

displays of Indian corn and pumpkins on those empty porches were Martha Stewart-impeccable.)

One of the most chilling passages reveals the depth of manipulation that New Urbanism entails. A development in downtown Providence, Rhode Island, had flopped because the apartments came with dishwashers and frilly curtains, while “urban pioneers . . . cherish their edgy self-image and eschew iconography that smacks of middle-class contentment. Their taste for roughness cannot be overestimated. If the walls of the ele-

vator are covered with Formica paneling, better to rip it off and just leave the glue.” And, in the suburban development pretending to be an old-fashioned country town, make sure the corner store has sleeping dogs.

Read here of the first full-scale, reality-tested program for bringing sanity to the landscape of sprawl. If it disturbs our deepest beliefs about place and authenticity, then it’s up to us to invent something better. Any ideas?

>SUZANNAH LESSARD, *the author of The Architect of Desire: Beauty and Danger in the Stanford White Family* (1996), is writing a book about sprawl.

Grammar with Style

WORD COURT:

Wherein Verbal Virtue Is Rewarded, Crimes against the Language Are Punished, and Poetic Justice Is Done.

By Barbara Wallraff. Harcourt. 368 pp. \$23

THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE

(4th ed.).

By William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White.

Allyn & Bacon. 105 pp.

\$14.95 hardcover, \$6.95 paper

by John Simon

Writers, readers, and reviewers of books about the English language must bear three things in mind. First, English has as many mystery-shrouded sources as the Nile, has felt as many influences as much-conquered Sicily, and has endured enough legislators for a combined Areopagus and Sanhedrin. From this it follows that, second, no grammar, dictionary, or other language book will go uncontested and become the sole and absolute authority on its subject. Third, no one owning all the books, including a dictionary occupying an entire shelf, can claim to have and know it all. Trying to navigate among these clashing tomes is as arduous as sailing between Scylla and Charybdis, though slightly less perilous. Skin and reputation may be saved, but the certainty of being right remains elusive.

From among a handful—more properly, an armload—of recent publications, I pick as deserving of prompt attention Barbara

Wallraff’s *Word Court* and the fourth edition of Strunk and White’s renowned *Elements of Style*. Wallraff is a senior editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* and the author of its popular “Word Court” column. E. B. White (1899–1985), a *New Yorker* mainstay and the author of *Charlotte’s Web* (1952), revised the notes for students’ use by his Cornell University professor William Strunk, Jr. (1869–1946), and first published them as *The Elements of Style* in 1959. The new edition, Roger Angell explains in the foreword, “has been modestly updated, with word processors and air conditioners making their first appearance among White’s references, and with a light redistribution of genders to permit a feminine pronoun or female farmer to take their places among the males.” *Word Court* is aimed at the desk in your study; *Elements* should companion you and settle arguments that arise along your peregrinations.

For arguments there will be. The lion’s

share of *Word Court* belongs to letters from readers seeking advice, and Wallraff's answers. It emerges that matters of usage and grammar are hotly and protractedly debated in schools, offices, bedrooms, and all sorts of other gathering and watering places. One could rashly conclude that correct speech and writing are of paramount concern to Americans, but I suspect these anxious seekers to represent no more than a tiny percentage of the people using and abusing our language. The rest flout correction, claiming to be perfectly comprehensible, mistakes and all; they may even jeeringly point to disagreement among the authorities as an excuse for anarchy.

But there is a right and wrong as dictated by tradition and usage, by concision and clarity, and sometimes even by logic and mere common sense. You may prefer getting your instruction from the slightly avuncular and often engagingly jocular Ms. W., or from the stricter, sometimes wryly ironic S&W. Whether with a nudge or a ferule, both books fill a need. "I believe that the highest purpose of language," Wallraff writes, "is to allow us to exhibit ourselves as the noble creatures we perceive ourselves to be. . . . We can be our best selves, and even selves better than our actual best." *Elements of Style* "concentrates on fundamentals: the rules of usage and principles of composition most commonly violated," White writes in the introduction. "The reader will soon discover that these rules and principles are in the form of sharp commands, Sergeant Strunk snapping orders to his platoon."

By now almost everyone knows that linguists, and even amateur language mavens, can be prescriptive or descriptive: those who posit rules and those who accommodate themselves to the vox populi, however multifurcated its tongue. The former tend to be politically conservative and elitist; the latter, liberal, populist, proud to endorse the speech of salt-of-the-earth Americans in their rural nooks or teeming inner cities. This conflict will remain forever undecided; the attainment of perfect English, a lost cause. But what truly good cause is not a lost one?

