

Book Review: Finding the Fun in the Fundamentals

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The Story of Be: A Verb's-Eye View of the English Language. David Crystal. Oxford University Press. 2017. 208 pp. \$19.95 hardcover.

Making Sense: The Glamorous Story of English Grammar. David Crystal. Oxford University Press. 2017. 304 pp. \$24.95 hardcover.

In his new book, linguist David Crystal describes that dispiriting classroom moment when a well-meaning teacher's lesson on, say, phrases is met with bored silence. The problem here, says Crystal? A lack of grammar glamour. And if there's anyone who can see the glamour in grammar, it's Crystal.

Crystal is the rock star of English linguistics studies, a writer and editor of more than 100 books targeted to both academics and civilians, with a media footprint that ranges from the BBC to the Shakespearean stage. Lucky for us, he writes with wit and charm, and is at home contextualizing language in the time of the Greeks as well as in the era of texting. (Up next, he says: Twitter.) His pedigree is extensive; currently, he's honorary professor of linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor.

Last year Crystal added two books to his bookcase: "The Story of Be: A Verb's-Eye View of the English Language" and "Making Sense: The Glamorous Story of English Grammar." "The Story of Be" is perfect for word nerds who like to dip into and out of tales of such topics as the use of the U.K.'s slangy "innit." "Making Sense" is a great resource for word nerds who teach writing and editing to non-word nerds.

He structures "Making Sense" by evaluating how his daughter Suzie learned to speak. He's not merely bragging about his precocious child; rather, he uses Suzie's learning process as a way to show how sentences are put together. Here's an example of how he ties the two strands together: "By age three, she was using sentences displaying remarkable syntactic progress, such as 'I put the ice cream on the table very carefully, Mummy.'" Crystal goes on to break down the five parts of Suzie's sentence, and then slides into an explanation of the elements and roles of language parts.

For me, Suzie's linguistic charms rubbed off after a couple of chapters. Happily, Crystal makes his points and moves on. His chapters on clarity are engaging and teachable—like a chattier version of "The Elements of Style."

His discussions of changes in language patterns, especially regionalisms, are great fun. Crystal employs "gotten" as an example of how one group's use of English can confound the other. Americans, he writes, will say, "We've gotten off at the wrong stop" but not "She's gotten red hair," which mystifies Brits. He writes: "British youngsters trying to copy American speech often get it wrong. Maybe they should read some Chaucer first, for they

would find gotten there, following the same rules, as seen in these lines from ‘L’amant’ in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*.”

He quotes several lines from Chaucer to make his point. He employs that strategy extensively in his other new book, “The Story of Be.” In this book, he looks far and wide for how “be” has been used over time—poetry to song lyrics to the nominative case.

My favorite chapters illuminate such topics as British slang (“I’m going, innit?”) and Americans’ verbal crutches (“I’m, like, wow.” and “This guy’s going, ‘Hey dude, what’s happenin’?”). He dubs the word “innit” as the declarative form of the word “be,” and “like” and “going” as the quotative form of the word “be.”

Crystal’s labeling makes sense. “I’m going, innit?” translates as “I’m going, aren’t I?” And what our bro-ish friend really means is: “This guy says, ‘Hey dude, what’s happenin’?” Crystal situates the uses of “innit” and “like” as part of social class and popular culture, and describes how the words have been criticized and, eventually, accepted.

On the saucier side of “be,” he traces use of the euphemism “I’ve been with someone” back to the early 1800s, but says it was well-suited to the Victorians “because its ambiguity conveyed a sense of mystery. It allowed people to allude to the unmentionable.” That explains why 200 years later, we use the phrase with a bad English accent and raised eyebrows—sort of a modified side-eye.

In “The Story of Be,” Crystal lavishes his attention on a hard-working, versatile little word that can morph into more uses than any other in the English language. Sounds a bit like Crystal himself.