

# Who's to Say What is Right and What is Wrong with English?

by  
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Rev. of Guide to Home Language Repair, by Dennis Baron. Urbana IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1994. 165 pages. Paper. \$16.95; \$12.95, members.

In a time when we are barraged with information about continuing cuts in education, decreasing skills of students, and increasing demands of teaching, Dennis Baron comes to the rescue as Dr. Grammar with a prescription guaranteed temporarily to cure all ills, or at least make us forget about them for a while. For the syntactically challenged, the grammatically disinclined, and the offensively idiomatic, the Guide to Home Language Repair is the English teacher's answer to "Tool Time." Illustrated with cartoons by the author, this guide is "dedicated to the serious language do-it-yourselfer" (1) and addresses timely topics such as the existence of the language police, the need for a politically correct term for the president's spouse, or the status of "Make my day" as cliché.

With ten readable chapters, each divided into sections, this book is a compilation of Baron's commentaries on the English language that have appeared in print or have been broadcast on the University of Illinois's WILL-AM and other radio stations from New York to Texas to Vancouver. The Guide is not, however, intended as a substitute for a usage guide. Baron states that since one of his "fundamental assumptions is that your language probably doesn't need repair in the first place, this book doesn't tell you how to fix your language so much as it suggests ways of coming to terms with language that may trouble you, or give you pause, but that doesn't necessarily need repair (1). As in other areas of our lives, he suggests that "Correctness in language is a tricky thing: lots of mistakes are made by people trying to fix something that isn't broken to begin with" (6).

His chapter titled "Questions and Answers" is an entertaining collection

of humorous and—if we dare to admit it—informative responses to the debates over appropriate use of who / whom, that / which, can / may, less / fewer, and what Baron calls “commatose,” the overuse of commas. Another chapter, “The Language Police,” includes a test over lazy speech that offers the following question: “If Garrison Keillor said ‘Yup, you betcha’ on the streets of Lake Wobegon, would you have him arrested? If you answered ‘Yup, you betcha,’ to that, you can spend the rest of the afternoon in the principal’s office. Or you may” (51). And in “Politically Correct Language,” Baron suggests “First Person” as a neutral title for the President’s spouse. If a future President is unmarried? Then “she (or he) will be the First Person, Singular” (111). Of course!

In addition to the light-hearted approach to the English language and all of its English teachers / munitions experts, this book would not only be useful as a diversion from our daily teaching duties, but also as a source of thought-provoking discussions about the state of our profession as Baron perceives it. How can we be so adamant about student plagiarism when “one Western university admitted lifting the plagiarism section of their freshman writing handbook entirely from materials written at another university in a neighboring state”? (83). Or are we sincere in devoting our energies to creating culturally diverse classrooms when “even as we celebrate cultural diversity in American society and American literature, we fear and reject diversity in the American language, where correctness and standardization . . . remain the academic goals”? (62). Baron’s commentaries could also generate classroom activities and discussion that could provide students with some of the social and linguistic history of our language as well with an inkling that language study can be fun, especially with the Guide to Home Language Repair as a reference text.

Baron reminds his readers, “by the way, although it’s a guide to *home* language repair, this book is suitable for apartment dwellers as well” (2). And yes, there will be a test.