

CLEAN, WELL-LIGHTED SENTENCES



Sometimes your own book collection reveals something you didn't realize about yourself. In my case, it has to do with the written word itself.

I only recently noticed the pattern in my book-buying habits, which were spelled out on my bookshelves long ago:

Wisecracks, Witty Remarks and Epigrams For All Occasions, Mrs. Byrne's Dictionary of Unusual, Obscure and Preposterous Words, The Miracle of Language, Posh and Other Language Myths, and The Superior Person's Book of Words.

If these titles have piqued your interest, you may be a kindred spirit. You may also enjoy my latest acquisition, *clean, well-lighted sentences* (title correct with no caps), by Janis Bell. You don't have to be a language maven to love this book. In fact, it may be best appreciated by the reluctant grammarian because it is, as the subtitle states, *A Guide to Avoiding the Most Common Errors in Grammar and Punctuation*.

Don't throw out your AP or Chicago style manuals just yet. As implied in the capital-deprived title, *clean, well-lighted sentences* does not serve as a complete directory, nor does it bog down with lots of theory or mandatory rules. Instead, it is a friendly guide that helps you steer clear of the stickiest

language pitfalls. It does so with examples, context, and a humorous tone from an author who doesn't take herself or her important subject too seriously, despite Bell's 35 years as a teacher of writing and grammar.

What I most enjoy about *clean, well-lighted sentences* is that it can simultaneously spread the gospel to intimidated writers and mollify those of us with usage peeves, as common mistakes are explained and corrected. The book is full of understandable descriptions and often amusing examples that helped lodge the rules in my long-term memory.

Exhibit A: Bell says never to use "was" after "wish." So, "I wish that Rover was a Pomeranian" is wrong, but "Rover wishes that I were better trained" is correct as well as comical.

Perplexed by semicolons? Think of the punctuation mark as glue that holds together two complete, but related, sentences.

To make a word that already ends in "s" into a possessive, Bell instructs, say yes to the apostrophe, but no to an additional "s." She follows up with this reassuring advice: "If you follow the guideline all the time, you'll never be wrong." Music to a writer's ears.

-- Wendy Levine

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