

Mark Tredinnick. *The Little Green Grammar Book*

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Mark Tredinnick's *The Little Green Grammar Book* is a consciously nonformal guide to finding the most effective way to write. Tredinnick eschews any kind of encyclopaedic approach to favour instead an outline of the grammatical laws of the English language that begins with the whole rather than the parts. Thus begins the first major section of the book, "A Natural History of the Sentence": the inner life of its word order, how it makes meaning as more than the sum of its parts, family relationships between phrases and clauses, basic structures.

But it is in the prologue – "The Rules for Paradise" – that Tredinnick sets out his *modus operandi*. Cautioning that we stay cool but learn the rules we might like, as artistes, to go on to forget, he steers clear of any particular school of grammatical rigour to instead insist that good language be used for what it does best: "Grammar helps a writer make fast and economical—sometimes beautiful, sometimes shocking—sense." (11) But don't let any of his friendly approach fool you into thinking this book doesn't take pains to insist upon the correct usage of words, punctuation, or grammar. It's just that he is more comfortable, as am I, with the Pam Peters style of plain-spokenness than Rodney Huddleston's kind of contemporary linguistic grammar. Because of this, *The Little Green Grammar Book* is eminently suitable both for teacher and student. And given the current debate regarding the standard of English received at the culmination of an Australian secondary education, Tredinnick's aside early in his comprehensive treatment of the sentence ("that they didn't tell me a thing about it

when I was at school”) seems sadly apposite (27). Hence, another good reason to get to know better the characters in this play of meaning. (My paranoia at whether or not that was a good sentence is allayed, somewhat, by *The Little Green Grammar Book’s* concentration on functionality delivered with style. Many references to famous authors, and the way they bend rules with great aesthetic panache, illustrate Tredinnick’s points.)

On the practical side, there are many cases in which this book clears up common errors with clarity and brevity. Should there be a comma before that conjunction? It is conventional, in the following example, because two main clauses are being compounded in the one sentence, and the pause helps to hold the two ideas apart, avoiding the suggestion that the conjunction (in this case “and”) merely joins the two words either side of it:

I came to the plateau in the spring of 1998, and I left in the autumn of 2005 (48).

And the dangling modifier? The relative clause in the following sentence (“which it hopes will capture”) is meant to modify the main clause (“an advertising campaign”), but is instead dangled (great word huh?) after... well, you’ll get the point:

The government has introduced an advertising campaign highlighting the dangers of certain recreational drugs which it hopes will capture the attention of the young demographic that uses them (71).

While we can be confident that certain recreational drugs will capture youth attention, it is probably not the government’s main agenda to further advertise the possibility.

Speaking of which (as we were, if not pointedly), and that, there is an extended discussion (73-78) that includes the comparative influences of American and Anglophone literature to conclude the following:

I keep *which* for only those occasions where it clearly calls for a comma in front of it because it introduces additional information; I use *that* for all *defining* clauses.

In line with the new colloquy style guide (many thanks to Robert Stilwell), Tredinnick cements the Australian standard of dropping the full stop from all contractions and abbreviations (ie, Dr, J R R Tolkien, incl, etc) (134). Likewise he cautions against overuse of the hyphen, asking the writer to trust to the latest dictionary (in consultation also with style manuals or guides, colleagues or employers – who should not necessarily be trusted!) and let it fall by the wayside if at all possible (165). The hyphen is meant to clarify meaning or avoid disconcerting sequences of letters (*antiintellectual*,

deemphasise) but can in turn, with overuse, become ugly and awkward. He also reminds us of the original function of the comma – to give the reader pause for breath between clauses – which is not simply to be sprinkled liberally whenever in doubt (135-6). And one of my personal bugbears, severing the verb from its object, gets its due too (148). Not: “All a writer needs is, a pencil, some paper, a desk ...” but: “All a writer needs is a pencil, some paper, a desk ...” A true story about a Canadian legal wrangle proves the absolute necessity of correctly placed grammatical marks such as the comma in the quest for accurate meaning (149-50).

It is enjoyable to read a book about something dry like grammar and be regaled by stories from *West Wing* (ostensibly about writing as much as it is about American Presidential politics). I’m not quite sure about the author’s suggestion that *The Little Green Grammar Book* could be taken to bed with you, though – perhaps we enjoy different relaxation techniques. Nevertheless, the most valuable aspect of this book is its capacity to communicate important rules in a readable style. Even in a world of sms code and cute emoticons, as we are told in the Media Release, grammar helps us make sense of those “blobs of sound and suggestions that we call words.” If I had a minor quibble with the book, it would be that it can be disconcerting to find typographical errors in a writer’s manual (no matter how approachable it is). But that is probably slippage that falls under the jurisdiction of the proof reading and typesetting disciplines and it never compromises the book’s meaning or utility. Recommended for all of those (definitely myself included) whose grasp of grammar could legitimately be said to be less than perfect (and if that isn’t a good percentage of university students (and grocers) today, I’ll be ... surprised). And Rules for Paradise? The artist, as we know, must learn the rules in order to transcend them:

If grammar constrains a writer, it’s the kind of constraint that frees.
The rules of grammar are the rules for paradise. Writing is the paradise (242).

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