

## Book review

## New guide takes close, joyful look at style

*Dreyer's English: An Utterly Correct Guide to Clarity and Style*, by Benjamin Dreyer. © 2019. New York: Random House. 320 pages.

Reviewed by Amy Spungen

Well! As Benjamin Dreyer might punctuate it, What can I say. A lot, as it turns out: This debut book by Random House's copy chief is informative, humorous and helpful. It's readable and relatable, and probably the most-important style guide to appear in a long while because, among other things, it is *so much fun*.

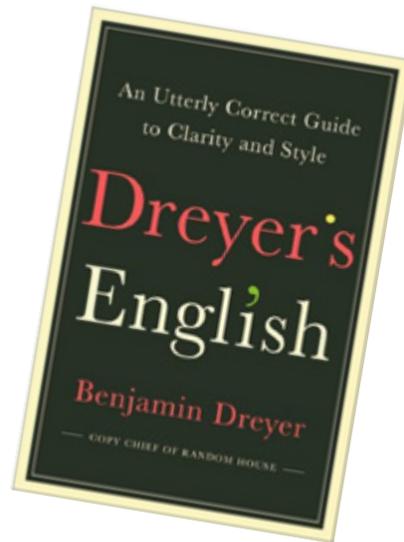
If you have dutifully toiled in the world of copyediting for decades, as I have, you will soak up every mini-story the author tells while absorbing the advice aimed at helping you hone your tools. Dreyer offers up his own experiences to show how he has arrived at his style, which he lays out methodically.

These and other nuggets within the book are golden to us editors, but Dreyer readily acknowledges that English is an evolving language, one whose grammar and style preferences are subject to change. From the beginning, he makes it clear that he doesn't intend for this "Utterly Correct Guide to Clarity and Style" to be the final say on the subject.

"Let's get started," Dreyer writes in his introduction. Then:

"No. Wait. Before we get started:

"The reason this book is not called *The Last Style Manual You'll Ever Need*, or something equally ghastly, is because it's not." Dreyer says that his book does not repeat guidance from the established stylebooks upon which he still depends, but that he would "own up to my own specific tastes and noteworthy eccentricities and allow that just because I think something is good and proper and nifty you don't necessarily



have to."

Why, thank you, Benjamin. Because I don't necessarily ...

"Though you should."

OK, then: We can agree to disagree a tad; more about that later.

*Dreyer's English* is handily divided into "The Stuff in the Front" (Part I) and "The Stuff in the Back" (Part II). Front Stuff's seven chapters include the topics of tightening up prose, "Rules and Nonrules," punctuation, numbers, foreign words, grammar, and fiction. The Back Stuff comprises six chapters covering, among other things, "Peeves and Crochets" and "The Confusables."

The content in each chapter is helpful, of course, but it's Dreyer's many asides that I find the most entertaining, such as this footnote: "I occasionally receive aggrieved correspondence, with much 'Whither publishing?' teeth gnashing, from readers who've stumbled upon a typo in one of our books. I don't like typos any more than you do — likely I like them quite a bit less — but as long as

there have been books, there have been typos. Nobody's perfect."

Another humorous aside eases the burden of contemplating the subjunctive: "You'd be amazed at how far you can get in life having no idea what the subjunctive mood is — as if it's not bad enough that English has rules, it also has moods — but as long as I've brought the subject up, let's address it."

Dreyer's experience and common sense are perhaps most evident in the "Realities of Fiction" chapter, packed with perspectives on the importance of accurate real-world details, strategic deployment of pronouns, and restraint in using semicolons in dialogue. He also cautions writers that "[a] novel is not a blog post about Your Favorite Things." In one example illustrating the importance of preserving a writer's style, Dreyer tells a tiny cautionary tale featuring Richard Russo, whose characters may have smiled a sentence or two.

Dreyer also highlights authors like Shirley Jackson, whom he justifiably adores. His references to Jackson not only support his points but offer readers a tantalizing bit of her prose; at one point, Dreyer describes the final comma in the opening paragraph of *The Haunting of Hill House* as "my favorite piece of punctuation in all of literature."

Then, bless him, he includes it so we can all appreciate Jackson's genius.

There is so much good advice within the pages of *Dreyer's English* that it feels awkward to nitpick (which comes close to being a "reduplication" word, a term Dreyer explains). However, in some cases, his approach seems at odds with my bible, *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Take, for example, Dreyer's

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## Book review, continued

use of the colon; as *CMOS* advises in 6.67, “In fact, if a colon intervenes in what would otherwise constitute a grammatical sentence — even if the introduction appears on a separate line, as in a list... — there is a good chance it is being used inappropriately. ... When in doubt, apply this test: to merit a colon, the words that introduce a series or list must themselves constitute a grammatically complete sentence.”

Dreyer seems to disregard that rule in examples like these:

“A bit of copyeditorial controversy tends to pop up when a writer offers something like:

“I’m on my way to visit Aunt Phyllis.”

“Which many copy editors will attempt to downgrade to:

“I’m on my way to visit my aunt Phyllis.” (p. 31)

“If Jeanette has some pencils and Nelson has some pencils and Jeanette and Nelson are not sharing their pencils, those pencils are:

“Jeanette’s and Nelson’s pencils” (p. 41)

Even Dreyer’s own copyeditor argued with him on occasion during the birth of this book. In one case, he notes, his editor queried the use of “his own devise,” and in another section, the editor told Dreyer he was repeating himself. In both cases, the author acknowledged the query, but changed nothing.

Perhaps the cover art really says it all, with the apostrophe in *Dreyer’s English* appearing over the *i* in *English* and the tittle (little dot over the *i*) appearing where the apostrophe in *Dreyer’s* should be. It’s a clever visual, alerting readers to Dreyer’s sometimes slightly rebellious style.

I, for one, step outside my tidy little box to applaud Dreyer’s fearless, thoughtful foray into the styleosphere, even if I’m not quite ready to suit up and follow him on every EVA. He wouldn’t want that anyway, because I use really bad imagery, but also, remember what he said in his intro about how just because he likes and applies a

style element doesn’t mean we have to?

*Dreyer’s English* takes a close, joyful, rollicking look at style that will send readers away wishing for more. And maybe there will be more, at some point. After all, as the author concludes, “There’s no rule without an exception (well, mostly), there’s no thought without an afterthought (at least for me), there’s always something you meant to say but forgot to say.

“There’s no last word, only the next word.”

Here’s hoping that Benjamin Dreyer’s next word appears soon, followed closely by many other words. If we copyeditors\* are very lucky, he will continue to focus on the foibles and glories, and the style ins and outs, of our ever-vigilant profession.

*\*I am a copyeditor even if Dreyer is a copy editor, and both Merriam-Webster and The Chicago Manual of Style are fine with that. There is room for both of us in our style worlds. See the May 4, 2018, look at the move to copyeditor as one word at copyediting.com. ■*