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AMERICAN CULTURE IN THE NETHERLANDS

Introduction of Mary Norris by Maarten Westerveen
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Just to be clear, I did not enjoy writing this. Every line that is to follow has been wrought with the clammy sweat of a man crippled by self-awareness. Anybody who ever met a psychiatrist at a party will understand. There you are enjoying yourself, having a few drinks, telling bad jokes and all of a sudden you find out you are in the presence of an implacable observer. You cannot help but see yourself through their clinical eyes. And you don't like what you see.



And so it was with Mary Norris' *Confessions of a Comma Queen*. A book that works both as a memoir of her time at *The New Yorker Magazine* and an exploration of the beauty of grammar.

With her loving and deeply conscientious approach to punctuation, she exposed the embarrassingly sloppy nature within myself. After just a few pages I was ready to confess: no, I don't read manuals, yes I do leave toilet seats up and yes, my use of punctuation is lazy and slapdash at the best of times. Typing my comma's and semicolons with one hand, the other covering my eyes, muttering a prayer for good luck, hoping to get it right this time.

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Norris' *Confessions* has shown me the error of my ways. Her book gives a keen insight in what might be gained if you would take a much closer look. To peer under the hood, marvel at the valves and pistons and

see the forces at work that propel words and punctuation marks towards meaning. There are riches to be found that I, and perhaps a few amongst you, had not known about.

But had her book just been about analysing the use of hyphens and the benefits of the Apostrophe Protection Society, *Confessions* might have descended into what the Dutch so lovingly call comma-fucking: attention details to the detriment of the bigger picture.

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Confessions offers us, via hyphens and comma's, a much grander view. To read her book is to be drawn deep into the offices of The New Yorker, where words and their meaning are truly appreciated, carefully weighed and appraised and placed. Norris' description of The New Yorker and her place in it reminded me of monastic life in the middle ages; a sanctuary of peaceful dedication in a world of ever-increasing chaos.

If that seems far-fetched, I encourage you to read *Confessions* and be struck by the humility, love and care with which Norris and her colleagues devote themselves to each line, each word, each point. And in return they ask so little. A kind word from Philip Roth or Pauline Kael can sustain them for decades.

Initially I wondered whether such fastidiousness was warranted, but came away fully converted to her truth. It is precisely Norris' care that elevates both the writer and the reader. If her good work goes unnoticed most of the time, if we fail to see her hand in other people's work, it is fitting that we here, celebrating a sustained dedication to literature, allow her the spotlight today.