

edited by Beth Notzon



MIGHTY FINE WORDS AND SMASHING EXPRESSIONS: MAKING SENSE OF TRANSATLANTIC ENGLISH. ORIN HARGRAVES. OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS; 2002. 320 PAGES. HARDCOVER \$27.50. ISBN 1-95157-04-4.

GRACE DARLING is a self-described language groupie and lover of words. She lives in Arlington, Texas, and works as a medical editor at UT Southwestern Medical Center when not too busy reading for fun.

“What we have here is a failure to communicate.” So said the evil warden to Cool Hand Luke, and such is the premise of *Mighty Fine Words and Smashing Expressions*. Author Orin Hargraves, a full-time lexicographer who divides his time between Britain and his native United States, sets out to explore and list the multiple distinctions between British English (BrE) and American English (AmE). Hargraves’s aim is to compile the differences between the two dialects that hinder transatlantic communication and to offer equivalent words and expressions that may be helpful to “many kinds of English users: readers, writers, editors, visitors to the US or the UK from across the Atlantic, and students of language.” Alas, he succeeds only too well. After claiming that a completely exhaustive treatment of the differences would be beyond the scope of practicality and nearly impossible to organize, Hargraves attempts to prove himself wrong by including an enormous amount of material. Only bits, however, are relevant to the sciences.

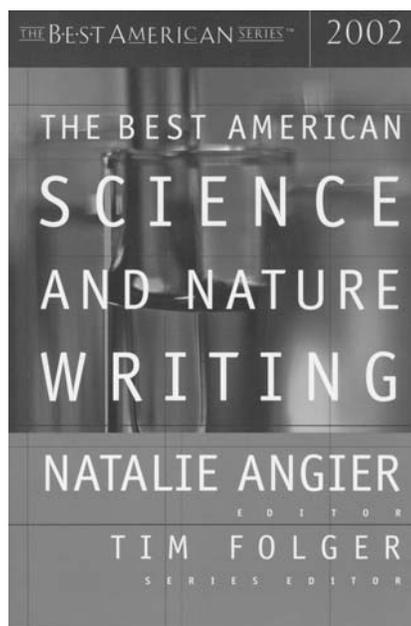
The book is organized from the specific to the general. All the examples I give here are from British English; I assume that most readers are familiar with the American equivalents. Chapter 1 focuses on spelling (for example, *colour*, *analyse*, *per cent*, and *anaesthesia*) and punctuation. Although the book follows the American convention of placing commas and periods inside closing quotation marks, we are reminded that British usage calls for commas and periods (full stops) to be placed outside the quotation marks unless the quoted material is a full sentence.

Chapter 2, “A Choice of Words”, has sections on nouns, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, articles, and pronouns. Subsections consider such matters as “Variability of Number and Countability in Nouns” (for example, “a dish with carrot” and “a scales for weighing”), “Group Nouns” (“the FDA have issued” and “a committee are”), “Preference for Variable Forms” (*orientate* and *syllabicate*), and “Verbal Nouns from Infinitives”. Under “Verbs”, we find “Modal and Other Auxiliary Verbs” (*mustn’t* and *needn’t*), “Alternatives to the Subjunctive”, “Variable Ellipsis of Verbs”,

“Differences in the Use of Tenses” (heavy use of the present perfect), “Gerundive Constructions” (“looks like being” and “needs doing”), “Transitivity Matters” (“approximates to”, “notified to”, and “provide with”), “Double Imperatives”, and “Variable Conjugations” (“got” and “never gotten”). The “Adverbs” section contains a discussion of the “Terminal -s” (*towards* and *upwards*), “All Right and Alright”, and “Supplementary Conjunctions” (*momentarily* means “for a moment” in BrE but “in a moment” in AmE).

The section on “Prepositions” (still in Chapter 2) abounds with helpful hints for avoiding pitfalls that are “clear marker[s] for the origins of speech and writing, and [that] need to be scrutinized carefully when text is being edited for presentation in the other dialect”. A table and several paragraphs are devoted to the topic and give illuminating examples. Under “Articles”, variant usage of *the* is the primary focus; in BrE, it is sometimes omitted (“in hospital” and “in future”) and sometimes added (“to the boil”). In the “Pronouns” section, Hargraves informs us that British writers typically prefer *which* for both restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses, whereas Americans use *that* for restrictive clauses. British writers are also more comfortable in using *one* when referring to a person; an American writer is likely to use *you* rather than the politically correct but grammatically awkward *he or she*.

