BOOKS

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Lesser men could have traced and documented the history of this affair. Lesser men could have returned to the site of the greatest trial of their lives and dutifully recorded the words of those who opposed them. But few, if any, have had the genuine humility and empathy to walk in the mental and spiritual moccasins of the opposers of one’s life’s work as James Moffett has. He knows that they genuinely believed what they said, and he respects that belief because it is rooted in spirituality, even though he sees it as agnostis—“not wanting to know.”

And there—I believe—is where we meet ourselves.

For this state of mind, this agnostis, is deeply rooted in all of us, not just in Appalachians like me and the folks from Kanawha County. We all set some limits on our knowing and our children’s knowing. We all fear losing our children to some extent, and to some extent and at some point, all of us fear our children’s coming to think, behave, and believe in ways that we do not believe to be right or simply cannot understand. We fear the collapse of a known world into an unknown or strange one. This consciousness is really a fear of losing the world, and thereby losing ourselves. Books actually can do this to our children and to us, and deep inside we all know that. This is the state of mind from which the book protesters spoke, whatever their language, and it is a state of mind that none of us is immune to.

Perhaps, although Moffett does not suggest this, such a state of mind is a kind of spiritual flywheel on the intellect, a built-in safeguard to keep us from going too far too fast, from doing what Robert Pirsig called “going out of the mythos,” off the tracks. We protect what we know—or think we know—for without it, there is nothing.

But this is my idea, not Moffett’s. His is more transcendent. Listen to his closing sentences:

But defense is a losing game. Perpetual mobilization of an individual or a nation squanders resources. To defend against the Other is to ward off higher consciousness. It alone is equal to dealing with the world’s conflicts, which stem, precisely, from our social need to limit knowing and identifying. The spiritual way is the practical way. As we identify so we know. Only by identifying with the culture-free and cosmic nature of a Christ or Buddha does one learn what they tried to teach us and assume their power. This means molting lesser selves.

James Moffett has molted quite a few. So may we all.

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Harold Nelson

GRAMMAR GRAMS

by Stephen K. Tollefson
Harper & Row
1989

“Small Admonitions on Many Points”

For several years Stephen K. Tollefson was Writing and Speech Coordinator at the University of California at Berkeley. To help the “large numbers of staff members who had questions about writing,” Tollefson wrote and distributed a series of one-page newsletters on topics in grammar and usage. He wrote the newsletters in no particular order, but he organized them into thirteen volumes for his collection, Grammar Grams.

Tollefson summarizes the book’s purpose in the first two paragraphs of the introduction:
Dear Grammar Gram:

I'm turning to you for help. I do some writing in my job, and I'm also taking a writing course at night. I have some writing books which are quite helpful, but I feel like I need something else. Is there something brief and easy to read that I can use when I have a question about some aspect of writing? I can study my writing test, but I also need a quick guide.

Signed,
Where to Turn?

Dear Where:

Yes, there is help: the Grammar Grams. They provide short, almost telegraphic explanations of some problems in grammar, style, and usage as well as pointers and reminders for writing essays, letters, and memos.

The Grammar Gram

Tollefson then defines form, content, and audience. The Grammar Grams, according to the introduction, cover "general considerations about language and writing to provide a good background, the more common trouble spots in writing, the areas that cause concern (who vs. whom, that vs. which, for example), and miscellaneous matters of writing, not only essays but also memos, letters, and reports." Tollefson emphasizes common trouble spots most heavily (thirty Grammar Grams), followed by miscellaneous matters (nineteen), particular areas (ten), and general considerations (four).

Grammar Grams is not a handbook. Instead, the book is a relatively short work focusing on practical matters in style. It falls generally into the same class as Baker's The Practical Stylist, Strunk and White's The Elements of Style, Trimble's Conversations About Writing, Williams's Style, and Zinsser's On Writing Well. As the lead for the introduction illustrates, Tollefson writes confidently, vigorously, somewhat assertively, with a tone similar to Baker's, Strunk and White's, and Williams's.

Tollefson writes, "The brevity of the Grammar Grams will appeal to people who find wading through a larger book to be a frustrating experience." I agree. I also agree with Tollefson when he recommends audiences. According to Tollefson, business people might keep Grammar Grams "by their desks for those times when questions of grammar, style, and usage arise"; students might use it as a supplementary reference; and teachers might suggest appropriate Grammar Grams to students who have specific problems, rather than taking the time unnecessarily for tutorial sessions.

The introduction is limited to an 8 1/2 by 11 page, as are each of the sixty—three Grammar Grams, so Grammar Grams is a thin book. It's also modestly bound, with a soft cover and two staples for binding. Teachers can recommend it as a supplementary text without feeling pangs of conscience over the total price of texts for a course—the book sells for only $6.95. It doesn't look cheap, though. It's nicely made. The black and yellow cover design is eye-catching, the logo of a telegram speeding through a circle appears at the top of each Grammar Gram for visual continuity, and the print is distinct and readable.

Only one minor aspect of the book bothers me—at times the humor probably worked better in the individual Grammar Grams than it does in a collection. The first Grammar Gram's title is "1500 Years of History in One Minute," and the last sentence of the Gram is "OK, it might have taken you longer than one minute to read this." I liked this line. But when I read the second Grammar Gram, I saw the same witty echoing of the title and lead in the conclusion, and again in the third, and again in the fourth, and so on. For me, the pattern became too predictable when I read the Grammar

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Grams assembled. I'm sure the pattern wouldn't have been as obvious if I had read the Grammar Grams intermittently.

Generally, though, I like the book very much. It's well written, witty, concise, and it gives good advice. I'm impressed with how solidly and unostentatiously Tollefson has based this advice on modern linguistics. He states in the introduction that "one general theme runs throughout Grammar Grams: because language constantly changes, our rules are merely guides ... The Grammar Grams try to make distinctions among what is generally accepted as law, what is a matter of style, and what is currently changing. In all cases, the Grammar Grams remind you to consider your audience." He is unlike the authors of several of the handbooks I've looked at recently who treat the rules as fixed and who apparently haven't studied modern grammars.
I’ve taught an upper division course, Theories of Grammar, for some years now, and I believe it important to be able to think systematically about language. But when I write, I use grammar much like Joan Didion apparently does. In her essay “Why I Write” she says, “Grammar is a piano I play by ear, since I seem to have been out of school the year the rules were mentioned. All I know about grammar is its infinite power.” Tollefson also emphasizes grammar’s flexibility and its rhetorical power, not its rigidity, showing how writers can use grammar when thinking about their writing.

I’ve put my copy of Grammar Grams with my other books on style. Of these, Grammar Grams most closely resembles the “Bits and Pieces” chapter in On Writing Well, in which Zinsser has assembled “scrap and morsels—small admonitions on many points that I have collected under one, as they say, umbrella.” Tollefson’s small admonitions, like Zinsser’s, are worth reading and applying.

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