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Sister Bernadette's Dog Barking: The Quirky History and Lost Art of Diagramming Sentences
154 pp. "Sister Bernadette's Barking Dog: The Quirky History and Lost Art of Diagramming Sentences is a 2006 book by author Kitty Burns Florey about the history and art of sentence diagramming. Florey learned to diagram sentences as a Catholic school student at St. John the Baptist Academy in Syracuse, New York. Diagramming sentences is useful, Florey says, because it teaches us to "focus on the structures and patterns of language, and this can help us appreciate it as more than just a vehicle for expressing minimal ideas". Florey said in a 2012 essay "Taming Sentences":When we unscrew a sentence, figure out what makes it tick and reassemble it, we interact with our old familiar language differently, more deeply, responding to the way its individual components fit together. Once we understand how sentences work (what's going on? what action is taking place? who is doing it and to whom is it being done?), it's harder to write an incorrect one.Sentence diagramming was introduced by Brainerd Kellogg and Alonzo Reid, professors at the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute, in their book History of English published in 1877."Keywords: KITTY BURNS FLOREY SISTER BERNADETTE DOG BARKING DIAGRAMMING SENTENCES ENGLISH GRAMMAR REFERENCE LANGUAGE

Sister Bernadette's Barking Dog: The Quirky History and Lost Art of Diagramming Sentences Details

Date	:	Published October 1st 2006 by Melville House Publishing
ISBN	:	9781933633107
Author	:	Kitty Burns Florey
Format	:	Hardcover 154 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, Language, Writing, Humanities, Education, Reference, History, Linguistics

From Reader Review Sister Bernadette's Barking Dog: The Quirky History and Lost Art of Diagramming Sentences for online ebook

Theresa says

I enjoyed this book very much because I am a grammar nut! :-) I was surprised to learn that the words "prioritize" and "finalize" are actually considered poor English. I also enjoyed learning about the debate as to whether a dictionary should reflect English as it SHOULD be spoken or English as it is spoken by regular folks, even when it is spoken incorrectly.

John Wiltshire says

I went to an English grammar school. You'd probably assume, therefore, that I learnt something called...grammar. God forbid. I went in the 1970s, when yet another crazy, liberal, progressive eduction reform decided that actually teaching anyone anything was elitist. I came out of seven years of grammar school education thinking that if a word ended in ing it was possibly a verb. I couldn't put a comma correctly into a sentence to save my life. In fact, launched out into the world where I needed to be able to write (not least for taking a degree in English), it was a little like going into a bicycle race on a handmade bicycle which had shiny wheels (I've always been a bit of a blagger) but gears made of Heinz bean tins. However, I guess not having to suffer any form of formal education at all (those pesky elitist grammar schools), I'm now able to actually enjoy studying it for myself.
This little book on sentence diagramming struck me as something I'd find interesting. I lived and breathed Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation and can't rate it highly enough if you want to learn to punctuate (and then you'll possibly discover that modern American publishers have issued a fatwa on colons and semi-colons). I digress.
I'm 70% through this book now. No, I haven't learnt how to diagram a sentence. The book is actually about the history of diagramming, but more, it's about famous writers who were brought up under this system and how it might have affected their use of the language.
The interesting conclusion she seems to be coming to is that knowing the structure of your language doesn't necessarily mean you write better sentences. Gertrude Stein, for example, knew the rules intimately but then dismissed them, overrode them with something more original.
I'm wondering now who wins the Tour de France: the guy who buys shimano gears or the one with the heart and soul to make it on his rickety handmade device. And, more to the point (if this shaky metaphor can be said to have one) which would be more fun to follow and watch.
I'll conclude when I've finished.
Finished. This got even more interesting as it went along and for those interested in the evolution of English and grammar I'd recommend it. It's fun, light and rather sweet (yes, I'm not using an Oxford comma. It's an English peculiarity according to this author and wrong. Uh-huh).
As an author you're always on a bit of a sticky wicket critiquing other authors. It's so easy to hear the detractors thinking, "Jeez, pot calling the kettle black..." if you say anything negative. How much more so do you feel on tenterhooks writing about a book on grammar! Kitty Burns Florey is a copy editor, so her grammar has to be spot on, but I do like the way she's able to set this to one side if she finds quirky, fun uses of the language that are technically wrong. After all, as she points out, how many copies of "I can't get no satisfaction" would have sold if it had been called, "I can't get any satisfaction" (which she assumes the Rolling Stones actually meant).
She's even brave enough to pick Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation up for

