

On the subject of...

Devilish Details

by Viki Eggers Mason



THE TRUTH IN BLACK AND WHITE

The Aberdeen Advocate

I'm plagued by picky people! There ought to be some kind of public service award for a woman who must live and deal daily with an accountant-type who insists on nauseating perfection when it comes to check-book balances! Particularly worthy of such an award would be a right-brained female who also suffers from numeric dyslexia. In my mind, you see, all numbers are interchangeable.

I don't understand why some folks are so picky about having numbers in silly sequence! Furthermore, those little periods that come two digits to the left in numbers with dollar signs are completely unimportant to me! I cannot help it that they seem to matter a good deal to my husband AND to my boss.

When I fail to put that decimal thingie into our accounts receivable list, it sends my employer into fits of euphoria, which are matched only by the subsequent fits of melancholia, which descend upon him the next day – right after I discover the extra decimal thingie lying

around on my desk and put it back where it belongs.

Now, if it weren't already bad enough, I have the comma coach, Don Rowe, with whom to contend. He is forever misappropriating my commas and doing other sinister things with my most creative sentences, all in the spirit of competence. Phooey! Some of you have asked me if Rowe is ever going to get over the spelling spell he's been using as a means of entertaining us. I must report, dear reader friends, Rowe's bend toward journalistic perfectionism is probably here to stay. (Although I did find one of his sentences in last week's paper that ended in a preposition! Gasp! This is behavior up with which I shall never put!)

Despite the aggravation (the barber side of my handsome husband's persona is continually running his fingers through my hair; at first I thought it was a romantic gesture, then I learned that he

was merely measuring the length of the right-hand curls with those growing on the left side of my head) the perfectionists in my life cause me, I have a nasty little compulsion of my own. I'm a phrase phenatic. (Note to Rowe: I know full well that phenatic isn't a word in *your* dictionary. Keep your rampant red pen away from my literary license!)

I like precision (same admonition, Rowe) in language. I think it's very important to say exactly what you mean. In my world, it is just as important to mean what you say. Perhaps this urgent need may be blamed on the fact that words are like currency to me. Each of them has value and is to be used appropriately. At the end of the day, I like my books to balance. I like to know I've kept my promises, honored my obligations and been a woman of her word.

Not everybody shares my "word ethic." Here are some examples of the sort of things
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Sports sections leave a lot to be desired

By Contributing Editor Don Rowe

In the last two editions of our beloved *Advocate*, I have taken a critical look at the advertising and the news sections of the *Aberdeen Examiner*. This week, it's the sports section's turn.

After I left the *Examiner* a second time in May of 2005, Robby (or is it Robbie) Byrd came back on board in October of the same year for his second stint as the sports editor at both the *Aberdeen Examiner* and *The Amory*

Advertiser. In his first column headline, he claimed he would be, "A little bit smarter on second go **around** (go-round)." He then went on to say that, "things will be a little different **this time around** here in Monroe County for me, which will hopefully mean things will be a lot better for the readers **this time around** in Monroe County." He then filled the rest of his column with stuff like: "I've come to realize that people **every where**

(everywhere) are just as serious about sports; ...about each and **everyone** (every one) of your events;" and "I want to **here** (hear) about every game or match played." (The following month he wrote: "I got to **here** (hear) bits and pieces of the Ole Miss/Alabama game.") And things went downhill from there, as you can see from just a small sampling of his more memorable goof-ups: "main goal is to **preform** (perform); it's **they're** (their) last year;"
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which make me crazy.

