

2006 / Aug - LYNNE TRUSS - Publishing News

Next month, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves - Why Commas Really Do Make a Difference!* will be published by Profile. Written by Lynne Truss, and illustrated by Bonnie Timmons, it has just been released in the US by Putnam and, in the week that *Harry Potter* went into paperback, it was atop the Barnes & Noble children's bestsellers and at number four in the adult list. It is, says Profile's publicity blurb, "based on the international bestseller, which has sold over three million copies worldwide".

Did Truss still have to pinch herself when she reads that statistic? "I honestly do, yes. You can get used to the idea that everyone you meet has a copy of *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, but it's still impossible to imagine such a huge number of people going into bookshops, taking my book off the shelf and getting their wallets out because you can only imagine two or three people a day, and it doesn't work out. I do look at football stadiums and think, 'Well, that's 80,000 people, so if you want over three million, that would be about 40 stadiums', and then my brain packs up."

We are, she points out, talking about a book on punctuation. As a novelist, Truss says she could have written a character who was the author of a book on punctuation, but it would have been shorthand for 'a bit sad' and 'a bit clueless about the realities of publishing'. Returning after a short break from the book world, she thought the idea was a rather clever way back into print, "a book that couldn't possibly be construed as a failure, because no one could expect it to succeed."

Having exceeded everyone's expectations with the original, what was the genesis of the children's book? "I knew a junior version would be really helpful, because I met hundreds of English teachers who said they'd been using the adult book with their kids, trying to get them interested. I had an idea about a family of punctuation, with the comma as mummy, dashing about and organising things, and the full stop as daddy, always arriving at the end and

saying ‘that’s quite enough of that!’. Mercifully, I didn’t get any further with it.”

If she had her way, kids would be made to love language, and be taught that writing well is as important as reading. Teaching children to read but not to write, is like teaching people how to listen to Bach and Beethoven, but not teaching them even basic scales on the piano. “The language does belong to everybody, but the way things are going, there will be just a small elite that’s been trained how to use it effectively. That can’t be right. We’ll be back in the Middle Ages.”

And if this book is a success, is there more to say and do in this style and format for children? “We’ve been putting together some examples for an apostrophe book,” says Truss, “but I don’t think we’ll work our way through all the marks.”