





To a varietal of writer, often American, the technique is pure offense. "The most pusillanimous, sissified, utterly useless mark of punctuation ever invented," the grammarian James J. Kilpatrick declared. "All they do is show you've been to college" (Kurt Vonnegut). "Ugly as a tick on a dog's belly" (Donald Barthelme).

*Sissified.* If only the source of the anxiety weren't so mysterious.

Semicolons are not your workaday periods and commas. They belong to the family of trills and volutes; they exist for the sake of complexity, beauty, subtle connections. Cardinal virtues, I'd say, but Watson traces the warring (and gendered) camps of prose style — a fixation on clarity and directness versus a curled sensibility, one interested in the fertile territories of ambiguity.

Watson covers impressive ground in this short book, skittering back and forth like a sandpiper at the shores of language's Great Debates. There are fascinating forays into how grammarians "created a market for their rules," the strange history of diagramming sentences and the racial politics of so-called standard English. Watson is sharpest when acting a bit like a semicolon herself, perceiving subtle connections and burrowing into an argument. Whatever her subject, her targets are always pedants, those acolytes of "actually," all those who profess to love language but seek only to control it.

Self-appointed grammar "sticklers" and "snobs" "want so much to get back to that point in the past where the majority of people respected language and understood its nuances," she writes. "That