The city, when it needs a new employee, uses this language in their newspaper want ads: ***“City policy requires that employees must live within the city limits or move within six months.”*** I think the phrase is intended to tell prospective employees they must actually reside in Aberdeen. Instead, what it really says is, “All city employees must accomplish some form of physical motion at least once in the first six months of their employment.” (Psst, don’t tell anybody about this. I’m waiting to see what happens if/when the city fathers actually try to enforce this inane policy. I’m no lawyer, but I’ll wager it can’t be done.) Kidding aside, we all already know that not one of our five aldermen or even our Mayor cares much about residency requirements. Since they have each failed for many years to insist that Willie A. Cook (alderman for Ward 3 who actually RESIDES in Ward 5), step down as required by Mississippi law, they cannot possibly hope to enforce residency rules for anybody else.

We have an ordinance (a rule reduced to writing which comes complete with consequences for noncompliance) requiring owners of pit bulldogs (after the animals are specially and expensively registered with City Hall) to deck their dogs out in bright orange collars and firmly-fitting muzzles. Whenever the dog leaves the confines of its pen or the owner’s home, it must be wearing his special “outfit” and be at the end of a very short leash. The opposing end of the leash, by law, must be in the hands of someone over the age of 21 years.

However, this is not a law anybody in Aberdeen enforces. Not by the dogcatcher. Not by the police department. Neither does either of those enforcement entities catch or confine offending dogs of any sort running at large, nor do they “slay” dangerous or aggressive animals as required by the statute. When an Aberdeener is bitten or mauled, the insurance company’s lawyers will have a field day attempting to explain this negligence away. (Please notice, I do not say “if someone is bitten or mauled.” Mark my words. This horrific event is inevitable.)

I think when we enact the laws, we should actually enforce them across the board. A few months back our aldermen, in their wisdom, declared cigarette smoking in public places to be illegal. They said there must be

big, bold “NO SMOKING” signs on every restaurant entrance. They declared a smoking ban in all of Aberdeen’s public places and even went so far as to include in the edict precisely where one might enjoy this otherwise legal activity outdoors. The result of this smoking ban was local restaurants losing some very faithful customers including my own sweet self. I’ve never spent money at local restaurants because the food at my house was inferior. Actually, the opposite is true. My restaurant visits were mainly social in nature. I sincerely miss the camaraderie I once enjoyed on my several luncheon outings each week. Nevertheless, because my handsome husband is a smoker, he and I seldom dine out these days unless it’s in Columbus.

All of that said, if one were to visit a certain dancing club on the south side of town on any given weekend evening, one might discover that there are still places in Aberdeen where smoking is not only allowed but almost encouraged. I happen to think that smoking bans represent regulatory “taking” of private property and I generally dislike them. Nevertheless, if we must endure such assaults on our constitutionally guaranteed freedoms, why “take” only some private property owners’ rights and leave others alone? Where is the equity in that?

I haven’t ventured out to see if Aberdeen’s new vehicle maintenance rules are being followed. I rather suspect that vehicle owners are still doing their own auto repairs in their own yards, no matter how offensive alderman Jim Buffington finds the visual assault on his tender eyes. Why? In my opinion, this rule, like the smoking ban, constitutes a regulatory land grab and might eventually lead the city into another courtroom battle. Time will tell.

What we say is one thing. What we fail to say can be just as fraught with error. Take, for example, the action taken by the board of aldermen to condemn several structures in Aberdeen. It was late last year when Dwight Stevens came before the board to plead with them to take action on two Commerce Street storefront properties with damaged roofs. According to Stevens, the buildings were both compromised to the point they were on the verge of caving in upon themselves, leaving Commerce Street with two gaping holes.

The city correctly agreed to adjudicate the buildings, which is to say, they stepped in to tell the owners of the respective buildings to take immediate steps to secure the structures,

thereby mitigating the damage possible to adjoining structures and assuring the public safety. But, the aldermen were in almost uncharted water. The process of condemnation is not one any leader wants to take—it’s always better if the owner of the structure will take the initiative upon himself.

Our aldermen were so queasy about the prospect of condemning the buildings, they eagerly accepted the owners’ verbal assurances that necessary repairs would be made quickly. In their haste, they failed to include quantifiable goals and objectives in the deal. In doing this, they left the questions of precisely what repairs would be finished and exactly when the repairs would be complete flapping in the wind. Because they left the entire arrangement open-ended, when few if any, of the necessary repairs had been made, they found themselves awkwardly back at square one in April.

