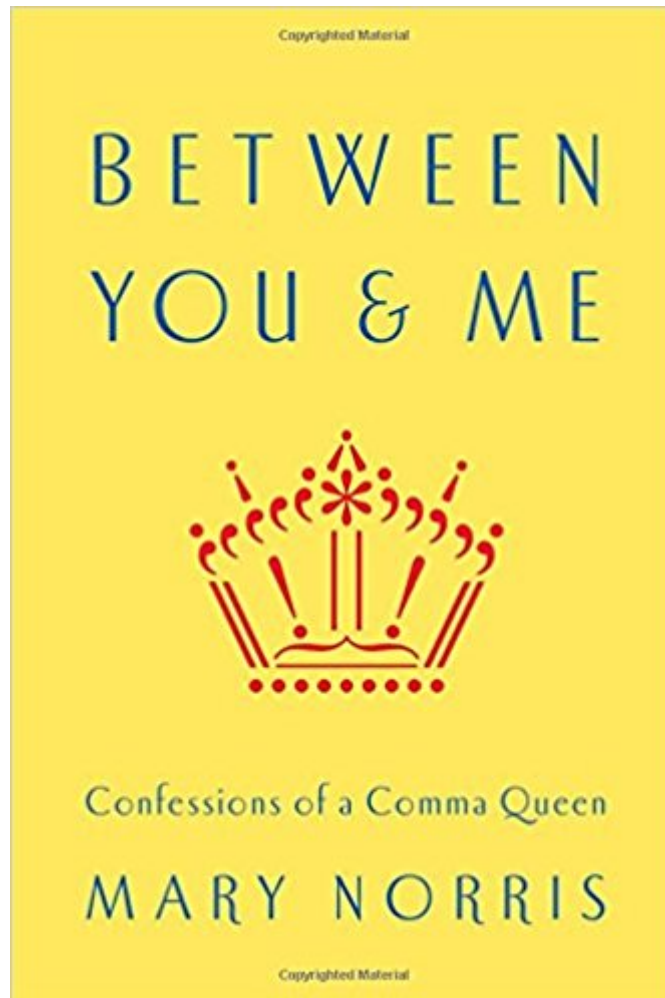


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Between You & Me: Confessions Of A Comma Queen



Synopsis

The most irreverent and helpful book on language since the #1 New York Times bestseller *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*. Mary Norris has spent more than three decades in The New Yorker's copy department, maintaining its celebrated high standards. Now she brings her vast experience, good cheer, and finely sharpened pencils to help the rest of us in a boisterous language book as full of life as it is of practical advice. *Between You & Me* features Norris's laugh-out-loud descriptions of some of the most common and vexing problems in spelling, punctuation, and usage—comma faults, dangles, "who" vs. "whom," "that" vs. "which," compound words, gender-neutral language—and her clear explanations of how to handle them. Down-to-earth and always open-minded, she draws on examples from Charles Dickens, Emily Dickinson, Henry James, and the Lord's Prayer, as well as from *The Honeymooners*, *The Simpsons*, David Foster Wallace, and Gillian Flynn. She takes us to see a copy of Noah Webster's groundbreaking *Blue-Back Speller*, on a quest to find out who put the hyphen in *Moby-Dick*, on a pilgrimage to the world's only pencil-sharpener museum, and inside the hallowed halls of The New Yorker and her work with such celebrated writers as Pauline Kael, Philip Roth, and George Saunders. Readers—and writers—will find in Norris neither a scold nor a softie but a wise and witty new friend in love with language and alive to the glories of its use in America, even in the age of autocorrect and spell-check. As Norris writes, "The dictionary is a wonderful thing, but you can't let it push you around."

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Customer Reviews

An Best Book of April 2015: Once upon a time, a couple or few decades ago, most American boys

and girls in grade school were taught grammar and punctuation; we learned, for example, that “came before “except after “(except sometimes, but never mind) and that the verb “was “like an equal sign, “which meant that you used the nominative case (have I lost you yet?) on both sides of it. (“I is I, “in other words, is the correct, if dowdy, response to “Who’s there?”) Some of us were even taught to diagram sentences; some had parents who corrected us at the family dinner table. (I can still hear my father pressing the subjunctive upon me. “If I WERE, “he’d bellow, when I allowed as how there’d be later curfews if I “was “in charge.) Whether they retained the lessons or not, most people probably don’t wax romantic about the grammar lessons or teachers of yore. Which is why even those of you who don’t have the soul of a second-grade grammar teacher will love *Between You and Me*, the hilarious and delightful “memoir “by the longtime New Yorker copy editor, Mary Norris, who confides in the subtitle that she is a “comma queen. “(The above is not a full sentence, I know -- but I think I can get away with it by calling it “my style.” Also, I put quotation marks around the word “memoir, “Mary “ “I know you’re wondering -- because I was trying to make the point that your book is an unusual take on the form, dealing as it does with that’s and whiches as well as with your Ohio adolescence as a foot-checker at the local pool.) Who knew grammar could be so much fun -- that silly marks of punctuation could be so wickedly anthropomorphized (a question mark is like a lazy person), that dashes grow in families (there are big dashes and little dashes and they can all live peaceably within one sentence), that there was once a serious movement to solve the he-or-she problem with the catchall “heesh “? Clearly, Norris knows: her book is plenty smart, but it’s its (one’s a contraction, one’s a possessive) joyful, generous style that makes it so winning. This is a celebration of language that won’t make anyone feel dumb “ but it’s also the perfect gift for the coworker you haven’t been able to tell that “between “is a preposition that never, ever, takes an object that includes the pronoun “I. “ “Sara Nelson