being too critical of those whose first language isn't English (and for not having a hyphen in the subtitle of the book, which is quite funny really when you think about it. Personally, I agree with Truss that Zero Tolerance Approach doesn't need one as its meaning is quite clear without it, but hey ho).
I loved the discussion of the absence in the English language of a contraction for *I am not* and the legitimacy for a while of ain't, which is now so wrong.
So, if you have a slight tendency to be a grammar Nazi (actually, more a grammar Tory, because she rightly points out that flexibility and fun make for a more interesting reading, writing life) then I think you'd enjoy this little book and get a lot out of it. The author has a really nice writing style. I felt I was sitting down with an old friend I'd known for years and chatting about another old friend we both loved. Very strange when I consider it's a book about my childhood nemesis.

Chris says

I wish there had been more about the actual process of diagramming a sentence, but the bits about other writers was awesome. It's actually a nice little book about grammar.

Richard says

I bought this book after hearing an interview with Kitty Burns Florey on NPR. Though diagramming always seemed to me a limited pedagogical form, I was interested to find out more about the methodology and rationale behind the system. The first two chapters of this book provide a lot of that, though in essence the research seems weak, with Burns Florey doing little more than finding the original books where diagramming methods were developed, from the original balloon designs of S.W. Clark (A practical grammar: In which words, phrases, and sentences are classified according to their offices, and their various relations to one another : illustrated by a complete system of diagrams) to her formal focus, Reed and Kellogg's (Higher Lessons in English A work on english grammar and composition). Her overview takes more of a memoir-like bend, relating these ideas to how they affected her in grammar school rather than addressing their applications to writing and language. Her insight into these books feels very thin, and I felt that I could get more about this topic from reading the original source material, since Burns Florey couldn't really offer any insight into the rationales behind these systems.

The later chapters start looking at the styles of other writers and the shortcomings of sentence diagramming. In fact, after a long treatise on Gertrude Stein, who praised diagramming highly yet wrote utterly undiagrammable sentences, Burns Florey concludes by saying, "For many of the world's great literary writers, diagramming would seem to be seriously beside the point." Now, I was mystified as to what the point of the book was anymore. If diagramming was already a lost art, as the author had already brought up from the beginning, then why go into the shortcomings of diagramming? Her point about the fact that a sentence can be utterly nonsensical but diagram well was interesting but does not seem to be taken towards any further insightful conclusions (and this point was not even the author's). If this was a book ultimately about language and its nebulous nature that is naturally resistant to the geometry of diagramming, then Burns Florey doesn't really offer much insight into the nature of language and how it can resist structure. Overall, this reads like a flat overview of diagramming with a little bit of research, but not enough to provide much insight into the schools of controllable vs. uncontrollable language and whether effective language fits this geometry or not (the answer to which being obviously mixed, but Burns Florey does not offer any ideas as to why).

By the end of this book, I felt as though I had been dragged into a conversation (fairer to say monologue) with Kitty Burns Florey and lectured to for a time about a subject she has great interest in. However, by the end of the lecture, I have learned little more than what I knew from the start--that she is greatly interested in diagramming, though I still have no palpable reason why (or, fairer to say, why I should be interested as well). An interesting topic for a book, but Kitty Burns Florey in the end has little to say about it.

Sara says

What a fun book! The only book I know in which the author reminisces fondly about diagramming sentences in middle school back in the day. It's an entertaining book, not a book teaching you how to diagram. Actually, I had no idea kids these days don't diagram sentences (except in a few rare schools) because I did it when I was in school. I diagrammed badly. I remember nothing of it, but I remember hating it.

I did not hate this book. I had a good time with it and now I wished I had paid more attention to the lessons. I learned how much Gertrude Stein loved diagramming - and try to diagram one of her sentences! The author talks about the style of many famous writers not to mention gives us a history of the lost art of diagramming.

I recommend this book if you have any interest in grammar and would like something light-hearted. This book can be read in an afternoon.

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max says

What a delightful book. If you ever loved diagramming sentences, as I did, you must read it.

As a sixth grader in Morris Plains Borough School, I was taught how to diagram sentences by Mr. Ed Borneman. He was an irascible man who ruled his classroom like a tyrant. After each quiz or test, he rearranged the seating chart according to the grade you received. Students with the lowest grades sat in front (so as to be squarely within his zone of psychological terror) while top scorers chilled in the back. This was 1968, when you could actually get away with this sort of insanity. He never hit us, but often acted as if he wanted to. One day, Mr. Borneman screamed at me: "Gabrielson! Do you know what you are? You are blase!" I had no idea what blase meant but knew it could not be complimentary. And of course, he was right. I was blase to the bone.