At least one of these stories has a happy ending. Ultimately, Dwight Stevens and his restoration organization struck a deal with the owner of one of the endangered buildings and repairs to the structure have begun. The second building is still in the lurch and continues to cause damage to adjoining structures. All this damage is raining down for the lack of a few little words.

Perhaps people who are accustomed to flying by the seat of their pants shouldn’t be expected to understand the usefulness of quantifiable goals and objectives. Nevertheless, effective leadership is dependent upon careful planning and concise communication. In Aberdeen, we have leaders who enact essentially toothless laws and demonstrate the bad habit of making ill-advised concessions when follow-through is essential. We can’t all be perfectionists, but couldn’t we *try* to get it right once in a while?



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Sports sections leave a lot to be desired Continued from page 1

unless **their** (there) are only two teams; can **wreck** (wreak) havoc; death **effected** (affected) everyone; somehow greatly **effect** (affect) the play; did not **fair** (fare) as well; we didn't **thro**e (throw) the ball a lot; they could have **road** (rode) a win against the Trojans; they **now** (know) what it feels like; cheerleading has become a popular **pass time** (pastime); one of my all-time favorite **past times** (pastimes); I can **for see** (foresee); focused on getting a group of five **freshman** (freshmen); Hamilton will take the court with five **freshman** (freshmen); and **lets** (let's) focus on."

Then we had words like: **turn around** (turnaround), **kick off** (kickoff), **out right** (outright), **half time** (halftime), **down field** (downfield), **non existent** (nonexistent), **over powered** (overpowered), **indepth** (in depth), **under estimate** (underestimate), **shut out** (shutout), **sports writer** (sportswriter), **over matched** (over-matched); **slip up** (slip-up); and **hot bed** (hotbed), along with the botched names like: **Randolf** (Randolph), **Sim** (Sims), **Quin** (Quinn), **Charges** (Chargers), and **Mississippi High School Activity** (Activities) Association. (I purposely misspelled Byrd's first name "Robbie" one time last week just to give him a small taste of how it feels to have his name botched in print. I also had dozens of sarcastic questions scattered throughout the column such as: "is it there, they're or their, is it affect or effect, is it quit or quite, is it no or know, is it two, too or to," or "is it hear or here," but reluctantly had to edit them out because of a lack of space.)

Too, in his short two-and-a-half month stint as the sports editor, Byrd also had hundreds of other mistakes, including: comma splices, run-together sentences, incomplete sentences, misuse of the possessive case, subject-verb agreement errors, misspelled words, punctuation mistakes and sentences which just didn't make any sense. (Is it sense or cents?) Unbelievably, instead of being reprimanded or fired, Byrd was given additional duties in the news department in January of 2006 by his boss,



Charlotte Wolfe, and Josh Neaves was hired to take his place as sports editor. In Neaves' very first week on the job, he made (by my count) no less than 49 errors in the Aberdeen paper alone, including three misspelled words: **sportswriting** (sports writing), **teeball** (T-Ball or Tee Ball) and **match up** (matchup); three misspelled names: **O'Brien** (O'Brian), **Lawrence** (Lawrence) Roberts and **Alex** (Alec) Johnson; two run-together sentences; three comma splices; 22 punctuation mistakes; one subject-verb agreement mistake; one indefinite pronoun agreement error; and seven careless mistakes due to a lack of attention to detail, such as carrying the following sentence in his column in the *Aberdeen Examiner*: "I look forward to watching the hot Lady Panthers fight their rivals in the Monroe county (County) tournament." (Great material for the Amory paper, but not for the *Examiner*.)

