

Sister Bernadette's Barking Dog
Subtitle: The Quirky History and Lost Art of Diagramming Sentences
By Kitty Burns Florey
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Making a Point for Diagramming Here

So Much for a Title That Tells You What You're About to Get

Reviewed by Carolyn Howard-Johnson, award-winning author of *This Is the Place* and *Harkening: A Collection of Stories Remembered, Tracing*, a chapbook of poetry, and the author of the *HowToDoItFrugally* Series of books for writers

The title of this book, "Sister Bernadette's Barking Dog," may not quite get across what this book is about. The subtitle, "The Quirky History and Lost Art of Diagramming Sentences" does a better job. But it is the illustration that really does tell the whole story to a book browser.

As odd (yes, even confusing), as a reader might find all of this, it is an example of what the subject of the book—diagramming—is about and an indication of why a picture of said diagram works better than a slew full of descriptive words.

So now, I've told you this book is about diagramming sentences you may want to run screaming from this review. I urge you not to. For this book is wholly entertaining.

First, Author Kitty Burns Florey knows what a hook is. She knows it as well as great novelists and the best screenwriters. The book opens with Sister Bernadette writing on a blackboard with a flourish, fastening her young charges to the miracle of language by drawing them a picture—which is, after all, what diagramming is (and part of what the illustrated title does). We feel the intensity of why the author was so taken with such a demonstration by a personality like Sister Bernadette). With that sharing of emotion, we also get an inkling that this will be a diagramming exercise like none we've ever taken before.

So, we have here not only a lesson on learning syntax by using art—call it geometry, if you prefer—but we also get the anecdote, the thrill, the good and tender story behind the dry and humdrum facts.

Second, Sister Bernadette comes as an exquisite hardback (\$19.95 US) in addition to a paperback. The hard cover version is an ideal gift for anyone who loves language—from a copywriter to the writers of the nightly news (who, I hope, still do love language).

And the book's design! Rarely does the design of a biography or a book on grammar deserve a mention but this one surely does. David Konopka merits accolades for making this book a work of art, just like the art of language that Foley is working to get across to her readers.

Third, there are just enough scholarly touches to help "Barking Dog" maintain its authority. We have annotation. Yes, on the first page, no less! An allusion to Twain and Fennimore Cooper.

I remember a book from the early 60s about the origins of our alphabet that was an unlikely runaway bestseller. There are many similar ones on the same subject now but none that capture the imagination of a nation like that one did. It was magic that made it a book club favorite. "Sister Bernadette's Barking Dog" may match its popularity. It is indeed the rare combination of teaching and touching.

Carolyn Howard-Johnson's first novel, "This Is the Place," has won eight awards. Her book of creative nonfiction "Harkening," won three. A UCLA Writers' Program instructor, she also is the author of another book essential for writers, USA Book News' Best Professional Book of 2004, "The Frugal Book Promoter: How To Do What Your Publisher Won't". The second in the HowToDoItFrugally series is "The Frugal Editor: Put your best book forward to avoid humiliation and ensure success," also a USA Book News pick. Learn more at www.howtodoitfrugally.com