

## *IMHO*

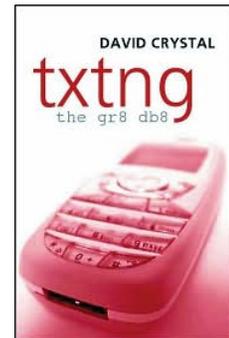
Dennis Baron, **A Better Pencil: Readers, Writers and the Digital Revolution**, Oxford University Press, 2009, 259 pp. \$16.47 (hardcover).

David Crystal, **Txtng: The Gr8 Db8**, Oxford University Press, 2009, 256 pp., \$17.05 (hardcover), \$10.36 (paperback).

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If the British ever became sophisticated enough to recognize proper public intellectuals, then David Crystal would be a front-runner to be so considered. As a prolific, serious, and highly regarded linguist, with an enviable ability to explicate lucidly the most complex concepts, he has long conducted a war on behalf of the living tongue against the English style police — the sort of people who would welcome an English Language Academy with powers to match the stifling authority of the *Real Academia Española*, the *Accademia della Crusca*, or the *Académie française*.

*Txtng: The Gr8 Db8* is, as one would expect of Crystal, a sensible rebuttal of the current hysteria in some quarters about the burgeoning world of SMS, “concatenated SMS,” MSS, DoCoMo, and all other forms of electronic digital alphanumeric communication. As is usual, Crystal’s is a “don’t panic” position and his arguments for calm are overwhelming sane. Basically, they are the same as ever — language, spoken or written, is a vibrant, evolving thing, and attempts to halt its processes of development, be it the decline of the adverb or the rise of *txtng*, are, theory and history tell us, doomed to failure. They constitute so much wasted effort.



It is the tendency in all texting systems to undercut traditional orthography that so alarms the conservative. In fact, few things enrage them more. Defending the arbitrary spelling rules (aka “the writing system”) of Dr. Johnson and his 18<sup>th</sup> century London publishing cronies is, for them, a crucial front in a never-ending *kulturkampf*. (This babbling by reactionaries is, perhaps, more audible in Britain than elsewhere in the Anglophone world. For them, for example, Noah Webster’s baby steps toward rationalising (or “rationalizing”) spelling are nothing so much as clear evidence of the perfidy of potential allies. England’s English language guardians regard “Americanisms” as a very dangerous contagion indeed.)

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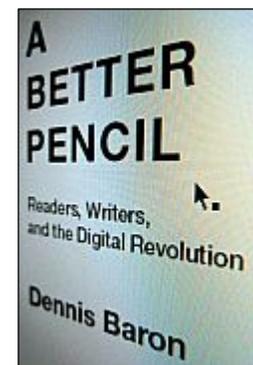
Crystal is a Labovian in that he has no time for worries grounded, de facto, in an unexamined notion of restricted codes, which is exactly what, in essence, critics claim txtng is — an impoverishment of written communication. Just as Labov a generation ago insisted that, for example, African American Vernacular English should not be dismissed as a species of debasement of standard English speech, so Crystal finds txtng codes vivid and lively and no threat to our ability to write richly meaningful communications with each other.

He is also an historian of language, and he offers a clear analysis of the various elements informing txtng, demonstrating their antiquity. He finds many tendencies are at work, only one of which is, of itself, novel — letters run together but only to be read and decoded and not pronounced at all. He cites *nd* (= *nada*) as a U.S. example. (This Americanism doesn't exist in the UK, of course.) Otherwise, every linguistic aspect "invented" by the *txtrs* takes a well-established form. As these, thus far, have not caused orthography to totter, there is no reason to suspect the supposed txtng onslaught will have any more effect.