Then there were five of what I sarcastically refer to as "Stupid Can't Be Fixed" sentences, such as: ...hello, my name is Josh Neaves and I'm the newest **edition** (addition) to the Monroe County **sportswriting** (sports writing) team; the Panthers enter a tough division that now includes **inter-county** (intra-county) rival Aberdeen; Bryant knows that **their** (there) is always room for improvement; as long as the girls play hard **were** (we're) going to get better; and we've gotten better and better and **were** (we're) going to continue to get better. And finally, there was one "Say What?" sentence in which he stated: "**I started playing teeball** (T-Ball or Tee Ball) **around the age of 5** (five) **and didn't stop until I graduated from Booneville High School**. (I'll bet he really tore that T-Ball League up as a senior.)

Over the next seven months, Neaves' sports pages contained literally hundreds upon hundreds of errors and he proved to be far worse than Byrd ever thought about being. For example, Neaves wrote (insert team) "**lead**" (insert score) no less than seven times in one week when he should have used the word "**led**," as in "*Amory led 32-13*." Better yet, in a Body Worx story, he wrote: "*Prestage competed in the 165 **pounds**. weight class and Lockett won the Masters 198 **pounds**. class*." (Apparently Neaves never learned that "lbs." has a period after it, but a period is not needed when the word "pounds" is spelled out.)

But his most infamous piece of journalism was found in a relatively short story about Daniel Beasley in which he wrote: "He's a **Forth** (Fourth) **Degree Black Belt**" and "Beasley is also a **Forth** (Fourth) **Degree Black Belt in Mixed Martial Arts**." Other gems in the same story included: "In 2004 Beasley was elected **onto** (to) the Board of Directors for BMA, one year after joining the board he was **put into** (inducted into) the BMA Hall of Fame, one of only **ten** (10) members; I started when I was real **pound**; during his stretch of competition (needs a comma) **Beasley up** (???) the Southern Martial Arts **Championship** (championship) in 1993; and, *Beasley is working with the Tang Shou Society **ran*** (run) by Bill Dixon.

In a baseball story, Neaves wrote: "**Smithville took the lead in the sixth inning, plating six runs. The Seminoles added four runs in the fourth and another four in the fifth to end the shortened game**." (Now let's take a close look at what he wrote.



Smithville won 14-0 over West Union. If the Seminoles scored four runs in the fourth (is it fourth or forth?) inning, and another four in the fifth, they couldn't possibly have taken the lead in the sixth inning because they were already ahead 8-0. Then again, how does a team score six runs in the sixth and *then* add four in the fourth and four more in the fifth? And if the shortened game ended in the fifth, how in the devil did Smithville score six runs in the sixth? (On the plus side, at least he learned how to spell the word "fourth," something he didn't know how to do at least four times in a previous edition [is it addition or edition] when he used the word "forth.")

Other classics included a sub-head in which Neaves claimed: "**Dogs jump on Red Raiders early but drop a close contest in O.T.**" (actually, Aberdeen outscored Shannon 11-0 in the overtime period and won the game 70-59, according to the fourth paragraph in his story); and "*The division is very similar to last year, **parody** play a role*." (Parody for parity is just unbelievable.)

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Before and After—Aberdeen Employee Making a Difference!

I have occasionally been critical of some City of Aberdeen employees. I see those critiques as my mission and make no apologies for keeping an eye on them. I also like to give kudos when they are due. (You may recall that I've even praised the aldermen on those rare occasions when I think they've done the right thing!)

Last week, I learned David Brock, a lineman for Aberdeen Electric Department was, once again, about to do something perfectly wonderful.

Brock is a gruff sounding character who occasionally demonstrates the attitude of a rattlesnake with a toothache. Brock rides a Harley and pretends to be a tough guy. Imagine my surprise when I learned that Brock had been growing his curly red hair to shoulder length, not simply to irritate his co-workers, but instead, in order to donate his ponytail to Locks of Love.

