
Dot your commas

David Crystal

Semicolon: How a Misunderstood Punctuation Mark Can Improve Your Writing, Enrich Your Reading and Maybe Even Change Your Life

by Cecilia Watson

4th Estate, 310, pp. 212

Now, how shall I start this review?

I loved this book. I really did. (Too abrupt.)

I loved this book, I really did. (Too rushed.)

I loved this book: I really did. (Too planned.)

I loved this book — I really did. (Too afterthoughty.)

I loved this book... I really did. (Too uncertain.)

I loved this book; I really did.

Ah, that's more like it. The semicolon gives me the best of both worlds. It helps me pause, and have a think, and yet pushes me forward to what I want to say next. It separates and unites simultaneously. It does a job that no other punctuation mark does. And the way to see this is to develop a sense of the contrast. What happens if we punctuate a sentence differently?

This isn't something that can be summed up in a simple rule, and those who have tried over the past 200 years to find rules governing punctuation have failed miserably, as Cecilia Watson shows in the opening chapters of her insightful book. Punctuation tries to capture two incompatible drives: the desire to mark grammatical structure, and the desire to express the dynamic of the speaking voice. The tension between them means that no two people share exactly the same set of preferences. That's easy to demonstrate. Give a group an unpunctuated page and ask them to mark it up, and you'd be lucky to find two who would do it in exactly the same way.

Watson approaches her subject historically. She begins by recalling writers who have gone on record as hating the semicolon, such as Kurt Vonnegut, and traces its history of transformation 'from a mark designed to

create clarity to a mark destined to create confusion'. We see its origins in 1494, when Aldus Manutius first presented it, and then the way it came to be treated in the convoluted 'grammar wars' of later centuries, as writers struggled without success to reduce its complexities to simple rules. Two fascinating chapters show the way semicolons have played a central role in court cases — including the horrifying story of Salvatore Merra, in which the much-debated legal interpretation of a sentence containing a semicolon ultimately led to his execution.

The power of the book lies in its leisurely literary illustrations of the way writers have used semicolons to great effect, including Irvine Welsh, Raymond Chandler, Herman Melville, and brilliantly in Martin Luther King's 'Letter from Birmingham Jail' — a moving sequence of semicolon-separated plaints that build to one of the most powerful climaxes I have ever read. I'd defy anyone to repunctuate this and retain the rhetorical effect. The extracts from Welsh and Chandler are especially well chosen, for they give the lie to those, like Vonnegut, who thought that the only purpose of semicolons is to show that the writer has 'been to college'. Her example from *Trainspotting* is as far away from college as you can get, and Mark Renton's description is all the more powerful for the use of a semicolon. ('The sweat wis lashing oafay Sick Boy; he wis trembling.')

A great deal that Watson says is basic linguistics, and especially stylistics — domains that, curiously, she doesn't mention. And yet she would find huge support for her approach there, especially in the way a semantic and pragmatic perspective helps to remove the restricting effect of a naive grammaticism. It's the approach I've used myself in *Making a Point*: you see the system in language by observing the options that the language makes available. Punctuation is a system, though not subject to the same kind of rules that we see in some other areas of language. Watson's examples of contrasting marks illustrate this very clearly.

This is no pedestrian account of how semicolons work, with boring sentences taken out of context and their marks defined in an abstract way. The author wants us to appreciate the 'beauty in language that rules can't comprehend'. She wants us to see that trying to put a 'protective fence' around punctuation is a limiting response that doesn't allow us to see the true power of language in communication. Recognising this is liberating. We begin to realise that instead of punctuation controlling us, we can control it.

Watson thinks of herself more as a punctuation therapist than a punctuation theorist, and her clarity and good humour pervade the book, along with some cheeky illustrations by Anthony Russo. Some people will hate her for even trying to make us appreciate semicolons, but not me. As I say, I loved this book; I really did.