



Washington's cavernous new Capitol Visitor Center is three-quarters as big as the Capitol itself.

show the building of the Capitol and illustrate the workings of the government with contemporaneous letters and other documents.

Ten times the size of the White House, the new visitor center is part of a trend toward "interpretive" interventions in historic precincts. "Visitor centers subvert credibility through the extra degree of separation they impose between viewer and artifact," Filler contends. The Liberty Bell Center in Philadelphia, he says, makes the authentic Liberty Bell look fake. George Washington's pristine Mount Vernon estate suffers from the "dreadful impositions" of the new Ford Orientation Center and the Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education Center. The Mark Twain House in Hartford, Connecticut, which Samuel Clemens lost through foolhardy investments, is threatened with being lost again as a result of spending on an "overinflated" and "misproportioned" annex. Money is now being raised in a misguided effort to build a visitor center at Washington, D.C.'s elegantly evocative Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Enough, says Filler. Visitor centers are a "pointless, wasteful building type we'd be well rid of."

ARTS & LETTERS

The Grammarians Have No Clothes

THE SOURCE: "Fifty Years of Stupid Grammar Advice" by Geoffrey K. Pullum, in *The Chronicle Review*, April 17, 2009.

AFTER 50 YEARS, THE INFLUENCE of William Strunk and E. B. White's *Elements of Style* is not to be denied by us.

If that sentence makes you cringe, you are either a well-grounded grammarian or, more likely, part of the legion of college graduates who regard Strunk and White's slim volume as the essential guide to English usage. In Geoffrey K. Pullum's opinion, the book does not deserve its enormous esteem. Not only has it "not improved American students' grasp of English grammar; it has significantly degraded it."

William Strunk Jr. taught Eng-

lish at Cornell University in the early 20th century, and privately published the first edition of *Elements of Style* in 1918. Many years later, when Strunk's student, E. B. White, wrote a nostalgic piece about his former professor for *The New Yorker*, he was invited to revise and expand the style guide for commercial publication. As Pullum reports, "It took off like a rocket (in 1959) and has sold millions." But Pullum, coauthor of *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (2002) and head of linguistics and English language at the University of Edinburgh, says the book's popularity was unfortunate, "because both authors were grammatical incompetents. Strunk had very little analytical understanding of syntax, White even less," even though, as Pullum acknowledges, White was a skilled writer, author of, among other books, the much-admired *Charlotte's Web* (1952).

Proof of Strunk's and White's shortcomings as grammarians can be found throughout *Elements of Style*, Pullum says. "Use the active voice," the authors command in one of the book's most familiar sections, even as they admit that the passive voice is "frequently convenient and sometimes necessary." But Pullum finds it troubling that the bias against the passive "is being retailed by a pair of authors so grammatically clueless that they don't know what is a passive construction and what isn't." Three of the four examples used to illustrate its evils are *not* passive constructions. (In "The reason that he left college was that his health became impaired," *impaired* is "fingered as passive"

though “it’s an adjective here.” Bonus grammar tip: The presence of the verb “became” makes a following passive clause impossible.)

Pullum says the book “is so misguided that the authors appear not to notice their own egregious flouting of its own rules.” Strunk and White urge students to “write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs.” This edict is followed *in the next sentence* by a clause with three adjectives wrapped around a negative passive: “The adjective hasn’t been built that can pull a weak or inac-

curate noun out of a tight place.” (Pullum awards this prose pearl a fourth strike for violating another commandment: “Keep related words together.”)

Pullum believes that Strunk and White based “their grammar claims on intuition and prejudice rather than established literary usage.” He tests one instruction—“With *none*, use the singular verb when the word means ‘no one’ or ‘not one’”—by searching the texts of Oscar Wilde’s *Importance of Being Earnest*, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, and Lucy Maud Montgomery’s

Anne of Avonlea. All contain examples of plural agreement with “none.” The example from Wilde’s play seems particularly apt: “None of us are perfect.”

“The uninformed bossiness of Strunk and White,” Pullum says, has bred ignorance and needless anxiety. “English syntax is a deep and interesting subject . . . much too important to be reduced to a bunch of trivial don’t-do-this prescriptions by a pair of idiosyncratic bumbler who can’t even tell when they’ve broken their own misbegotten rules.”

OTHER NATIONS

Africa’s Orphans

THE SOURCE: “The Politics of Intercountry Adoption: Explaining Variation in the Legal Requirements of Sub-Saharan African Countries” by Marijke Breuning and John Ishiyama, in *Perspectives on Politics*, March 2009.

TO GRASP THE MAGNITUDE OF the African AIDS crisis, imagine that all 11.6 million children living in the coastal states from Florida to Virginia had been orphaned by AIDS. In sub-Saharan Africa, this calamity is not hypothetical, it’s fact. And the HIV/AIDS crisis that affects more than 30 percent of the population in some of the nations of that region is beginning to deplete the “once seemingly limitless network of extended-family” members able to raise parentless children. Foreign adoptions are only beginning to take up the slack. Although

American adoptions from Africa have become much more common since the 1990s, the number of children adopted in 2006 from the leading source country, Ethiopia, reached only 732.

Many African countries make it difficult for outsiders to adopt orphans. Openness to adoption is not determined by the severity of the orphan crisis, the prevalence of AIDS, or the level of democracy in

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the orphans’ homeland, write political scientists Marijke Breuning and John Ishiyama of the University of North Texas.

Government officials are more likely to base their decisions on domestic politics, the authors say, and, because so many Africans fear “baby buying,” restrictions are easy to tighten. America accounts for about half of all intercountry adoptions worldwide. Clamping down on adoption seems to many leaders like a relatively cheap way to stand up to Uncle Sam. Frustrated with the meager benefits they net from globalization, African leaders are tempted to “frame intercountry adoption in terms of exploitation and to restrict or prohibit it.”

Malawi, with 12 percent of its adult population suffering from HIV/AIDS and an estimated 560,000 AIDS orphans, requires prospective parents (singer-actress Madonna excepted) to foster a child for two years in the country before