The Lexicographer's Dilemma: The Evolution of 'Proper' English, from Shakespeare to South Park

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In its long history, the English language has had many lawmakers--those who have tried to regulate or otherwise organize the way we speak. *Proper Words in Proper Places* offers the first narrative history of these endeavors and shows clearly that what we now regard as the only "correct" way to speak emerged out of specific historical and social conditions over the course of centuries. As historian Jack Lynch has discovered, every rule has a human history and the characters peopling his narrative are as interesting for their obsession as for their erudition: the sharp-tongued satirist Jonathan Swift, who called for a government-sponsored academy to issue rulings on the language; the polymath Samuel Johnson, who put dictionaries on a new footing; the eccentric Hebraist Robert Lowth, the first modern to understand the workings of biblical poetry; the crackpot linguist John Horne Tooke, whose bizarre theories continue to baffle scholars; the chemist and theologian Joseph Priestly, whose political radicalism prompted violent riots; the ever-crotchety Noah Webster, who worked to Americanize the English language; the long-bearded lexicographer James A. H. Murray, who devoted his life to a survey of the entire language in the *Oxford English Dictionary*; and the playwright George Bernard Shaw, who worked without success to make English spelling rational.

Grammatical "rules" or "laws" are not like the law of gravity, or even laws against murder and theft--they're more like rules of etiquette, made by fallible people and subject to change. Witty, smart, full of passion for the world's language, *Proper Words in Proper Places* will entertain and educate in equal measure.

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