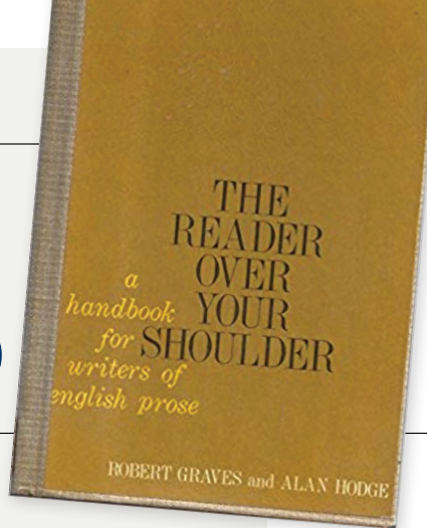


BEST WORD FORWARD



Growing up in the 1970s, I thought of Robert Graves as the man behind a TV show I wasn't supposed to watch. *I, Claudius*, his

novel about imperial Rome, had been adapted as a television series that was the *Game of Thrones* of its day, touched by the violence and depravity of court life in a faraway kingdom.

This obviously wasn't PG-rated stuff, and the show's opening credits, which included a nod to Graves, were my signal to change the channel or risk my mother's wrath. For years, even a passing mention of Graves quickly evoked for me a sense of the illicit.

Only much later did I discover that Graves was famous for something else – namely, a memoir of his World War I years, *Goodbye to All That*, still celebrated as a classic chronicle of youthful disillusionment. In recent months, I've connected with yet a third legacy of Graves, an Englishman who died in 1985 at age 90.

In 1940, just after the fall of France to the Nazis and the evacuation of Allied warriors at Dunkirk, Graves and co-author Alan Hodge began work on a writing guide called *The Reader Over Your Shoulder*. It appeared in 1943, while much of the world was in flames.

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Readers might have naturally wondered, given the global conflagration, why anyone would be worrying about the best way to craft sentences.

That reality wasn't lost on Graves and Hodge, who suggested that precisely because of what civilization faced, there was no better time to affirm the value of clear prose.

"With a new war to be won," Patricia T. O'Conner writes in her introduction to the most recent edition, "the kingdom couldn't afford careless, sloppy English. Good communication was critical, but Graves and Hodge were afraid that English prose in its current state was not up to the task."

For the men who wrote *The Reader Over Your Shoulder*, writing clearly was a civic imperative: "The writing of good English is ... a moral matter, as the Romans held that the writing of good Latin was."

Graves and Hodge were not alone, of course, in thinking of clear writing as a bulwark of civil society. Shortly after the close of World War II, in his iconic essay "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell argued essentially the same thing. If clear writing is the result of clear thinking, as Orwell saw it, then no doubt the reverse is true – that writing clearly can promote lucid thinking, an obvious antidote to tyranny.

The Reader Over Your Shoulder takes its title from the idea of language as a collaboration, one in which we think not only of what we want to say, but how it might best be understood by someone else.

It's a message worth remembering in our Twitterpated age, in which we too often think of writing as directed inward, toward the navel, rather than outward, toward the wider world.

The rules for good writing that Graves and Hodge advance are really nothing new. What should abide is their sense that rules themselves can benefit language – then, now, and as long as one mind tries to reach another through the written word.

DANNY HEITMAN (Southeastern Louisiana University) is a columnist for *The Advocate* newspaper in Louisiana and the author of *A Summer of Birds: John James Audubon at Oakley House*. He frequently writes about literature and culture for national publications, including *Humanities* magazine and *The Wall Street Journal*.