“Hilarious “ | [T]his book charmed my socks off. “ - Patricia O’Conner, New York Times Book Review “Ms. Norris, who has a dirty laugh that evokes late nights and Scotch, is “like the worldly aunt who pulls you aside at Thanksgiving and whispers that it is all right to occasionally flout the rules. “ - Sarah Lyall, The New York Times “[P]ure porn for word nerds. “ - Allan Fallow, Washington Post “Mary Norris has an enthusiasm for the proper use of language that’s contagious. Her memoir is so engaging, in fact, that it’s easy to forget you’re learning things. “ - People “Wonderfully confiding. “ - Miriam Krule, Slate “[A] winningly tender, funny reckoning with labor and language. “ - Megan O’Grady, Vogue “Very funny, lucid, and lively. “ -

Julia Holmes, *The New Republic* "Funny and endearing." • - Joanna Connors, *Cleveland Plain Dealer* "Laugh-out-loud funny and wise and compelling from beginning to end." • - Steve Weinberg, *Houston Chronicle* "Down-to-earth memoir interwoven with idiosyncratic, often funny ruminations on the nuts and bolts of language." • - Linda Lowenthal, *Boston Globe* "Between You & Me is smart and funny and soulful and effortlessly illuminating." • - Ian Frazier "Mary Norris brings a tough-minded, clear-eyed, fine-tuned wisdom to all the perplexities and traps and terrors of the English sentence." • - Adam Gopnik "Mary Norris is a grammar geek with a streak of mischief, and her book is obscenely fun." • - Marilyn Johnson "This is as entertaining as grammar can be. Very very. Read it and savor it." • - Garrison Keillor "A delightful mix of autobiography, New Yorker lore, and good language sense." • - Ben Yagoda "Mary Norris is the verbal diagnostician I would turn to for a first, second, or third opinion on just about anything." • - John McPhee, in *The New Yorker* "Destined to become an instant classic." It's hard to imagine the reader who would not enjoy spending time with Norris. • - Christian Science Monitor

Mary Norris, a copy editor for *The New Yorker* has written a book, "Between You and Me: Confessions of a Comma Queen" which is a lot about grammar and a bit about her life and her job. I really can't believe that I am writing a review and tempting Ms Norris to judge my woebegone grammar! Ms Norris's book is not a grammar textbook and she's really quite gentle on everyday speaking and writing. She discusses some punctuation that we all use - I really don't think she likes writing with dashes - and gives us examples of the good and the bad. (Let me say right up front that I couldn't write without using dashes and that's my excuse for using them! But I'm not writing for *The New Yorker*, and thanks god for that.) Ms Norris quotes a note Jacqueline Kennedy wrote to Richard Nixon after her husband's death. The note was dashed off in that breathy style with which she spoke - full of dashes to keep her thoughts somewhat straight. Norris takes the same note and "corrects" it. The result was a grammatical correct message, but one lacking in Mrs Kennedy's distinctive style. Would Richard Nixon want correctness - or heart? I know which one I'd want! Ms Norris's book is great fun to read, while learning some "Ps" and "Qs". There are some swear words in the text; it's not offensive but just surprising. Now, in this review, I've tried to use most of the punctuation she writes about. Let's hope I'm using it correctly!

I've got a bad habit of buying books about the history and proper usage of the English language and not reading them. I've got a shelf in my home library that's attractively stacked with books like Bill Bryson's *Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way* and

Sister Bernadette's Barking Dog by Kitty Burns Florey. I tend to read the first few pages, enjoy them as much as I expect to, then get distracted by some work of fiction or other. I'm terrible about nonfiction, even if it's on a topic I'm very interested in. But Between You & Me was a Goodreads win, and I'm more likely to win other titles if I read and review this one, so I had a bit more motivation than usual. Also, well, it didn't hurt that Mary Norris is so funny. Witness the following examples and tell me you don't want to read this book, too: Whom may indeed be on the way out, but so is Venice, and we still like to go there. Chances are that if you use the Oxford comma you brush the crumbs off your shirtfront before going out. Between You & Me covers such topics as spelling, punctuation, and profanity in a direct and easily-understood manner. Norris makes frequent mention of the ways that style and usage vary between major publications such as The New Yorker (where she's worked since 1978) and The New York Times. There's even an entire chapter dedicated to pencils and pencil sharpeners! (This might sound boring to you, but if it doesn't, we should probably be friends.) I learned from this book, and I enjoyed myself immensely while reading it. It made me want to pick up my next work of nonfiction sooner than the usual schedule (which would be maybe in six months or so?). It made me want to buy, read, and annotate/highlight a style guide to learn even more. I have an advance copy, but I'm tempted to buy a finished copy "partially to support the author, but also because the advance copy doesn't include the Recommended Reading list. (Yes, I am that much of a nerd. I want to do the background reading!) All in all: A great read for anyone with a sense of humor who's also interested in usage, and a particularly great graduation gift for an English major. Note: I received a review copy of this book.

I was expecting to be entertained as well as informed. Frankly, I was disappointed. It seems there are many ways to say the same thing. However, sometimes the easiest way is best. For example, in trying to figure out whether to say "I" or "me" in a sentence could have been explained simply, but it became a pages long dissertation. My favorite example is to take the other person out of a complex sentence. "Mom came over to visit with Bobby and I." Take Bobby out of the sentence. "Mom came over to visit with I." Bingo! Simple, right? Now you know that "I" wouldn't be used in that sentence. Yet, that was never explained so easily. There are other examples. This isn't to say the book isn't worth reading! It is. But I do feel it is unnecessarily ponderous.

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