

The all-girls' school I attended in the Eastern Cape was run on the lines of an English boarding school. The headmistresses were all Oxford or Cambridge bluestockings who came out to the colonies to instil some sense of culture and civilisation in the daughters of the colonials. Although not actually British, our headmistress was in this tradition.

I lived in absolute terror of her, and it was only later in life that I came to appreciate how much she had taught me. She was a stickler for correct behaviour, which gave us confidence in any situation. She also insisted that we use clear, grammatical English, and would pounce on anything she perceived to be sloppy syntax or mispronunciation. Her biggest bugbear was the phrase 'going to bioscope', which was the expression



## BETWEEN THE LINES

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used in the platteland dorp where we lived. She abhorred the word 'bioscope', and loathed even more the dropping of the article in front of it. If we used the word at all, it should be preceded by 'the', but she would far prefer us to say 'the cinema' or 'the pictures'. To this day, I shudder at the word, and it jars when someone says 'I'm going to gym'. The word 'medicine' had only two syllables, she drummed into us - you didn't pronounce the first 'i'. I was once reprimanded for pronouncing the word 'ate' as 'eight' and not 'et'. I have never forgotten. Looking back, I realise now that she instilled in me an awareness of the use of language, and a love of the English language in particular.

In our final year, she taught our class what was called, in those days, Scripture. She taught it as history, and used the syllabus as a jumping off point for a great many other, and much more valuable, lessons. She related the Biblical events to what was happening around the world at the time, and we would have to troop off to the library to look up the various trouble spots in atlases. She also introduced us to the **Oxford book of quotations**, the **Oxford companion to literature**, and of course various dictionaries, in which she made us look up the origins of a great many words and phrases. And she made us aware of the matchless English (her description) of the King James Bible - so much so, that the official New translation now sounds flat and insipid to my ears, compared to the majestic rhythms and cadences of the King James version.

I have referred in a previous column to Anne Fadiman's collection of essays, **Ex Libris**. In one of these is an account of how, one evening, she and her parents and brother were sitting in a restaurant, studying the menu. Each one remarked, in turn, on some spelling or grammatical error in the menu. Then they looked at each other and burst out laughing. They came to the conclusion that they were a family of proofreaders. She goes on to relate, rather sheepishly, how she had once written to Nabokov's publishers, pointing out the errors in a particular edition of one of his works, offering to correct them.

This story struck a chord with me. I realise that I have become a nit-picking fuddy duddy when it comes to the written word. Like the Fadimans, I find restaurant menus a constant source of irritation and amusement, particularly in up-market establishments, where, I feel, if they are going to serve such pretentious food, they should at least get the spelling right. My favourite was the description of a dish containing 'pie lentils'. My annoyance in this instance was exacerbated by the fact that the restaurant had obviously found a source of these lovely little green lentils originating in the Puy region of France, which I search for in vain on supermarket

shelves. Surely, one would think, one look at the label would have told them the correct spelling. A recent trip to a Franschoek restaurant was the occasion of much mirth at our table when we discovered one of the main courses on offer was 'Roasted oven with a porcini sauce'. We sent the very embarrassed waitress to inquire of the chef whether the oven would be served medium or rare. It turned out to be oven-roasted quail.

Years ago, I lived round the corner from a Portuguese greengrocer. I loved buying vegetables from him, because they always seemed fresher than anywhere else. And I was entertained and charmed by the way he advertised them. He had a list of his wares chalked up on a board on the pavement, and the spelling was clearly phonetic.

So you could buy 'lettis', 'brockli' and 'collyflower'. My favourites, though, were clearly spelt exactly as he pronounced them: 'licks' and 'merrows'. In a non-English speaker, I found this endearing and amusing - his trade, after all, was in vegetables, not in words.

Journalists, however, are an altogether different kettle of fish. For people whose job is skilful use of words and language, they show a remarkable indifference, or worse, ignorance, of spelling and grammar. As I have said, I'm a nitpicker, unable to avoid being jarred by every spelling mistake or grammatical error in whatever it is I am reading. This makes me a very good proofreader, but it can be rather tedious when I am reading for pleasure. It is particularly irritating when I am reading the morning paper, which seems to produce more and more of the most blatant errors by the day. I feel I have to go through it with a mental red pencil, correcting them all, before I am comfortable reading it.

I am inclined, for instance, to get very twitchy about split infinitives. I know they are now considered acceptable - even Fowler seems to concede that there are certain occasions on which they may be used to make the meaning clearer. Apostrophes, however, are another matter. Many people nowadays seem to think that whenever a word ends in 's', an apostrophe is required somewhere. It should only be used to indicate possession (the girl's hat, the boys' school), or to show where a letter has been left out (isn't). And people get confused about whether it should be before or after the 's'. In primary school we learned a very simple rule, which has stood me in good stead: if the possessor is singular, the apostrophe comes after the singular, if it is plural, put it after the plural. It works for me.

Another phrase which is a constant bugbear to me is one which is so widespread that I am beginning to doubt my own judgement. 'He could not help but do it' sounds like a tautology to me. It should be either 'he could not help doing it', or 'he could not but do it'. The phrase, as it seems to be commonly used, makes a double negative, which is something to be avoided when speaking English. I can find no guidance in Fowler, who seems to skirt round the issue, and the usage is now almost universal - I come across it daily - so I am beginning to conclude that I am in a minority of one in being irritated by it. Irritated, however, is what I am, and I could never bring myself to say it.

All this would seem to indicate that it is better to remain in ignorance of what is correct. Then I would be spared the never-ending irritation caused by reading poorly written matter. My blood pressure would remain at a constant level, and I could drift through life serenely unaware of what Professor Higgins called 'the cold-blooded murder of the English tongue'. But then, of course, I would be denied the pleasure of the finely-turned phrase, the elegant piece of prose, savouring them and rolling them around my tongue like a mouthful of vintage wine. On the whole, I think, I will put up with the irritation which comes with awareness, in order to be able to enjoy the satisfaction which comes from the perusal of a masterly piece of writing.