

Stanley Fish. *How to Write a Sentence and How to Read One*. New York: Harper, 2011. 176 pages. \$19.99.

Roy Peter Clark. *The Glamour of Grammar: A Guide to the Magic and Mystery of Practical English*. New York: Little Brown and Company, 2011. 304 pages. \$19.99.

James Geary. *I Is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World*. New York: Harper, 2011. 304 pages. \$19.99.

OMG, RU ready 4 a tweet world? IM not. I don't have a cell phone, so I don't text or tweet. No Facebook page either. Maybe you could tell. I have more time to observe those who do use these media, however. Nevertheless I experience the consequences of some who do tweet when I read papers, listen to preaching, and talk with folks who use "like" every fourth word. I mean like really? Ya know? I am not a member of the Grammar Gestapo or P.O.E.M. (listen to *Prairie Home Companion*). Writing hundreds of sermons has probably been detrimental to my correct use of commas. I don't object to split infinitives. The declining ability to write well, however, has been a matter of concern for some time. George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" predates my concerns by 65 years. He opens the essay with the claim that, "Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it." (*Horizon*, 1946.) At least three authors seem to be up to the challenge.

These three books likely will not save the English language, but they might provide inspiration for a more careful rendering of our thoughts into words, phrases, clauses, and sentences, not to mention inspiring a simple love of language. All are well written and easily read. The material is designed for writing that will be read not spoken, but nearly all of the principles still apply for oral/aural applications. While they are not textbooks, they do guide the reader in the effective use of the English language. I have no way of knowing if it will make any difference, but reading these books has moved me to try reading examples of good writing in my classes to ensure that students' ears have experienced good writing. The Civil War letter by Sullivan Ballou is one example. Sermons by Barbara Brown Taylor, Fred Craddock, and Walter Burghardt are others. Perhaps you have some additional suggestions.

Fish's *How to Write a Sentence* could easily be the basis for a course on writing. He provides examples that he thoroughly analyzes and then invites us to imitate in order to feel how the forms work. It would take months to digest, practice, and then employ all of the examples. While forms may not generate specific meaning, they create "the very possibility of meaning" (27). Our imitative efforts may not qualify as good writing but the sentence forms will seep into our own writing. It is work, however. Fish notes, "Verbal fluency is the product of hours spent writing about nothing, just as musical fluency is the product of hours spent repeating scales" (26). Although it is a small book, it is not a book to skim but to savor a little at a time. The author's goal is "both sentence pleasure and sentence craft, the ability to appreciate a good sentence and the ability to fashion one" (8). I especially like the chapters on first and last sentences, opportunities, in my opinion, that are often botched in preaching. Fish is a patient and enthusiastic guide throughout.

Clark begins *The Glamour of Grammar* by explaining how the words grammar and glamour are derived from the same root. The book is divided into several sections: words, points, standards (rules of grammar), meaning, and purpose. Each section contains multiple chapters. Each of the 50 chapters ends with a review with some exercises and suggestions for

application. *Geary* labels these “Keepsakes.” One suggestion offered in Chapter Two, for example, is not to trust spell-checkers. The software on my first computer insisted on correcting “postmodern” to “postmortem”; an editorial comment, I suppose. Clark steers well clear of being a pedant on these matters but seeks only to address, as the subtitle suggests, “practical English.” Working gradually through these chapters over a period of time will prevent the reader from feeling overwhelmed by the lurking potential for errors.

The first two books are good reads and provide plenty to work on. Probably the most provocative of the three books, however, is *I Is an Other* by James Geary. The book’s title comes from a letter by poet Arthur Rimbaud gathered in a collection known as the Seers Letters. Both Rimbaud and Geary work from the premise that “Metaphor systematically disorganizes the common sense of things ... and reorganizes it into uncommon combinations” (2).

In addition to a forward and a backward, the book consists of 14 “Metaphor and...” chapters: Thought, Etymology, Money, the Mind, Advertising, the Brain, the Body, Politics, Pleasure, Children, Science, Parables and Proverbs, Innovation, and, finally, Psychology. There is also an extensive bibliography. I suspect Geary had a ball writing this book; he employs metaphor as he writes about it. He usually stops short of being just too clever.

Geary looks at the prevalence of metaphor in language, much of which goes unrecognized. He observes that, “Metaphor is a way of thought long before it is a way with words” (3). Later, he adds, “Metaphor is a lens that clarifies and distorts” (147). Geary even explores the neurological implications of metaphor and how certain mental disabilities prevent one from understanding or employing metaphor. Fascinating.

I have noticed that, after reading this book, I spot the metaphors that I and others casually employ. This awareness has been helpful in preaching as I tune in to metaphor families that I or another preacher might consistently employ. After a while, of course, this could get very annoying for the hearer and probably for the preacher who suddenly became aware of her or his disposition. Even how a word sounds communicates meaning as it seeks to represent the reality behind the rhetoric. Or is the rhetoric the reality?

Three good books on English language usage. (I know, I know; an incomplete sentence.)

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