A logogram (*b* for *be*) is no more innovative than an *x* for kiss. An emoticon is a pictogram. We should not be *\*o\** (surprised) by this. Also, *7ac* (as they text in France, *c'est assez*) to note that rebuses are ancient, and it is *2 18* in the *pm* to become appalled at *OMG* and other initialisms. We are not exercised by *pm* etc. so we should not fret over these new-minted coinings. Nor should we worry about missing letters, never mind missing syllables. After all, we live with *exam*, *max* etc., do we not, dear *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, *Ms.*, or *Dr.* reader? Even non-standard spellings, *luv*, are time-honored *cos*, for example, *luv* dates from 1898. (*Cos* dates from 1828.)

The ludic tradition in language use, which Crystal himself identified as significant in the study of speech and writing systems, underpins all of these and gives rise to many txtng novelties to his clear delight — *IMHO* (in my humble opinion), for example, or *2bctnd*. This playfulness is celebrated in the book's brevity, its octavo compactness, and despite the august publisher who produced it, in its cartoons of a charming if not exactly rib-tickling or entirely relevant nature. Rather, they are like Dr. Johnson's famous woman preacher: "It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all" in an Oxford University Press (OUP) volume.

*A Better Pencil*, by Dennis Baron, is a more sober-sided Oxford volume from every point of view, although it is informed throughout by a ludic wit. A hypothetical ancient writer, "Philoflatus," makes an early appearance, and the NRA is noted as failing to take "aim" against Rudolph Guiliani when his cell phone went off while he was addressing them. It is hard not to warm to a person who once published an essay on the controversial translation into Spanish of *The Star*



*Spangled Banner* as “Jose Can You See.” The conceit of the better pencil is well articulated too, tying Thoreau to pencils, because his money for pursuing the simple life came from his family’s better pencil manufactory.

Baron is also clear sighted enough to see the absurdity of much technicist information revolution posturing — the illogicality, for example, of the *Wired* utopianist Kevin Kelly’s vision of a Google Book- Searched, Wiki-ed world, where none write for payment and all can edit and emend all. Baron opines,

Presumably, Kelly didn’t write his defence of Google Book Search in *The New York Times Magazine* without first securing promise of payment, and it’s likely that his day job as ‘senior maverick’ for *Wired* is not a volunteer position either.

Unfortunately, this welcome tone of cynicism is not maintained. It is, rather, at war with Baron’s deployment of the usual technicist assumptions wholesaled by Kelly and his like. After all, the book is subtitled *Readers, Writers and the Digital Revolution* (emphasis added). There is a wobbly historical causality — for example, the press, he claims, causes censorship — and a certain lack of reach. To cite one indicator of this, the signature did not, as Brown suggests, acquire real significance only after John Hancock et al. The lack of attention to the significance of writing in legal culture, in general, is a problem as is the absence of a nuanced historical account of communications technologies. Photography is a good case in point (and, incidentally, the author Conan Doyle, far from being skeptical about photography, as Baron claims, was a spiritualist who famously fell for some faked snaps of fairies in 1917). The suggestion that teachers, to take another example, might be replaced by machines was not first made in connection with contemporary devices but 300 years ago. Then it was the magic lantern. There’s a minor error too: In 1984, Brown tells us, a PC cost \$6,000 — well, not the Apple II that I bought that year for \$2,500.

Couple all this with, shall we say, challenging assertions — that there is a difference between digital and analog writing, or that the screen makes everybody an author — and the result is a rather confused discussion of current developments. This is not helped either by the book’s anecdotal discursiveness. The chapter on having a class work with cuneiform and clay indicates how exciting a teacher Professor Baron seems to be, but it doesn’t clarify his argument.

Overall, a perhaps more fruitful and sophisticated agenda can be found in, say, *The Aesthetics of Net Literature* (Gendolla & Schäfer, 2007), and Crystal certainly brings a more coherent view to the specifics of *txtng*. Not only that — if you want to be *au courant* with useful text abbreviations in Czech and Dutch, Welsh and Chinese, or seven other languages, *Txtng: The G8t Db8* throws in the lists you need.

**References**

Gendolla, P., & Schäfer, J. (Eds.). (2007). *The aesthetics of net literature: Writing, reading and playing in programmable media*. Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript Verlag.