

The Mountain Man's Field Guide to Grammar: A Fearless Adventure in Grammar, Style, and Usage

Gary Spina. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc. 2006.

The *Field Guide* is two books in one. As the title indicates, it is a guide, or handbook to English grammar and usage. And it is also a novel about a mountain man, Big Jake McLaughlin, who lives in the Rockies, not a schoolroom, in early 1800s. The narrative of the novel is broken up with sections on parts of speech, sentence structure, comma usage, and other topics one would expect to find in an English writer's handbook. Sometimes, the examples in the handbook refer to people or incidents in the novel. However, the characters in the novel never find themselves referring to topics in the handbook, such as comma usage, since they are fur trappers, not writers.

The novel is adequate with one-dimensional characters and minimal plotting. The handbook covers what is expected in a handbook, with a few personal twists. The list of confused words matches "anal" and "annals," and commas are recommended "to clarify meaning" (p 342); an admirable intention, but, potentially, confusing.

What is significant about this book is that its construction addresses two issues associated with texts about grammar and usage. One is that a handbook is not usually read by struggling or inexperienced writers. Basic writers often don't know how to use handbooks; they lack the metacognition to identify what is wrong or awkward, and when they try to read them, they may find the directions confusing or not helpful. Schuster (2003) goes so far to claim that grammar texts "do not offer meaningful help to students" (19). By embedding the principles of grammar and usage in a novel, Spina tries to introduce and acquaint the reader with guidelines and advice. If they read the novel, writers must admit that they

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have, at least, turned the pages which explain subject-verb agreement.

But more important than exposure is attention. Spina respects his audience. Even if the grammar guidelines are a bit trite and the novel conventional, Spina has trapped a select group of readers, and possible writers, with his *Field Guide*. He probably wrote the book for teenage boys in rural or suburban schools. The book is not intended for a general audience, but for a specific group. We are a large, diverse institution, but we also teach small groups, or even individuals. Is it possible to attract some of the writing students at Community, the young, urban, African American males, with a grammar book written for them? Maybe it would include a novel aimed at African American males, and would present grammar and usage guidelines written for a specific group of readers.

Schuster, Edgar H. *Breaking the Rules: Liberating Writers Through Innovative Grammar Instruction*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. 2003.