For all of his oddities as an educator, Mr. Borneman at heart was a man who took his job very seriously. He insisted that we diagram sentences. He showed us how to do it and demanded that we get it right. I enjoyed this enormously. I was an indifferent student, and didn't care much for the lessons of my teachers. But diagramming sentences was different. It was stimulating, challenging, something that I took pride in doing successfully. I can also say categorically that it was only through this exercise that I came to understand for the first time how the parts of speech functioned in a sentence.

Diagramming, much like handwriting itself, is a lost skill. Sadly, there are very, very few teachers of middle school grammar who bother to teach it at all today. It is not a silver bullet in the English classroom and -- let's be honest -- will not necessarily make anyone a better writer. Still, it has definite pedagogical merit because it uses a visual schema to map out the way words function on a syntactic level and how meaning is

created thereby. Would a competent math teacher talk about circles or polygons in the abstract without drawing one on the board? Could a lesson on the parts of a flower -- pistils, stamens, et alia -- have any meaning whatsoever without an appropriate picture with labels? For young language learners, creating a diagram of how a sentence works is a brilliant solution to the basic problem faced by so many youngsters of trying to grasp what words -- or better, how words mean.

I don't know where Mr. Borneman is these days, but I wish I could thank him for what he taught me. I am quite sure that diagramming sentences was the first step in a language learning process that culminated in my becoming a teacher of Greek and Latin.

Laurel says

Anyone who knows me (I'm also known as the Comma Queen or the Red Pen Lady) won't be surprised that I loved this book about sentence diagramming--although I was surprised to realize that my diagramming skills were terribly rusty! The author provides a history of diagramming schemes, hilarious examples of what diagramming does and doesn't do (horrid sentences can still be diagrammed with ease...it doesn't improve grammar), and examples of various author's approaches to The Sentence. A bit of grammatical/ punctuational/word-misusage ranting towards the end of the book--and we've got a winner. I laughed out loud throughout! Not everyone's cup of tea (my hubby just shook his head as I cackled through the book), but a delight for some of us!

Antonio says

I remember having fun putting words into diagrams, and this book was both a fun reminder and an interesting history of the grammar tool.

Beverly says

My interest in sentence diagramming (an activity I recall adoring as a girl) was renewed by the need to teach grammar to a student I tutor. Florey's book was recommended to me by another English teacher, and it was a pleasure to read. Florey's narrative voice is charming; her excitement about English and proper grammar pour from the pages.

The chapter "Poetry & Grammar" was my favorite. In it, Florey examines (yes, diagrams) sentences from famous authors such as Gertrude Stein (she claims Gertrude Stein must not be called simply "Stein"), Hemingway, James, and Fitzgerald. She poses the question in this chapter, and throughout: does skill at diagramming, and hence prowess over grammar, make one a better writer?

Ultimately, she reaches the same conclusion I have reached in my ten years of teaching. Strength in grammar does not make one a better writer, but a better editor. Strength in grammar helps a writer to craft sentences that are clear and elegant, which makes them easier to read. Since writing is ultimately about communication (do we writers not, after all, want our readers to bend their wills to ours? Do we not, after all, want them to

see what we see and think the way we think?), the ability to write correct and cogent sentences, as well as the ability to bend and break rules for deliberate effect is vital.

Diagramming sentences, while it does not really do much to teach writing, may help writers to build confidence in their ability to use English in a way that will not sound, as David Foster Wallace complained, like a "Stradivarius hammering nails."

Kristina says

Sister Bernadette's Barking Dog: The Quirky History and Lost Art of Diagramming Sentences by Kitty Burns Florey is a delight. Florey is informative and her commentary is amusing. The book itself is well-designed with simple graphics, a lot of white space and those beautifully-rendered sentence diagrams.

In six relatively short chapters, Florey goes over the origin of sentence diagramming (at first, words were enclosed in bubbles), its popularity with teachers through the 1960s, its pros and cons and does it actually do what it's supposed to do (that is, help students learn grammar and write better)? While dispensing all this information, the author discusses her own love for diagramming and her personal history as related to diagramming (Sister Bernadette liked her diagramming sentences to include lots of barking dogs) and other authors' feelings about diagramming. She also diagrams a lot of sentences and they are fun to look at (besides being visually enticing and worthy of being framed and displayed in the Louvre).

