

The Associated Press Guide to Punctuation

By Rene J. Cappon

Reviewed by Joe Marren

All their Irish charm and humor aside, James Joyce and George Bernard Shaw each had a beef with the English language. To wit: Joyce used dashes instead of quotation marks and Shavian logic abhorred apostrophes – wouldn't use them, couldn't bring himself to do it.

Word has leaked out of some trouble recently concerning reporters using quotation marks when they shouldn't have at the Great Gray Lady. Such reporters fall into the category of "Will lie for food," but most newspaper editors don't worry about prima donnas who won't adhere to conventional grammatical standards. Joyce and Shaw were literary types, not beat reporters trying to get facts and quotes from mayors and state legislators on impending fiscal nightmares and assorted accounting shenanigans.

Therefore the literary heirs to Joyce and Shaw – and don't even think about e.e. cummings – won't need Cappon's book. But editors like I used to be – the kind who grit their teeth and take an extra slug of stomach medicine when we pound on a keyboard to insert quote marks and apostrophes – will love the book.

The book is easy to navigate with individual chapters ranging from the ampersand all the way to slashes; it's compact (just 96 pages); and, best of all, inexpensive (cheap is such a misunderstood word) at \$7.95 in the United States.

Since it's (Shaw is doing somersaults in his grave now) put out by the AP, we can safely assume the book will appear on many reference shelves. Don't let it just gather dust there, take it down and read it! This is a well-written, entertaining and informative book. Make it work for a living, you'll enjoy it. Consider these excerpts:

- On the apostrophe: "The apostrophe is an alphabetical neighbor to the ampersand, but is far more versatile. Anything but a slug would be."
- On capitalization: "We come now to a subject that seems as large as the Grand Canyon and as spongy as Dismal Swamp."
- On commas (the biggest chapter in the book at 17 pages): "Commas aren't much to look at – not elegant like the exclamation point nor emphatic like the dash – but they handle enough major roles to qualify as virtuosos among punctuation marks."

Now that's good writing. The fact that it's punctuated correctly is a bonus for overworked copy editors with headaches who can instead relax and let their mind absorb Cappon's offerings.

With a few good words and deft insights, Cappon has succinctly done what editors and educators have tried to do since people wrote on stone tablets: Make learning fun. English is a wonderfully complicated language, but Cappon has restated some basic concepts in an engaging manner.

Cappon, who also wrote "The AP Guide to News Writing," deserves the thanks of writers and editors who love clear, precise writing.

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