

Review

Have You Eaten Grandma?

by Gyles Brandreth

Michael Joseph 2018

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In 2003 the writer and broadcaster, Lynne Truss, published what became an international best seller, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, a humorous but also serious guide to correct punctuation. She dedicated the book to the memory of the printers of St Petersburg in Russia, who in 1905 demanded to be paid the same rate for punctuation marks as for letters.

Now Gyles Brandreth, the broadcaster, humourist, former member of parliament and, currently, Chancellor of Chester University has followed in her footsteps but expanded the brief. *Have you Eaten Grandma?* is an informal and humorous guide not just to correct punctuation but also to spelling and vocabulary. It contains ten chapters

with a useful index although there is no contents list or suggestions for further reading. The ten chapters cover the basic elements of punctuation, the use of dashes and hyphens, when and when not to use apostrophes, spelling rules, plural forms, the influence of American English, the use of homophones, homographs and heterographs, abbreviations and bad language, and concludes with a summary of rules for writers, offered by such luminaries as George Orwell, Martin Amis and William Safire.

The title *Have You Eaten Grandma?* sums up the humorous style but serious intent. Without the comma, the question suggests cannibalistic tendencies. With the comma after 'eaten' as in, 'Have you eaten, Grandma?' the meaning is

completely different, a grandchild asking their grandmother if she would like something to eat. The punctuation section is light-hearted but good and clear with plenty of examples of unfortunate errors, especially in the misuse of apostrophes. But it is spelling where the book gets going, starting with US Vice-President Dan Quayle correcting a child on a visit to an elementary school. The child had written the word *potato* on the board. Quayle stepped forward and corrected the word, adding an 'e' – *potatoe!* Quayle later described the error as 'a defining moment' of the worst imaginative kind.

An interesting discussion considers the work of the English dictionary maker Dr Samuel S Johnson in 1752, and the US dictionary maker Noah Webster in 1828. It was Webster who 'americanised' the English language by dropping the silent 'u' in *color* and *humor* and turning *centre* into *center* and *theatre* into *theater*. He changed *defence* to *defense* and *gaol* to *jail*.

He was the author of *The American Spelling Book* (1783) and *The Elementary Spelling Book* (1829) and, as an obsessive speller, pioneered the competitive spelling bee. His list of difficult English words to spell and his list of mnemonics to suggest ways of remembering is very helpful. His rules of when to use capital letters are useful to learners, teachers and researchers, as are his lists of common prefixes and suffixes.

Lists are where Brandreth comes into his own and will be of the greatest value to linguistic researchers. He is good at advising when a noun ending in 'o' takes an 's' or an 'es' in the plural and giving examples of nouns derived from Latin, Greek, French and Italian. He is also good at correcting one of the commonest errors made by non-native speakers. Do we say, '*Here is the news*' or '*Here are the news*'? If you're French you'll probably want to say, '*Here are the news*' in the plural. But in English 'news' is singular.

Brandreth is very good on American imports into British English. Did you know the impeccably British expressions, *keeping a stiff upper lip* and *keeping your cool* are actually American in origin? *Stiff upper lip* was introduced in 1915 and was popularised by an American women's rights activist Phoebe Carey, who used it in a poem.

For linguists who are not millennials or members of Generation Z, the real payoff of this book is the study of acronyms used in social media and so-called 'bad language'. If you're not familiar with *OMG* (*oh my God!*) and *LOL* (*lots of laughs*), or *AFK* (*away from keyboard*) this is the place for you and your chance to 'get down with the kids'.

Some very rude expressions are also presented and explained, though with impeccable political correctness. One reason for the increased use of acronyms is lack of space in electronic

communication by Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc. That's one reason why many users finish their tweets with *end of*, meaning *nothing more to say*.

By the way, when you receive an email from abroad in English, do you actually know the origin of the abbreviations 'cc' and 'bcc'? We know that 'cc' means *copied to* and 'bcc' means *copied in private*, but the origin of 'cc' is *carbon copy*, going back to the days when a copy of a message was

made on carbon paper for future reference, and 'bcc' stands for *blind carbon copy*, a carbon copy for someone we haven't told you about. Funny how the old and the new meet in the modern.

Have You Eaten Grandma? is an amusing and a highly enjoyable browse for English language enthusiasts. It's also a useful guide for teachers and language researchers into what constitutes contemporary English usage. OK. End of.