When discussing the use of diagramming to improve sentence clarity, Florey provides an example from one of former President George W. Bush's speeches: "We want our teachers to be trained so they can meet the obligations, their obligations as teachers. We want them to know how to teach the science of reading in order to make sure there's not this kind of federal—federal cufflink" (March 30, 2000). Florey doesn't believe that diagramming makes for better writers because bad sentences can be diagrammed just as easily as good ones: "Like so many other bad sentences, the Bushism I just cited is baffling to the point of insanity, but that doesn't mean it can't be diagrammed. Sister Bernadette would be tight-lipped and disapproving, offering up silent prayers for the speaker and perhaps for the country, but she could wedge those two sentences into neat diagrams" (57). She has a very funny citation here quoting Mark Twain: "Use the right word, not its second cousin." Florey adds: "Or its great aunt who is locked up in an asylum." I wonder what Florey thinks of President (dear god, every time I have to put that word before his name I get nauseated) Trump's mangled sentences and does she attempt to diagram them?

The author's commentary isn't just focused on grammar and diagramming. She has many delightful excursions into other topics. There's a brief discussion about the word "axe" as in: I axed him to get me a sandwich" vs. "I asked him." It's physically difficult to say "I asked him" (go on, try it—it is difficult to enunciate, isn't it?) but saying "axed him" is still more difficult than "I ask dim" or "I assed him" so why is "axed" so popular? She doesn't know. Well, she says the answer goes "beyond the scope of this inquiry" which probably means that culture, race identity and linguistics comes into play. There's a wonderful chapter on poetry and grammar, which brings in Gertrude Stein and her quirky thoughts regarding punctuation (she hated question marks and commas) and her dislike of nouns. Florey quotes Stein extensively and says what she loves about her is how passionately she felt about grammar: "Gertrude Stein's thought processes are unlike anyone else's—except perhaps some of the characters in *Through the Looking Glass*—but to her they are crystal clear, and she is always definite in her ideas and implacable in her prejudices and vehement in her feelings" (67).

I loved diagramming and have the vaguest memories of learning it in elementary or middle school. I didn't do it again until I took a very fun linguistics class in college. That was one of the best classes I ever took because not only did I get to rediscover my love of diagramming, but we had to create a language. I enjoyed that so much that I created *two* languages, complete with visual aids. I was such a nerd then (…and nothing's changed). I really enjoyed *Sister Bernadette's Barking Dog* and regret I didn't read it sooner (I bought the book, according to my scribble on the title page, in 2009). Florey is a very fun companion and I enjoyed her prose. Even though she does take grammar and proper word usage seriously, she can laugh at herself:

> My friends who aren't editors are amused by my obsession with commas and solecisms and dangles and grammatical glitches—I know they see me as the poor doomed herring whose brain has been addled by all that tree-whacking (a Monty Python skit reference). I recently silenced an entire dinner party when I began to rant about how one of my hapless editing victims doesn't understand the meaning of "Indian summer," which—damn it!—is *not* a warm spell in November but the phenomenon of unseasonably warm weather after a killing frost. If you use it wrongly, you lose the whole bloody concept of Indian summer, which should not be jettisoned along with all the other useful and wonderful English expressions that we've lost because people just don't care enough or pay attention to blah blah going to hell in a handbasket yak yak yak the end of civilization as we know it yadda yadda yadda…(111).

I love that and giggle every time I read it because I know I've had fits like that myself (usually over spelling errors and plural possessives) and it is funny, but really: it's not that difficult to know the difference between its/it's. I mean, c'mon, people.

This is a really fun book if you have any love for grammar and the English language. Plus, all those sentence diagrams! Woo!

Jenny Schmenny says

Kitty Burns Florey writes, "Trying to stuff the complexities of the English language into flat visual structures is a bit like trying to force a cat into the carrier for a trip to the vet, and coming up with the idea in the first place seems comparable to the boldness and daring of cracking open the first oyster and deciding it looked like lunch."

Things like that made me really enjoy the book, as did her apparently hand-drawn diagrams, which look like rickety scaffolding. She loves the predictability and order of diagramming, but acknowledges that it's not very useful - most of us pick up grammar and syntax elsewhere. "The language sticks to them like cat hair to black trousers, and they do things correctly without knowing why." Again with the cats, but I liked the image.

