BOOKS

ifies the complex realities of urban schools, and because it ignores the attempts at equity and reform which do exist, it may elicit a cycle of responses that follows a predictable pattern: shock, outrage, frustration, discouragement, a sense of impotence to make change, and finally a turning away with the unspoken “I feel terrible about these poor, black children. Thank God my kids don’t go to schools like that.”

Joseph Check is director of the Boston Writing Project.

Denny T. Wolfe

GRAMMAR GRAMS II
by Stephen K. Tollefson
Harper Collins Publishers, 1992

Stephen K. Tollefson, Edwin Newman, and John Warriner — I’d love to see the three of them sit down with Dick Cavett on his old show. Newman would insist that the English language has gone somewhere in a hand-basket. And, after a little more haranguing by Newman, Cavett would turn to Tollefson and Warriner with, “Well, gentlemen, you’ve heard Ed’s indictment. What about it? How can we rescue English? Or, can we?”

John Warriner might say something like, “Dick, of course Ed’s right. And if teachers in schools would deliberately drill students with the exercises in my series, English Grammar and Composition, we could see a change for the better in the ways people talk and write. For example, in my twelfth grade book (p.177), I show why one would never say ‘The reason is because …’ I say, ‘In a sentence beginning, The reason is ..., the clause following the verb is a noun clause used as a predicate nominative. A noun clause may begin with that but not with because, which usually introduces an adverb clause. (For example), The reason she refused to go was that (not because) she had no money.’ So you see, Dick, if one knows how to analyze language, by knowing and applying the language of grammar, one could learn to speak and write completely.”


“Hey, let’s not be so uptight about all this. Kids just need straight advice about language. John just said how he tries to help through this series. Let me tell you how I deal with the ‘reason is because’ question. In Grammar Grams II (p.13), I try to de-mystify the problem. I say, ‘Don’t use because after the phrase the reason is: The reason she likes Ladysmith Black Mambazo is because they harmonize well.’ Not only is this much more complex than it needs to be, it is also redundant. A clause beginning with because is a reason, so we’re saying it twice. Say either, The reason she likes Ladysmith Black Mambazo is that they harmonize well, or, She likes Ladysmith Black Mambazo because they harmonize well. See what I mean?”

I think Tollefson would come out the winner by the end of the show, although Newman and Warriner would probably go away convinced that his Grammar Grams II is just “too cute.” They would think that learning how to use language “correctly” needs to be more painful and serious than Tollefson makes it. Cavett would probably invite Tollefson over to watch Monday Night Football.

Grammar Grams II is a useful little book, only sixty-five pages, including an index. I didn’t see Grammar Grams I, but now I have to have it. This book, Grammar Grams II, is organized as a collection of one-page “grams” on various aspects of language usage and advice to speakers and writers of English. The one-page treatments are grouped into thirteen “volumes,” with titles like Hors d’Oeuvres, Rebel Without a Clause, Fun, Fun, Fun, and Games, Tests, and Trivia. One of the many qualities that sets this little book apart from the others like it is its good cheer and lightheartedness. The very first grammar gram in the book,
"The War Between the North and the South," begins with two questions to students: "Would you rather communicate with your supervisor or talk to your boss? Would you rather read a dirty Grammar Gram or an obscene one?" After discussing and illustrating the differences between northern and southern regional vocabularies, Tollefson ends the page with this: "Remember, neither vocabulary is better than the other. The south may have given us rhinitis, a word favored by doctors to mean 'runny nose', but the north gave us a snout, snort, sneeze, and snot, for which we should be eternally grateful" (p. 5).

Tollefson covers everything in Grammar Grams II, from apostrophes to uses of you and your. There's a lot packed into this slim volume for students who might respond well to an upbeat approach to grammar handbook writing — and that includes all the students I know. Many of his grammar grams have hilarious and/or appealing titles. Here are five of my favorites: "Play It Again, Sam" (on adjectives and adverbs); "Is This a Good Grammar Gram, Or What?" (on rhetoric and rhetorical questions); "This Yam Is Your Yam, This Yam Is My Yam" (on forming and punctuating possessives); "The Sun Also Rises, Too" (on the uses of also, too, and in addition); "The Ski Punks Versus The Ten Commandments" (on effective uses of repetition in speech and writing). But my absolute favorite grammar gram title is "Comma, Comma, Down, Doobie, Do, Down, Down, Down" (on using commas to set off parenthetical sentence elements), inspired by Neil Sedaka's song "Breaking Up Is Hard To Do" (1962).

All handbooks that I know, save Tollefson's, are dry, thick, and all-inclusive — so all-inclusive, in fact, that one often wonders, "How come so many people write and speak reasonably well? They can't possibly know all that's in this handbook." Such handbooks can be helpful, useful — even invaluable — aids to speakers and writers, but they can also be intimidating and impenetrable to many students. Tollefson's book is not intimidating; it's downright inviting. His treatment of grammatical issues is practical and lucid. The advice he gives is often more sense-oriented than rule-oriented. He stays out of the terminological pit that many other grammarians and handbook writers wallow in. His illustrative sentences are witty, current, and written with a student readership in mind. As a result, this little volume can serve students well.

Reference


Denny T. Wolfe is director of the Tidewater Writing Project, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia