

Introduction

The Starting Idea: You and Your Audience

At one point in *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice finds herself at a tea party presided over by the Mad Hatter, and, after a particularly confusing remark of the Hatter's, she

felt dreadfully puzzled. The Hatter's remark seemed to have no sort of meaning in it, and yet it was certainly English. "I don't understand you," she said, as politely as she could. (Carroll 100)

This same problem emerges with much written and spoken language today. Though definitely composed of recognizable English words, much language has "no sort of meaning in it." It doesn't work. This proves to be something of a problem. I will contend here that we want our language to communicate something—specifically, what we intend it to convey—yet often it fails when we don't pay enough attention to how we put words together.

Throughout this book, I will argue that you need to pay attention to putting words into sentences and sentences into paragraphs—as well as to creating larger, more complex messages, like papers, letters, blog posts, reports, emails, and the like. Part of that attentiveness involves employing, when necessary, Standard Written English, which this book outlines. (I often call this "formal English," though formal

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English need not be written.) I am also striving to do something more ambitious here. In these pages, I am going to try to convince you that knowing the fundamentals of “correct” English has value in and of itself.

Now, you might wonder just how much such “correctness” ultimately counts: Is it important to master this stuff? I mean, does anyone really care anymore? In the Internet age? In most cases, isn’t “correctness” only a superficial gloss, an add-on option, like magnesium wheels or a chrome-tipped exhaust on a car, something that’s (maybe) nice but not necessary? Something, peradventure, even a bit overly flashy? If the basic content or idea being conveyed gets through, who cares about spelling, punctuation, or “grammar”?

Well, some people do. You care, or else you wouldn’t be reading this book, taking a writing course, or looking for some answers. My students care. They often ask me, “Does grammar ‘count’?” Yes, yes, it does. And I hope you don’t merely “care,” but go beyond that feeling into another realm, namely, that of having a deep concern for the words you craft, for the language that you float out into the world, for the verbal embodiments of your ideas.

Here is why grammar counts. While fairly often a version of your intended idea or message might seep or struggle through regardless of how imperfectly you write or say something, a lack of correctness has the potential to block or blight your message, to leave your reader or listener “dreadfully puzzled” (like Alice, at the Hatter’s tea party).

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What you're trying to communicate is not getting through. You yourself might have a good idea, but your words are not conveying it.

For example, sometimes verbal “errors” impede communication by distracting your audience from your message. Your audience might have to “translate” what you are saying or hold in mind two or three possible meanings while they listen (or while they read your writing), since your language lacks sufficient exactness. It resembles the situation in which you might say, “I was talking to Mike today, and”—and your listener has to hold three or four Mikes in mind while waiting for the detail that will pin down just which Mike you're talking about. So your listener takes in the message with one ear, in a manner of speaking, while simultaneously attuning the other ear to puzzling out a crucial player's identity. The message, in this situation, cannot command the attention it deserves.

Another kind of distraction crops up when a segment of your audience hears a particular usage—for instance, a double negative; a subject-verb error; a nonstandard verb or pronoun form, like “should have went” or “Me and him were . . .”; or a misused word—and swiftly dismisses you as someone whose ideas can't be any better than your usage. Their ears close up, their eyes glaze over, they not-too-surreptitiously consult their cell phones. They yawn.

When you speak or write, your words almost always produce responses, like yawning, or (let's hope) more engaged, complex, emotional responses in listeners or readers.

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Ideally, these emotional responses are to your ideas, the content: the message itself. But the very way you phrase your thoughts and employ language itself generates affective responses. That is, your audience will respond emotionally to how you say things as much as to what you say—will judge you as a sayer, as a consciousness, as a person. And since your words create an image of yourself, an audience will naturally respond to that image at the same time that it responds to your words. It gets distracted by random associations prompted by your words or phraseology. (This is why you might have been told, for example, to avoid unintentional rhyme, so that an audience's attention won't be drawn to the sound of your words and the musicality of their rhyme rather than to the more important element, namely, your message. Unintentional rhyme is only one of many possible distractions, I should add.)

I'm urging you, therefore, to employ language that on its own will not spark negative emotional responses. It won't disperse or scatter an audience's attention. Nor will it provoke extraneous, irrelevant, or judgmental reactions and thus take that audience away from your point. Instead you want your language to clearly lead your audience directly toward that point and toward an understanding of it.

Unfortunately, you never really know for certain the makeup of your audience, or what it is listening for. Will this audience really care about your word order, vocabulary, and exactness of expression? Put yourself into your

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audience's position. Empathize. Think about who might be on the receiving end of your words. (Sometimes you need to do this very rapidly, even instantaneously.) If you decide that your listener or reader might notice and care about correctness—might really be paying attention to both what you say and how you say it—adjust your language to the occasion.

What kind of book is this, then? When I imagined this book, I wanted a volume that didn't just lay out the "rules"—we have lots of books that do that quite well—but one that did something in addition to that. I wanted to provide a human voice chatting about those rules, one that used real-world rather than manufactured language as its model, and one that tried to show how using language carefully can improve the quality of human interactions.

Certainly, errors in usage pale by comparison with errors in moral decisions, or, for that matter, errors made while conducting bypass surgery, piloting an airplane, drilling for offshore oil, or when deciding whether or not to invade another country. The things our culture seems to value highly for the most part have to do with safety, security, personal/environmental health—and events that involve dollar gain or loss. So what are we doing here?

Striving for greater usage accuracy and precision may help us toward something else, something that connects to

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crucial personal, cultural, and economic problems. Greater usage accuracy works toward a shared understanding.

At the same time, your attentiveness to language will change you. If you're motivated enough to improve your language use, the way you say and write things, the way you punctuate, the way you choose words, and the way you structure each sentence you utter or write, you'll find yourself fundamentally reprogramming your interaction with others. They will listen more attentively. They will see you anew. They might suggest ways to build on your ideas (instead of, say, ignoring yours and offering alternatives of their own). You'll discover, in short, that you are more effective at doing what you want to do.

A paradox of writing is that while you're essentially creating something for others, you're also trying to discover something for yourself, even something about yourself, about how you feel or think regarding an issue or idea. It's true, of course, that you consult with others, but writing also has a lonely and methodical, even a banal quality, more so once you have a draft and are revising, correcting, rephrasing, making sure that your language is exact.

It's sort of like working on a craft project that requires you to smooth out some uneven, raw, and unpromising surface. You might struggle with it for hours, clearing away encrusted dirt and cobwebs, taking out a smudge or imperfection here, a blemish or stain there. Sometimes, though, if you're lucky and after you've been laboring

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over the thing for hours or days, it reveals its true nature: it's in fact a pane of glass or of crystalline rock, and now that you've got it Windex-squeaky smooth, you realize that the real discovery isn't the surface-perfect thing itself, but what has suddenly emerged as visible, beneath or behind the thing you've been laboring over—namely, what you can see through it, and what others can also see. Maybe the best writing has this self-immolative quality. It metamorphoses into nothingness, as the things and ideas the writing refers to take on a shape and vitality independent of the words that summoned them up.

Really mastering the basics isn't just some abstract exercise, like memorizing the quadratic equation, the periodic table of chemical elements, or the sequence of U.S. presidents. It's more than that: language use creates as it reflects a world—as it creates and also reflects the people in that world. That's the message I try to convey to my college writing classes, and I couldn't find a textbook that really drove that home. So I wrote one.

Preview of the Following Pages

You will encounter three “voices” in the following pages. The first will be this voice, one offering general advice about language use. This voice isn't so much providing the “what” of English grammar and usage, nor even the “how” of it. Instead, it's addressing the “why” of the issue. Why is it important to be attentive to this or that language

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issue? Why will this or that change have an impact? To be more specific, this voice claims that learning these nuances and details of English has more than merely instrumental value, isn't just a means of getting to an end. Thus the voice will be chatty, anecdotal, even autobiographical at times, as it attempts to offer a context for learning formal English.

The second voice belongs to others and speaks in the example sentences I have gathered. It's the voice of "them," of the people "out there." These are real-world people. Almost all of the example sentences come from U.S.-based publications of a single day, December 29, 2008. What's so special about that day? Is it like September 1, 1939; December 7, 1941; August 6, 1945; November 22, 1963; or September 11, 2001? Nope. It's not, in fact, special in any particular way. Wikipedia has no entry for it as a special day (no December 29 was ever a special or newsworthy day, according to Wikipedia: an unlikely claim). We've all lived through it, and though it might have personal significance for some of us, I chose it as the source day for example sentences because of its very ordinariness.

So this second voice will be the collective one of real people—writers, politicians, scientists, reporters, professors, average men and women: people whose sentences have already performed a function in the world. Their sentences are "used" ones; "pre-owned," eBay might label them. They are not fresh, perfect, unopened-in-original-packaging

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ones created for the sole purpose of illustrating grammatical principles. Instead, these example sentences have been riddled with the eye-tracks of many, maybe millions, of readers.

The third voice will be one directly commenting on these sentences from the newspapers, magazines, and websites. It's the voice of professor as language coach. It's an awkward position, to be commenting on and "correcting" people's (often writing professionals') usage, since it implies something flawed or "wrong" with it, so much so that it needs righting, adjusting, or editing. Yet I'm trying to make this voice, and the instruction it offers, as nonjudgmental and as supportive as possible, and if this voice can point out a problem in published language, a problem you hadn't been sensitive to, or which you'd perhaps never before even noticed, it will have done you a great service. So don't take it personally if I point out a questionable usage that, habitually, you also employ. (But also, hey, think about it.)

To capture an image of one day in the life of the English language, I draw from eleven newspapers and websites, including the *International Herald Tribune*, *latimes.com*, *nydailynews.com*, the *New York Times*, *seattlepi.com*, *sun times.com*, *sfgate.com*, the *Trentonian*, *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*. I also use six weekly magazines that carry the December 29, 2008, date: *National Review*, *New York*, the *New Yorker*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Time*,

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and *Us Weekly*. (Some of these, by the way, are “double” issues, dated December 22/29 or December 29/January 5.)

December 29, 2008, as History

Am I creating a narrative of this day? Yes and no. My microcosmic selection offers random sentences, ones I’ve isolated because I want to use them to illustrate grammatical principles. I think many narratives might be inferred from the quotations I have culled, but I’m not consciously trying to create any particular or even discernible narrative of the day, the month, the year, or the decade.

The day’s language tells the tale of some events and issues that have not proven to be of ongoing significance, and of some that have continued as part of our national narrative. We often can’t really tell what’s historical and what’s just daily news that will swiftly disappear from the collective consciousness, never to resurface. Will this event or issue be the start of some important trend, the tip of some huge, scary iceberg, or just a space-filler in a magazine or newspaper or news program? An additional complicating factor is that what actually happened on December 29, 2008, is one thing, and what the newspapers and magazines deemed significant enough to report, quite another. Thus the portrait of history that any single day’s publications paints will inevitably be much more incomplete, distorted, and patchwork than that found in history books, which, usually written from a distance of years, can

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better assess the significance of what happened during a given year, month, or day.

But still, reportage about current events amounts to a kind of history. This book will be looking at the English language that characterized and attempted to capture what was happening on our planet that December 29, thin-slicing, à la Malcolm Gladwell, the verbal universe in English that was on that day available to the average American via newspapers and magazines. It's only a sample of one day in the life of the language, but I'm hoping it's a representative one.

Three days from the end of the calendar year, that day saw much of the print media trying to frame and make sense of the striking and calamitous events that had taken place the preceding 363 days (it was a leap year). The *Trentonian* ran a feature entitled "2008: The Year in Review," though the events described covered only the first half of the year (the second half of the year was covered in a subsequent issue). It was a retrospective moment, December 29, and in many ways a "slow news day," yet on it the events of the previous days, weeks, and months reverberated and ramified.

As for those preceding months of 2008, three phrases might sum them up: natural disasters, ongoing violence, and financial meltdown—and a fourth, a proper noun that needs a category of its own: Barack Obama. All four remained epicenters of the news that third-to-last day of the year.

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On December 29, the *New York Times* reported that China was still cleaning up after its devastating May 12 earthquake (“Romance, and Slow Recovery, in a Quake-Devastated Chinese County,” by Edward Wong). *USA Today* ran an article entitled “Wet, Wind-Whipped Midwest Still on Alert.” And the *USA Today* “reader photo,” submitted by Kresta Meng Leimser, was captioned “A cumulonimbus cloud develops above a supercell thunderstorm near Lusk, Wyo., on a fall evening” (12A). In fact, the cumulonimbus in the photo looks very much like a mushroom cloud from an atomic bomb blast. Leimser’s photo, which shows the cloud hovering above and behind some iconically American-looking silos and farm buildings, makes for a menacing—but an eerily apt—image.

Indeed, Mother Nature was sinister and deadly in 2008. Munich Re, the German reinsurer that keeps track of such things, calculated that some 220,000 people died from natural disasters in 2008 (“Timelines”). These included an earthquake (7.8–8.2 on the Richter scale; accounts vary) in China that killed close to 70,000 (an additional 18,000 were missing), and a cyclone in Burma/Myanmar that left 50,000 dead. The United Kingdom suffered a 5.2-magnitude earthquake, and on December 29 itself Yellowstone Park suffered a series of tremors; the significance of both was probably artificially inflated by the year’s multiple natural disasters.

In the previous months, the United States had been experiencing terrible weather, with 111 deaths from torna-

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does alone by the end of May. A bitterly cold winter, flooding, and hurricanes—at least one every month from July through December—rounded out the meteorological picture. At the same time, global warming continued, with a 160-square-mile portion of the Arctic shelf breaking up. Even the moon, by December, reportedly shone both larger and brighter, by a lot, than it had previously that year (NASA Science News).

The violence of living on this, the third planet from the sun, remained unabated, unrelenting, and deeply disturbing. On December 29 all the publications I looked at had numerous stories about deaths, atrocities, murders, and wars. “If it bleeds, it leads” certainly held true. The war in Iraq continued (it had started in March 2003); its cost at that point was estimated at three trillion dollars. During President George W. Bush’s December visit to Iraq, an angry Iraqi journalist hurled two shoes at him. They missed. The journalist, Muntadhar al-Zaidi, was arrested, brutally beaten, tried, and imprisoned for nine months. (He was released early because of good behavior.)

In August of 2008, Russia and its neighboring state of Georgia had become embroiled in a conflict over break-away regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia invaded Georgia, using tanks and aircraft, maintaining that “it was protecting pro-Russian South Ossetians” (“EU Launches Probe”), a claim that, regionally modified, would ominously reecho in the 2014 Ukrainian crisis. The *International Herald Tribune* of December 29 ran the prescient

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article “Tajiks Bleed in a Xenophobic Russia” (Tavernise), and the *Wall Street Journal* printed a front-page article, below the fold, entitled “As If Things Weren’t Bad Enough, Russian Professor Predicts End of U.S.” (Osborn), which reviews the slightly madcap ideas of Igor Panarin: “Americans hope President Obama ‘can work miracles,’ he wrote. ‘But when spring comes, it will be clear that there are no miracles.’” As if to at least partially confirm the Russian professor’s prediction, early 2009 witnessed the emergence of the Tea Party in the United States, and the start of what would be a presidency marked by congressional stalemates, inactivity, government shutdowns, and angry, line-in-the-sand disputes between Republicans and Democrats.

The Mideast was roiled by the Hamas-Israel conflict. Hamas began by launching missiles into Israel, reaching the cities of Beersheba and Ashdod. Israel defended itself by launching missiles, killing close to 300 in the Gaza Strip. All major papers on December 29 ran stories about this as front-page news: “Israel Keeps Up Assault on Gaza; Arab Anger Rises” and “With Strikes, Israel Reminds Foes It Has Teeth” (*New York Times*); “Israel Pursues Strikes on Gaza; Toll Mounts and Outcry Swells” (*International Herald Tribune*); “Amid Gaza Violence, a New Task for Obama” (*USA Today*); “Israel Poised for Long Fight,” “Food and Medical Supplies Grow Scarce on the Besieged Gaza Strip,” and “Palestinian Deaths Near 300: Hamas Calls for Suicide Strikes” (*Washington Post*); and “Israel Pounds Gaza Again, Signals More on the Way” (*Wall Street Journal*).

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Late November witnessed a massacre in India, where the militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba launched a cell-phone-coordinated attack on hotels and other commercial centers in Mumbai, killing more than 160. The December 29 *International Herald Tribune* revisited this event in “Mumbai’s Torment Captured Click by Click” by Thomas Fuller, which presented a photographic record of the atrocity.

Earlier in the year, a suicide bomber had killed forty people during a “gathering of tribal elders and local officials in north-west Pakistan” (“Taking You Back”). In Afghanistan, on December 28, fourteen schoolchildren were killed in a bombing attack on a school bus, as reported in many December 29 papers. The Indian Coast Guard rescued two people off of the east coast of India, but “more than 300 people from Bangladesh and Myanmar . . . had jumped from a rickety boat that had been drifting for 13 days in the Indian Ocean and tried to swim to shore” (“Timelines”). This sad story made its way into the December 29 papers as well. The *New York Times* story, by Mark McDonald, carried the headline “Hundreds Are Feared Dead in Bay of Bengal.” That fear was realized.

Meanwhile the financial world lay in tatters amid a global recession. It was declared as such on December 1 by the National Bureau of Economic Research. On September 15, Lehman Brothers, an investment firm so huge that it seemed immune to market fluctuation, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. It had held \$600 billion of assets. People were reeling. The U.S. government had to bail out Chrysler

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and General Motors, giving them approximately \$17.4 billion in aid. The Emergency Economic Stabilization Act was enacted October 3, and \$700 billion was earmarked to pay for bad loans and to bail out flagging banks. Bernie Madoff was convicted of creating an enormous Ponzi scheme that further weakened the U.S. economy and that of the world. He was charged on December 11 with securities fraud. His Ponzi scheme was valued at more than \$50 billion, the largest financial fraud in history. Yet for their participation in wide-scale business practices that brought on the recession, Wall Street investors and bankers would suffer very little. It wouldn't be until 2013 that Credit Suisse banker Kareem Serageldin—the only Wall Street executive who would serve time for his criminal activities related to banking fraud—started a two-and-a-half-year prison term. (To offer a contrast, 839 people were “convicted in the savings and loan scandals of the 1980s,” according to Jesse Eisinger of the independent nonprofit investigative organization ProPublica [38]. And those earlier scandals were minuscule in comparison with 2008's financial misdeeds.)

Not surprisingly, many news articles about the year's calamitous financial events appeared in publications on December 29. The *New York Times* ran two front-page stories devoted to the recession: “Veterans of '90s Bank Bailout See Opportunity in Current One” (Lipton and Kirkpatrick) and the more whimsical “Skaters Jump in as

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Foreclosures Drain the Pool” (McKinley and Wollan). The *Wall Street Journal* ran a very long article that started on the front page, “The Weekend That Wall Street Died” (Craig et al.), while the *Washington Post* carried the first of a three-part, detailed article by Robert O’Harrow Jr. and Brady Dennis, entitled “The Beautiful Machine,” which was under the kicker “The Crash: What Went Wrong.” (A “kicker” is the journalistic term that refers to a smaller headline above the main headline; it often describes a series of articles or gives more information about a group of articles on the same subject.) Sequels in “The Crash” series would follow on the next two days. *USA Today* addressed a possibly different segment of the audience with its front-page “Bogus Money Goes Mainstream,” which detailed the rise of counterfeiting “amid a souring economy” (Leinwand).

Yet perhaps the biggest news of the year was that in November, Barack Obama, an African American, had been elected the nation’s first black president. He had campaigned on a platform that promised change. In seeking the Democratic nomination, he had vied with Hillary Clinton, the first woman who was a serious contender for the U.S. presidency. She would later be made secretary of state. Obama’s vacated senate seat in Illinois was (illicitly) put up for sale by Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich, who was arrested on December 9 and eventually convicted. Running against Obama and vice presidential candidate Joe Biden were John McCain and his running mate, a new

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face in national politics, Alaska governor Sarah Palin, who dazzled listeners with her brashness, her non sequiturs, and her faux pas.

On December 29, Barack Obama was only president-elect, and George W. Bush was still officially president. In that limbo between an election and an inauguration, the world was looking to Obama for leadership, and anticipating a very different brand of U.S. politics from what had characterized the Bush presidency. Overseas reaction was pronounced. The *New York Times* ran “Gaza Crisis Is Another Challenge for Obama, Who Defers to Bush for Now” (Myers and Cooper), while the *International Herald Tribune* carried a Reuters article entitled “Brown Sees Obama as Inspiration for Britain,” reporting British prime minister Gordon Brown’s words, “I look forward to working with President-elect Obama in creating a trans-Atlantic, and then a global coalition for change” (3). On the home front, the *National Review* wrote of outgoing president Bush, “It is a pity he did not do better; we are about to do worse.” The same editorial lamented the entrance of Obama’s “economic team,” labeling Lawrence Summers “a thoroughgoing redistributionist.” Prudently, though, the *National Review* warned conservatives to back off from the harebrained theory that Obama was not born in the United States: “Conservatives do themselves no favors by inhaling vapors from the fever swamps” (“The Week” 8). The *Washington Post* provided a look at things to come with “Obama’s Tax Cuts Likely Soon: Senior Advisor Says

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Middle Class Needs ‘Some Relief Now’” (Rucker). That relief would be a long time in coming.

Barack Obama was named *Time* magazine’s Person of the Year. Other notable persons of 2008 included Fidel Castro, who stepped down as Cuba’s president and transferred to his brother Raúl leadership of the country; Bill Gates, who resigned from his position at Microsoft; Radovan Karadžić, who was finally located after a twelve-year search and arrested for war crimes; Tarō Asō, who became prime minister of Japan; and Michael Phelps, who won eight gold medals in the Beijing Olympics. On the cover of the December 29 *Sports Illustrated*, the top line of print reads, “2008: BEST SPORTS YEAR EVER,” and the inside article talks not only about Phelps but also about Tiger Woods and Usain Bolt and the Super Bowl-winning New York Giants.

Just the same, though, while December 29, 2008, might not have the historical resonance of, say, 9/11, it held great importance, was by no means a slow news day, for many—for those who, for example, lost their fortunes or their loved ones, who were fired or betrayed or stricken terribly ill, or who won the lottery that day. At first glance it might appear to have been a day that most people would “little note nor long remember,” yet after having pored over many 12/29/08 documents, I now question the very concept of the “slow news day”—no day can be such for the billions of souls (6.7 billion in 2008) inhabiting this green-and-blue ball that hurtles, spinning, through space: every

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day sees its share of grief and joy, of tragedy and drudgery, of despair and elation.

Our culture does seem to value some days more than others, since what happened on them is of moment for more people. But at the same time, each day, no matter how momentous or ordinary, is enmeshed in, shaped by, and formative of history: it carves out a permanent place for itself along the time line. Just as the isolation of a single minute in a person's life might reveal an ordinary and apparently insignificant moment—or one of great pleasure, enlightenment, or horror—it is nevertheless still a moment that helps create who we are. Similarly, each day in the life of the world functions as part of an entirety, and can no more be dis severed from its place in history than can a single moment from a human life.

Thus picking a single day in history is a chancy business: December 29, 2008, had no forty-eight-point headlines, but what took place that day was part of an ongoing historical process. Entangled in history yet separate from it, that day still breathes strongly through the words that emerged on it, a small sample of which this book will share with you.

Two Disclaimers

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