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Literacy's wane punctuates a period of gloom

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Apostrophe lurched out of the gutter, staggered and almost toppled over—I couldn't tell if he was drunk or simply top-heavy, betrayed by a combination of giant head, curly little tail and gravity.

“Buy me a drink!” he demanded, with an exclamation point.

Ah, there was my answer: Plastered as the Sistine Chapel. Apostrophe had gone over the top, as usual.

“Don't you mean, 'Buy me a drink?' with a question mark?” I replied.

“No,” Apostrophe said, “It's an imperative. Buy me one for National Punctuation Day.”

I slapped my forehead, winced.

His shoulders slumped. “You forgot.”

“Its not like its Christmas,” I whined by way of apology.

“It's!” he snapped. “Not its, it's!”

I cringed. Mine was the sort of thoughtlessness that led to poor Apostrophe's downfall in the first place.

You might recall meeting him a few years ago. He was once a proud pillar of the language community, a little possessive perhaps, but beloved by poets who used words like e'er, o'er and 'tis. (“More contractions than a maternity ward,” he sniffled.)

Then writers got sloppy, began dropping the apostrophe for no reason, or 'using' it for single quotation marks 'inappropriately.' Even signmakers couldn't get him right: “It's Men's, not Mens,” he shouted at the washroom door. It was the absence of an apostrophe at Tim Hortons that finally sent him over the edge, drinking double-doubles.

It's not just the apostrophe, of course. Commas, colons, long dashes — few seem to understand the common symbols often referred to as the traffic signs of the English language. Text messaging on handheld devices has worsened the confusion; the BlackBerry treats punctuation marks as second-class citizens, consigning them to the keypad's cheap seats: out-of-the-way places accessible only by four-wheel drive and an awkward combination of buttons. The result is no punctuation at all: “cant make it c u l8r”

This is, one must acknowledge, the second sign of the end of civilization as we know it (the first was the sale of lime-flavoured beer). Start breaking the language laws and next thing you know it's full-scale anarchy, panic-stricken English teachers barricaded inside empty schools while illiterate Road Warrior savages rat-race down bombed-out streets with screaming librarians lashed to their fenders.

Which brings us to National Punctuation Day on Sept. 24. It's a newish holiday, founded in 2004 by American Jeff Rubin, who seems determined to root out the rot. “There's an epidemic of poor punctuation in the United States, much like the swine flu,” Rubin says in a press release. “It's too bad there's no vaccine to prevent it.”

Casual shortcuts bred by e-mailing and text messaging have no place in school papers or professional business writing, Rubin writes. “In the business world, words have power and help decision-makers form impressions immediately. Careless punctuation mistakes cost time, money, and productivity.” His website — nationalpunctuationday.com — points to a 2006 *Globe and Mail* story about a misplaced contract comma that exposed Rogers Communications to a \$2.13-million utility-pole bill.

Rubin is described as a former newspaperman. I'm not sure those are the best credentials for a language campaigner; it's like saying your appendix is to be removed by a former first aid attendant. Journalists tend to use English the same way a monkey drives a Ferrari. Personally, if I had understood the difference between “You never call me anymore” and “You, never call me anymore,” I might have avoided a nasty restraining order.

But I get Rubin's point, and so do others. Britain's Lynn Truss surprised herself and the world when her book *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* became an international bestseller in 2004. (She dedicated it to “the memory of the striking Bolshevik printers of St. Petersburg who, in 1905, demanded to be paid the same rate for punctuation marks as for letters, and thereby directly precipitated the first Russian Revolution.”)

Some editions even come with a Punctuation Repair Kit at the front, peel-off stickers printed with commas, periods and semi-colons that can be applied to public signs by guerrilla grammarians.

They can start with the sign on the Mens room.