Word Court often turns into a causerie, an amiable chat among near-equals. Thus

Wallraff, leaning on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology psycholinguist Steven Pinker (not the most unwobbling of pivots), declares that using *fun* adjectivally, as in "a fun time," indicates that you are under 30. She disapproves, adding coyly, "And I'm not telling you how old I am." Perhaps as hints of youthfulness, she'll write "Just kidding" and "Yikes!" But as an earnest of her experience and maturity, she'll remark, "That one is right is unpleasant enough for others when one is tactful about it." So she gets her kicks more discreetly, as when someone declares himself nauseous instead of nauseated: "I admit I enjoy a cruel little frisson when I hear people unwittingly describe themselves as disgusting and politeness forbids me to contradict them." How nice to have it both ways and feel superior while keeping courteously mum.

The subtitle of *Word Court* is *Wherein Verbal Virtue Is Rewarded, Crimes against the Language Are Punished, and Poetic Justice Is Done*. Circumspect and judicious, the book strikes me as insufficiently punitive. The blunt terseness of Strunk and White is, I think, truer justice. Still, just how often does one get a chance to punish verbal criminals? How often can one deny them a job, shame them into doing better, or just rap them across the knuckles?

And what about rewarding verbal virtue? Ms. W., with commendable honesty, thanks her correspondents on the rare occasions when they teach her something. But wouldn't \$10 be a more useful reward? Well, to be told in print that you are right is an ego boost, and settling a festering uncertainty must soothe the fellow whose letter begins, "I am writing this in the desperate hope that you will save my marriage," or the one whose exordium is, "A friendship of more than 50 years hinges on your expertise." For the rest of us, the book becomes gleefully readable through the reprinting of the inquiring letters in extenso, affording insights into many people, even as the replies often prove enlightening. Whether any of this constitutes poetic justice may be irrelevant to us, who live our lives in humdrum, anomic prose.

What is good about Wallraff, as also about Strunk and White, is the colorfulness of style.

“Punctuating this sentence with a semicolon,” she observes concerning “It’s not a comet, it’s a meteor,” “would be like using a C-clamp to hold a sandwich together.” *Thanks much* and *thank you much* are “jocular formations—not quite in the same ball park as *Who’d of thunk?* but perhaps lurking outside the gates, at a nearby souvenir stand.”

Wallraff is so helpful and stimulating that I am shocked by her occasional lapses. We read about a sentence with “958 possible parses,” though *parse* as a noun is impossible even once. She writes “referring back to an antecedent,” as if an antecedent could follow. She reluctantly accepts “I could care less” as “by now an informal idiom,” where S&W stand firm: “The error destroys the meaning of the sentence and is careless indeed.” I do, however, forgive her much for defending the use of *gravitas* with: “Aren’t you glad that it’s not only people with rings in their bellybuttons and skateboards under their toes who are giving us words?”

The Elements of Style covers much less ground than *Word Court*, but it is also less peccant. It is a bit overfond of the word *forcible* (as Ms. W. is of *punctilios*), and a trifle schoolmasterly in tone. But it is not without a sense of humor as it dispenses its tough love. Still, concision comes at a price: Under *comprise* we do not get the abominable *comprised of*. Under the dubious *due to*, there is no mention

of the respectable *owing to*. Under the much misused *enormity*, there is no guidepost to the nonpejorative *enormousness*. But how priceless is the ironic remark such as “Youths . . . renovate the language with a wild vigor as they would a basement apartment.”

Along with the somewhat laconic do’s and don’ts, we get an invaluable chapter on style, on how to write not just correctly but also well. It includes such gems as “To achieve style, begin by affecting none,” and “Think of the tragedies that are rooted in ambiguity, and be clear! When you say something, make sure you have said it. The chances of your having said it are only fair.” Wallraff has no such chapter, but she does have a useful bibliography of good books about language. Although she omits Jacques Barzun’s *Simple and Direct* (1985), as well as Eric Partridge’s many excellent and entertaining works, she is right to praise H. W. Fowler’s splendid *Modern English Usage* (1930), and to have serious doubts about its latest updater, the “not lovable” Robert Burchfield.

So get both *Word Court* and *Elements of Style*, and throw in Bryan A. Garner’s indispensable *Dictionary of Modern American English* (1998). With these in hand, you will be ready to ramble in the language wars.

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What Makes a Great President?

PRESIDENTIAL GREATNESS.

By Marc Landy and Sidney M. Milkis. Univ. of Kansas Press. 278 pp. \$34.95

THE PRESIDENTIAL DIFFERENCE: Leadership Style from FDR to Clinton.

By Fred I. Greenstein. Free Press. 282 pp. \$25

POWER AND THE PRESIDENCY.

Edited by Robert A. Wilson. PublicAffairs. 162 pp. \$20

by Godfrey Hodgson

Another four years have gone by, and once again the publishers’ lists are overflowing with books about presidents

and the presidency. Many of the authors wear spectacles warmly tinted with national pride, sometimes qualified by a