Primarily, I enjoyed the book for its shameless display of grammar-nerdism. I found it a little dry, partly because of the nature of the topic, and partly because I have a tendency to wish for more autobiographical stuff than the author felt like supplying.

One last earmarked page in my books shows E.B. White's example of a sentence that ends with five prepositions: "A father of a little boy goes upstairs after supper to read to his son, but he brings the wrong book. The boy says, 'What did you bring that book that I don't want to be read to out of up for?'" I almost swooned. It reminded me of "The editor said said that that 'that' that that author used was wrong" Should I be

embarrassed?

Yeah.

Ellen says

Loved this book. Great for anyone about to teach Grammar who has forgotten everything they ever learned about Grammar. Certainly made me want to do diagramming with my students, and so far they love it. It really is fun (for all ages!) and makes language into a kind of puzzle to be puzzled with and puzzled out.

Altivo Overo says

Fun and fascinating history. Unlike my friend Cat., I did have brief exposure to diagramming sentences from a thoroughly old-fashioned and fondly remembered fifth grade teacher. Mrs. Wilson didn't make us actually learn all the ins and outs of the process, but did use it to break down sentence structure in a different way. The methodology does provide a graphical approach to analysis and certainly could be helpful to some students for understanding grammatical structures in English.

The historical information and anecdotes about various authors was fun. If you're a nit-picker about grammar and spelling, or just feel nostalgic about fifth grade, you will probably enjoy this.

Ensiform says

The author, a novelist, weaves her own Catholic school experiences diagramming sentences under the watchful eye of Sister Bernadette, and then reflects on other writers, most notably Gertrude Stein, who was passionate about grammar, and apparently loved diagramming (although she wrote sentences that defied most grammatical conventions). She investigates the world of Brainerd Kellogg and Alonzo Reed, whose 1877 text on diagramming more or less created the concept, and works her way through other writers' ideas on grammar and form, finally visiting a modern-day junior high class that loves diagramming.

Florey's tone, throughout this delightful book, is one of spontaneous humor and warmth. She is passionate about language herself, and seeing how language has evolved, with or without the help of diagramming, is a fascinating look at ourselves, our culture, and gives us a clue about what the future may hold for the written and spoken word. This is a quirky, light book, just as the title says, and utterly delightful to read.

Mandy says

An admission: it was this book's title that drew me in. And when it arrived last week inside a big box of new reading material I had ordered from Amazon, I was equally captivated by its quirky cover art and the seemingly hand-drawn sentence diagrams inside. Then, I started reading the book. Instead of being dense

and hard to decipher, Kitty Burns Florey chose to present the information with style and—wait for it—a sense of humor. When I first ran across a footnote, I thought, Awesome. I can't believe I'm reading a book with footnotes. Then I read the note and it made me chuckle. The footnotes in this book are sometimes true footnotes. Sometimes, though, they're just funny, off-hand narrowly related quotes or quips the author just had to share with her readers, which turned out to be something I enjoyed immensely, since that's the way I'd like to use footnotes, too.

This book isn't long and it's definitely a quick read. You'll learn about the creators of the practice of sentence diagramming (and a few precursors) and learn the various reasons it has been used to teach grammar and why it may have fallen out of favor with many. All along the way through this quirky adventure into the world of word nerdom, Florey makes some interesting points, among them:
• sentence diagramming doesn't teach good writing; that's a God-given talent;
• you can even diagram bad sentences;
• diagramming teaches the science of words rather than the art (that's my term. What I mean is that diagramming teaches you the parts of speech and units that make up sentences and paragraphs, but it can't teach you the art of putting them together in ways that stir the heart and activate the brain.)

Florey's discussion of poetry and grammar (and the diagrams of florid sentences penned by the likes of William Faulkner and Jack Kerouac) is interesting, even if you get a bit lost and confused in the large section of the chapter that discusses Gertrude Stein. Who even though Florey says again and again is brilliant was SO confusing to me in those quotes that I doubt I'll be reading any of her work anytime soon. Add in a little ranting about the precise meanings of words and how our culture so often misuses them and the revelation of a philosophy of editing that so closely resembles my own that I wish I had written it myself, and you've got a winner!

This isn't a how-to diagram sentences book or overly scholarly. This is a quick, fun, informative read for people who are in love with words and grammar and remember with the nostalgia when that realization came. Which may or may not have been when we were diagramming sentences in grade school.