Locks of Love is a public non-profit organization which provides hairpieces to financially disadvantaged children under age 18 suffering from long-term medical hair loss from any diagnosis. They meet a unique need for children by using donated hair to create the high quality wigs. Most of the children helped by Locks of Love have lost their hair due to a medical condi-

tion called alopecia areata, which has no known cause or cure. The hair prostheses Locks of Love provides help to restore their self-esteem and their confidence, enabling them to face the world and their peers. For more information on Locks of Love, or to donate your own ponytail, visit the website: <http://www.locksoflove.org>

Editor's Note: On the day David Brock posed for the pictures below, he was also awarded his "Three Gallon" lapel pin for his other "tough guy" habit—donating blood. Way to go Brock! You do us all proud!



Above: Lisa Mobley, proprietor of Hair Visions by Lisa, lops off the curly red ponytail of Aberdeen Electric Department lineman David Brock. Above right: Happy Locks of Love beneficiaries. Below right: Shorn but smiley, Brock looks forward to a much cooler summer!



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Incredibly enough, despite countless mistakes similar in nature to Byrd's in his seven-month stint as sports editor, Neaves somehow kept his job until he decided to get married and move to the Jackson area at the end of July. In his last column, he went out with a bang when he wrote: *"Not only did I make some friends but I also learned a lot. I'm a more experienced, more prepared, generally just better sports writer. I take better photos, write better stories and conduct better interviews now than when I started. Mississippi State laid a good foundation for me but Monroe County really built my journalism skills."* (The sad part is Neaves, like Byrd, really thinks he has "journalism skills.")

Neaves' resignation brought on the current Brandon Speck era and, even though his debut wasn't as horrendous as Byrd's and Neaves' first week on the job with just 37 red marks, he still got off on the wrong foot when he claimed in his first *Aberdeen* column that he *"spent a few of his high school Friday nights here watching those Bobby Hall-led teams."* (Sorry to break the news to you sport, but Bobby Hall coached Amory, not Aberdeen.) Then he went on to say that, *"I started spending a lot more than Friday nights in this fair city. I eventually learned about Pickles, Papa's Pizza and something I think you guys call the Railroad Festival."* (Again, I think he's writing about Amory, not Aberdeen.) Conversely, he then carried a story about the new *Aberdeen* athletic director which was prominently displayed above the fold in the *Amory* newspaper. He also shares his predecessors' penchant for "Say What?" sentences. For example, earlier this year he wrote: *"Down 58-51 early in the final period, Farr's putback of a Pierre Hadley miss made it 58-51 Wave."*

(So if the score was 58-51, Farr's putback should have made it 58-53.)

Then there was the following: *"Hatley used three players in double figures to jump out early, taking a 13-10 first period lead."* (Let's do the math here – if Hatley actually used "three players in double figures to jump out early," that would mean Hatley would have had at least 30 points [three players with 10 points minimum] early in the game. Yet according to the story, Hatley had only a 13-10 lead in the first period.)

The one area in which he clearly surpassed both Byrd and Neaves, however, is in the "botched names" category where he can claim the top prize for spelling Nettleton quarterback Jami Boland's name *"Jamy"* for 13 consecutive weeks before discovering the error.

In the intervening months since he came on board in August of 2006, Speck has, to a lesser degree, repeated virtually all of his predecessors' mistakes. Again, space (or a lack thereof) prevents me from listing all of the many errors published by Speck, but rest assured, should he attempt to use any of his sports sections as a sampling of his work in order to seek other employment, he will have a hard time getting hired by any major newspaper if the interviewer has any kind of an eye for mistakes.

In summary, all three of my successors have been, to one degree or another, a disaster for the paper. Because of either ignorance or laziness (or maybe both) on all of their parts (plus the news and advertising aspects of the paper), the sad fact of the matter is both *The Amory Advertiser* and the *Aberdeen Examiner* have deteriorated into publications which have become the laughingstock of the newspaper industry.

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