

Oh Mama, Where's My Comma?

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I was taught in no uncertain terms that a list of words was separated by commas. If a comma did not appear between two words, then they were to be read as collective equals, both together and inseparable. So we have a list such as: French toast, ham and eggs, and coffee. The “ham and eggs” are to be reasoned as one ensemble, served together such that one without the other would be a huge mistake.

These days, however, for some reason unknown to me and clearly at odds with my memories of long-lost English teachers, the last comma in a list is AWOL. It just isn't there. So now we have lists such as: fear, killing and love. Clearly, “killing” is not supposed to hang out with “love”, but that's what this list says to me, being the strict traditionalist that I am.

So, why have the Machiavellian editors plotted to kill the extra comma? Is the print medium in such a tight financial crisis that they can't afford the extra ink or space that this lowly comma deserves? Or, is it just minimalism bursting upon the printed page, inspired by a Phillip Glass musical pseudo-composition?

I need that comma! My eye darts to the end of a list I am reading and seeks to assuage my anxiety: is the comma there, or is it missing? If it is missing, why is it missing? Where did it go? Why are these editors mocking my high-school memories of Mrs. Veterito teaching me how to write, memories that I had not revisited until I first noticed this grammatical ravaging. That ugly scene, that missing comma, is so distracting that all I do these days is mentally edit the piece to make it grammatically correct. The intended message of the prose fades into the background while I fuss over the comma that isn't there. Like the parable of the lost sheep, I cannot rest until I bring that comma safely back into the fold.