

Junk English

By Ken Smith

Blast Books, 142 pages, \$12.95

By John McIntyre

Not since *The Elements of Style* have I come across a book of such compact good advice about English usage. Ken Smith's *Junk English* is written with a magnificent scorn for the shoddy, the meretricious and the dishonest.

Look, for example, at what he says about the vogue for *generate*: "When compared to ordinary words like *produce* and *create*, *generate* sounds impressive. Electricity and power are things that are generated. It is not surprising that a journalist seeking to enliven an article would borrow the word to say that *a new film generated excitement* or that *an appeals court ruling generated controversy*. Memo writers, seeing *generate* in this expanded role and unwisely trusting in the lexical accuracy of the press, have begun to use it as well. *Generate* now describes the creation of reports and the production of trash, or anything else for which *produce* and *create* are no longer thought sufficiently thrilling."

Or his list of reprehensible business euphemisms: *accept this special invitation for pay money, convenience fee for interest charge, special criteria for restrictions*, and more.

"Stuffing" is his category for words or phrases that are made to carry "multiple (and possibly even conflicting) meanings" beyond their original connotations: "a QUALITY book, for example, may be well written and full of insight, or it may simply have a nice binding."

Smith finds the business world addicted to battlefield language, writers of all kinds falling into jargon and cliché, and perfectly good words eroded through precise use. And these lapses amount to more than mere words; they represent serious moral and social phenomena: "Junk English is much more than sloppy grammar. It is a hash of human frailties and cultural license: spurning the language of the educated yet spawning its on



pretentious words and phrases, favoring appearance over substance, broadness over precision, and loudness above all. It is sometimes innocent, sometimes lazy, sometimes will intended, but most often it is a trick we play upon ourselves to make the unremarkable seem important."

Junk English reminds the reader not only of precision in language, but also of our need for integrity. If you care about either, you will want to have it.

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