacked up on the spot and buried in an unmarked grave."

Pinker is not as pithy as Strunk and White: There's nothing in his book to rival their succinct, often-quoted dictum "Omit needless words." But his book is more contemporary and comprehensive than "The Elements of Style," illustrated with comic strips and cartoons and lots of examples of comically bad writing. His voice is calm, reasonable, benign, and you can easily see why he's one of Harvard's most popular lecturers. He means to take some of the anxiety out of writing, and when it comes to questions of grammar and usage, he's a liberal, much looser and more easygoing than the copy editors at this newspaper, for example, whom he would dismiss as "purists." At several points in "The Sense of

Style," Eleanor Gould, the legendary grammarian at The New Yorker, would have written in the margin, as she used to on proofs that particularly exasperated her, "Have we completely lost our mind?"

Pinker doesn't object to dangling modifiers on principle, but only when they lead to confusion or ambiguity; doesn't see much distinction between "like" and "as"; and says that "between you and I" is "not a heinous error." He'd just as soon not allow "disinterested" to mean uninterested, but he doesn't mind "presently" used to mean now, not soon, or "hopefully" in the sense of "I hope." In general he takes the view that if a phrase or construction sounds O.K., it probably is, and that many of the mistakes the purists get so worked up over — using "like" with a clause, for example — have been made for hundreds of years by writers like Shakespeare. Oddly, the one thing that really sets him off is the American custom of putting commas and periods inside quotation marks, which he says is illogical. That the alternative just looks sloppy doesn't seem to bother him.

The book's easygoingness extends even to the question of whether there is now more bad writing than there used to be. People have been saying this for centuries, he points out. In 1490, the printer William Caxton wrote: "And certaynly our langage now vsed veryeth ferre from what whiche was vsed and spoken when I was borne." There are even some ancient Sumerian clay tablets complaining that the young don't write as well as they used to.

The cause of most bad writing, Pinker thinks, is not laziness or sloppiness or overexposure to the Internet and video games, but what he calls the curse of knowledge: the writer's inability to put himself in the reader's shoes or to imagine that the reader might not know all that the writer knows — the jargon, the shorthand, the slang, the received wisdom. He may underestimate a little how much deliberately bad writing there is, writing meant to confuse and obfuscate. Just look at the fine print at the bottom of your next credit card bill or listen to a politician in Washington reading a speech about the tax code.

And what about a passage like this, a deserving winner of the bad writing contest that used to be run by the journal Philosophy and Literature:

"If such a sublime cyborg would insinuate the future as post-Fordist subject, his palpably masochistic locations as ecstatic agent of the sublime superstate need to be decoded as the 'now-all-but-unreadable DNA' of a fast deindustrializing Detroit, just as his RoboCop-like strategy of carceral negotiation and street control remains the tirelessly American one of inflicting regeneration through violence upon the racially heteroglossic wilds and others of the inner city."

This strikes me not as accidentally bad — the byproduct of knowledge overload — but as willfully, preeningly bad, making a show of how overloaded it is. There is more of this kind of prose now than you might guess from reading Pinker — much of it, sadly, ventilating from English departments, which used to be where the style manuals came from.

Like a lot of style handbooks, Pinker's talks more about grammar and usage than about style itself, which is harder to explain. He devotes many more pages to drooping, willow-tree-like diagrams of how the mind creates strings of words and phrases than he does to explaining what makes good writing good. Pinker advocates something he calls "classic style," which he says, not very helpfully, offers "a window onto the world." Fortunately (not fortuitously — even though he will let you have that, too), he may be an even better reader than he is writer, and some examples he provides, including excerpts from three terrific obituaries by The Times's own Margalit Fox, make it a little clearer what he has in mind: Classic style is direct, conversational, unfussy — more E. B. White, say, than Vladimir Nabokov. Like White, Pinker is after clarity above all. But he also acknowledges that the transparency of classic style — the window part — is a bit of an illusion. Words aren't the same thing as the objects or feelings they describe. They're intractable sometimes, and only loosely approximate the thoughts we want them to convey. When you first learn how to do it, writing is hard, and for some of us it never gets any easier. Writing is hard because thinking is hard.

Calm, judicious, reassuring, Pinker doesn't dwell on the difficulty. He prefers to think of writing as something that can be pleasurably mastered, like cooking or photography. (He is no doubt ridiculously proficient at those, too.) It's possible that he doesn't want to scare his readers off by coming on like one of those old-fashioned literary drill sergeants — Henry Watson Fowler, say, the author of the cranky and at times harebrained "Dictionary of Modern English Usage." Or it may be that for Pinker, writing really isn't a chore, which is why he can, maddeningly and seemingly without effort, turn out a smart, mostly sensible book about something that isn't even his field.

THE SENSE OF STYLE

The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century

By Steven Pinker

Illustrated. 359 pp. Viking. $27.95.

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