

BETWEEN YOU AND ME:

Confessions of a Comma Queen

By Mary Norris

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How does a girl from Cleveland with dairyman aspirations end up at *The New Yorker* for over four decades? Copy editor Mary Norris's *Between You and Me: Confessions of a Comma Queen* is a mash-up of memoir, corporate history, industry lore, and punctuation guide. Her first catch as a query proofreader, in 1978, was "flower" —instead of "flour"—in a grocery list. In those days, William Shawn was at the helm, film critic Pauline Kael turned in near-flawless work, and an office boy made morning rounds with "a tray of freshly sharpened wooden pencils" (172). Norris shares writers' minutiae, such as stationery entrepreneur Hyman Lipman's 1858 patent for the pencil ferrule, the crimped metal cap holding its eraser, and credits lexicographer and language reformer Noah Webster (1758–1843) for Americanizing English, for example, having converted *c* to *s* in "defence," transposed the *re* in "theatre," and removed *u* from "flavour." The Comma Queen deconstructs works by nineteenth-century novelists who punctuated haltingly (Herman Melville) and by ear (Charles Dickens). She explains in-house practices, including its signature diaeresis over a second vowel, as in *coöperate*, to show the start of a separate syllable. She defends the magazine's use of bleep-less profanity, although found editing rapper Earl Sweatshirt's lyrics "disorient[ing]" (161). Language evolves. And rules can bend to serve "clarity of meaning" (120). Thus, clarity, not the comma, reigns supreme. —Lisa Thaler, author, *Look Up: The Life and Art of Sacha Kolin*, 26 December 2020