Chapters 3 through 11 are devoted to British and American language conventions in particular disciplines or broad subjects: “Money, Business, and Work”; “The Government and the Law”; “Education”; “Sickness and Health”; “Food, Clothing, and Shelter”; “Transport(ation)”; “Sport(s) and Leisure”; “What You Don’t Say”; and “The Stuff of Life”. These chapters are extensive treatises on cultural differences between the two countries as reflected in language. The section on “Healthcare” in Chapter 6, for example, discusses the National Health Service in the UK and compares it with Medicare, Medicaid, and HMOs in the United States. Along the way, we learn that the British (and the rest of the world) write dates as day-month-



THE BEST AMERICAN SCIENCE AND NATURE WRITING 2002. EDITED BY NATALIE ANGIER, SERIES EDITOR, AND TIM FOLGER. BOSTON: HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY; 2002. XXIV + 305 PAGES. HARDCOVER \$27.50, SOFTCOVER \$13.00. ISBN 0-618-08297-2 (HARDCOVER), 0-618-13478-6 (SOFTCOVER).

A L WENZEL is an editor and a member of the District of Columbia Science Writers Association.

year, that metric units of measure are far more common across the pond, and that *through* in the UK is usually followed by *to* and means “having progressed to the next level”—rather the opposite of its meaning of “finished” in the United States.

Despite its often-tedious word lists,

Mighty Fine Words is charmingly written and liberally salted with wry humor and pithy comments on British and American societies. Devoted linguists and confirmed anglophiles will treasure it; the rest of you can easily give it a miss.

Grace Darling

Appending “The Best” to any title is in any situation a brave move, and to do so in such a competitive field as science writing is bolder still.

Editors Natalie Angier and Tim Folger each have a keen eye, however, and although there may be some quibbling about whether they’ve actually picked “the best”, there are few disappointments in *The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2002*.

One highlight of this collection is H Bruce Franklin’s ode to the menhaden, “The Most Important Fish in the Sea”. Well written and thoughtful, the piece gives us a clear picture of the regrettable results that decades of overfishing this “oily and foul” (p 81) species has had—and will continue to have—on the ecosystems of the Chesapeake Bay and the rest of the Eastern Seaboard. Franklin has managed to present many facets of the problem, interviewing the first “spotter pilot” for the fishing industry, scientists studying the situation, and the president of a fishing-industry trade association. Franklin took his time with the piece, and the reward is ours—a tightly knit yet fluid piece giving a 360-degree view of a tricky situation.

Another high point of the book is the essay by Anne Matthews, “Wall Street Losses, Wall Street Gains”, on the growing and changing ecosystem of Manhattan. Starting with a dismaying report on the dozens of songbirds that die each night in the skyscraper caverns—circling the brightly lit buildings, “mesmerized, until exhaustion claims them” (p 188)—the article helps us to discover the wilderness coming back to the city, reclaiming small parts of what it once owned in toto—foxes and deer, bears and herons, all being spotted within the city boroughs, all five of which “retain places where you can walk for hours and see

no human near” (p 192). Although more a story of personal discovery than a “hard” scientific piece, Matthews’s writing is enjoyable and fluid, and her detailed discovery of a whole new kind of urban renewal both educates and entertains.

The first article in the collection, Roy F Baumeister’s, “Violent Pride”, poses a fascinating challenge to the “common knowledge” that “aggression stems from low self-esteem” (p 1). Baumeister and his colleagues studied the aggression levels of narcissists who have had their egos challenged and of nonnarcissists and narcissists who have been praised. The result was clear: the most aggressive participants were narcissists who were told that they had done poorly, and their aggression was aimed squarely at those who had challenged their self-esteem. Baumeister has conducted and documented an intriguing investigation in which he has challenged the accepted truth that “feel-good exercises” (p 8) lower aggression by raising self-esteem and has shown that these exercises may harm those they are intended to help by blinding them to reality. His writing is clear and compelling, and his dismissal of unwarranted and indiscriminate praise encourages the cynic in us all.

Other standouts in this collection include Eric Schlosser’s entertaining and vaguely disturbing article on modern flavors, “Why McDonald’s Fries Taste So Good”; Burkhard Bilger’s “Braised Shank of Free-Range Possum?”, a very detailed exploration of low-country cooking, via the author’s “Strange Southern Foods tour” (p 17); and Judith Newman’s heartfelt biography of oncologist Steven A Rosenberg, “I Have Seen Cancers Disappear”.

A L Wenzel