



ON CRAFT: SUSAN STEINBERG ON PUNCTUATION

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1

For a long time, I didn't understand punctuation. I mean I understood end marks. And I knew a few things about commas. Like how they could separate words in a list. Or two independent clauses with a conjunction. But that was about it.

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I'm sure they taught us punctuation in junior high. Or in high school. But back then, I was busy with other things. I cut classes and hung out with my friends. I smoked a lot of cigarettes. There were parking lots I stood in. Cars I rode around in. I couldn't take on things that didn't matter. Like anything, really, they taught us in school.

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I'll tell you about my situation. At home, there were no rules. There was no such thing as discipline. I didn't have a curfew. I was simultaneously spoiled and ignored. I was simultaneously rich and poor. I was good and bad. I was smart and indifferent. And I was sometimes nice. And I was most of the time an asshole.

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The truth is, I did go to class. I went to art class. It was the only class I was good at. We were taught art by two different guys. They were the ones who told me about art school. And after a few years of doing nothing, I applied. I submitted a portfolio that included this: a still life of cassette tapes; a drawing, in ballpoint pen, of my boyfriend's boot.

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In art school, we read a lot of books. But our papers could be handwritten. The teachers weren't looking at our punctuation. They were only interested in our ideas. They wanted to make sure we could talk about things. They wanted us to be useful, in ways, to the world. I was a painting major. Which meant there was a chance I would be useless. And I honestly didn't care.

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In my junior year, a plane crashed into Lockerbie. And two girls from school were on the plane. There's a lot more to say about this. I mean everything just fell apart. But I'll just say I was suddenly desperate for rules.

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Besides. This is about punctuation. About what it is to punctuate. And how I learned to punctuate. And why I have to.

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My paintings were then of planes exploding in the sky. They were of planes crashing into houses. I couldn't help it. Sometimes in crit, the teachers didn't know what to say. Or what they said wasn't what I wanted to hear. But after a while, after looking at dozens of these paintings, they came around.

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One of my teachers referred to the shapes in my paintings as my "cast of characters." Another referred to them as my "alphabet." And in looking at them in these ways, I realized I had made up a language. And that my teachers were trying to read it.

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I could then see the punctuation in this language. I mean I could see how I was punctuating. How I was controlling time and story with marks. How a vertical line between objects did one thing. And a horizontal line did another.

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So really this is about control. About an attempt to control devastation.

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I started writing because painting was not enough. Writing was more direct. And it was faster. And cheaper. It was something I could do in bed. But my writing, for a long time, was without any punctuation. It was just words slamming into other words. Which was something, considering.

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I learned punctuation on my own. I read about it in a handbook. The rules were mostly satisfying. I liked that these marks all had their jobs. That there were things they were supposed to do. That one could push these things a bit harder.

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Punctuation for me is part intention, part intuition. It's part compassion, part aggression. It's part come-closer, part go-away.

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I have overused the semicolon. Because it links clauses that desperately want to be together. And in my stories, I often want to convey a certain type of intimacy. By which I mean a certain type of tension. A division.

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In a workshop, I handed in a story that was mostly a series of parentheticals. A few of the students didn't like it. But my professor said, "Parentheses are a really big bag." And really. The narrator was a teenager going through hell. I needed a way to contain this.

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Despite my situation at home, I guess I was pretty sheltered. And art school was idyllic, at first. Just years of playing around with paint. Years of not having to deal with the world. Thinking I was some amazing thing that would go on forever.

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Then what happens. Just something happens. Mine was plane crash. Yours was something. That thing you don't want. Or don't expect. That thing that becomes your thing. Then your art. That thing you try to control from that point on.

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And then what happens. It's hard to say. Perhaps something good. Perhaps even something amazing.

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As a child, I liked to watch people write. I would copy how they held their pens. I would scribble a string of loops. But I was mostly intrigued by that mark they all did at the end of a line. That emphatic jab at the page. That exquisite control I didn't understand. And I didn't yet need. But I secretly already wanted.

—Susan Steinberg

Susan Steinberg is the author of *Spectacle* and two previous story collections. Her work has appeared in *McSweeney's*, *Conjunctions*, *American Short Fiction*, and elsewhere. She has held residencies at the MacDowell Colony and Yaddo, and teaches at the University of San Francisco.