

*Sister Bernadette's Barking Dog: The Quirky
History and Lost Art of Diagramming Sentences*

by Kitty Burns Florey. Hoboken, NJ: Melville
House Publishing, 2006.

Book Review

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This is a delightful book. Florey enjoyed diagramming as a middle school student in a Catholic school where she had an epiphany as she realized that the diagrammed sentence was “a bit like art, a bit like mathematics. It was much more than words uttered, or words written on a piece of paper: it was a picture of language.” Florey fills in this sketch with a bit of history, audacious artistry, whimsical reflection, and critical reflection.

Sentence diagramming traces its roots to S. W. Clark, a high school teacher who drew balloons around words and then awkwardly arranged them according to their function in a sentence. In the late 1890s, two other high school teachers, Brainerd “Brainy” Kellogg and Alonzo Reed, dropped the balloons and used the linear scaffold to systematize the graphic representation of the elements of sentences.

Florey does not purposefully teach diagramming, but she sketches the dizzying diagramming patterns for elaborate sentences. If the reader knows how to parse a sentence, or how to identify the part of speech of each word in a sentence, then Florey’s samples of convoluted sentences offer artistic and daring models for diagramming simpler utterances.

Gertrude Stein was a devotee of diagramming, and Florey’s discussion of Stein’s prose and attitudes about commas are a refreshing relief for teachers who read too much flat prose by basic writers and who struggle to teach “The Comma.”

As a copy editor, Florey asks if sentence diagramming would help writers by showing how to improve a sentence. Would unnecessary modifiers be revealed in a diagram like too many charms on a bracelet? Would diagramming correct a sentence such as “Me and my friends got the real jonz” by at least repelling “me” as a purported subject, unworthy to occupy the place on the horizontal line preceding the elemental vertical, and also ignoring the proto-pronoun “jonz”? Probably not. Diagramming relies on knowledge of grammar; if one can parse a sentence, one can diagram it with a little guidance. Diagramming a sentence does not make its message more meaningful or its utterance more pleasing, but it does offer another way to appreciate its structure. Florey is an excellent writer, but she is not an evangelist. She does not attribute good writing to sentence diagramming, but following one of her own dicta for writers, Florey “communicates elegantly” about a topic of historic interest and current controversy.