

jcannonbooks

Because everybody
needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter



Negative thoughts+

Social distancing, a valuable tool in the fight against Covid-19, has a side benefit that most public health experts did not expect. Without movies, parties, dinners, sports, or anything of interest on our schedules, we have more time to identify and obliterate language usages we consider objectionable.

At jcannonbooks, where social distancing has been a default behavior for decades, we have noticed just such a target. Who could have known that the humble plus sign would be warped and defiled?

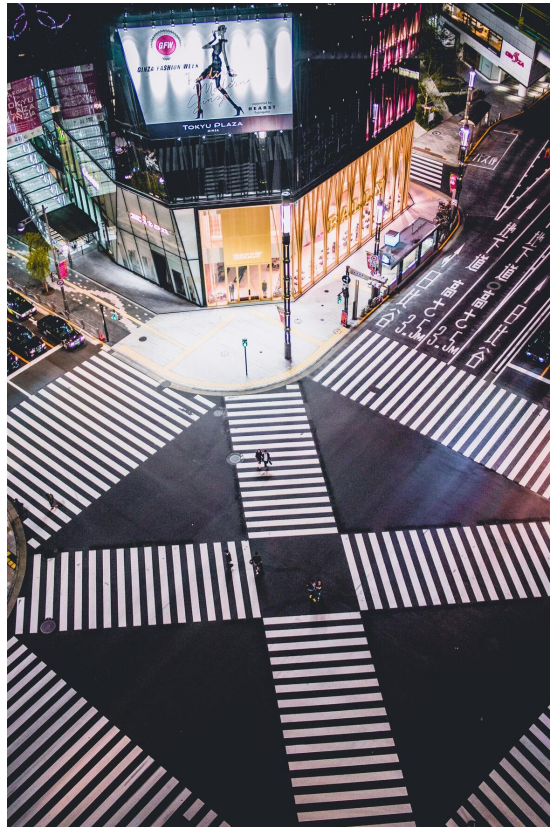
Disney+, ESPN+, Paramount+, AMC+, San Diego Mostly Average Roof Repair+.

I have seen stories about this naming convention in various media outlets, a sure sign that the plus sign has descended into overuse. What value does + add to any name? Consider how the airlines pounded the definition of plus into unrecognizable mush. Economy Plus has come to mean seats that have the same amount of legroom that we all had not so long ago without paying extra for it.

We can shun those who use + so offensively, but even better would be to find a different symbol that we could spread with irresponsible fervor, something that would absorb the attention given to the + sign and allow it to go back to mathematics, where it belongs. Such a thing exists. Writers know it as the

paragraph symbol. Microsoft Word users know it as the magic button in the upper middle of the home screen that reveals all the arcane formatting stuff that is preventing your work from looking the way you expect it to look. The symbol once was wielded only by squint-eyed proofreaders and sallow editors who worked with paper and pencil and used the glyph to tell writers where a paragraph needed to be broken in two (or three). It has waited faithfully for its due.

This week I learned that the symbol has a formal name. I am ashamed that I have not known it till now, but I'm going to human up and share my discovery. The backward cap P with two stalks, a symbol that looks like a musical score reject, is formally known as a pilcrow. Use it fearlessly and for no reason other than subtraction of the plus sign from the vernacular. Just more valuable advice from your friends at jcannonbooks¶.



Yeesh, they're everywhere. Photo by bantersnaps on Unsplash.



New blog item for the click-averse

[\[You can click here to read the illustrated, HTML-loaded version on the jcannonbooks website.\]](#)

St. Patrick's Day is mere hours away, so thoughts naturally turn to shamrocks, Guinness, and Catholicism, which reminds me that I have a confession to make.

I have never read *Ulysses*.

It's not that I haven't tried to fulfill this sacred quest. I have made at least three attempts. I have a 1934 Modern Library edition of the work that sits in a bookcase and dares me to try again. I am not completely unfamiliar with James Joyce or the Irish genius's masterwork. I managed to read *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. I have read about Bloomsday, the obscenity issues that made publication of *Ulysses* such a scandal, the connection to mythology, the experimental prose, and the modernism that *Ulysses* pioneered. But every time I open it, I grope my way through a few pages and ask myself: Exactly what the hell is this thing, anyway?

The '34 edition I own was a gift from a fellow reporter at a newspaper where I worked early in my career. That reporter was in his fifties then and had not been to college, which was not uncommon among reporters of his generation, and he reveled in educating people like me, a smug young English lit major. I benefited from his attention. He haunted bookstores near the University of Chicago, and I accompanied him on some of his forays. We eventually got around to James Joyce, and he was so unnerved by my disinterest in matters involving the oft-praised *Ulysses* that he gave me his Modern Library edition, which he had annotated in pencil. His idiosyncratic clues scribbled in the margins didn't help, but I was not surprised. My Joycean tutor wrote a weekly arts column that could be as indecipherable as *Ulysses*. I think he dodged the wrath of editors because he pitched his work as avant-garde, innovative, arty stuff that smart

people understood. But a column not far removed from gibberish wasn't an approach likely to increase readership. This is a line from one column: "Eureka, it's the dog-flying piranha feesh." Get it? Neither do I, but I can tell you that it was part of a piece that aimed to be a parody of *Star Wars*, which had just arrived at theaters. I don't know much about art, but I know what I don't understand.

I suggest that my history with James Joyce runs in the family. My grandfather, an Irish immigrant, didn't read *Ulysses* either. You might think that's a slap against a celebrated countryman, but it is not. My grandfather was an Irish speaker (Gaelic, if you must) from County Donegal. He didn't read much English, so he had good reason.

Other people appear to have had no trouble appreciating the novel's value. *Ulysses* is a "work of high genius," critic and *New Republic* editor Edmund Wilson wrote in 1922. Still, the praise was not universal. Virginia Woolf considered *Ulysses* an "illiterate, underbred book." Wilson, by the way, described the Lord of the Rings trilogy by Tolkien as "juvenile trash." I don't know much about art, but who does?

I see a connection between *Ulysses* and book display. Take My Word for It subscriber Bill S. and I have discussed bookshelves so that you don't have to, and we have determined that at least three categories of bookshelf owners exist. People who use them to store every book they have ever read; people who keep few books other than life-changing experiences such as Jack Reacher novels; and people who have shelves full of books they mostly have not read, but they are impressive titles that show well on Zoom. *Ulysses* ownership follows a similar pattern. There are people who have actually read all 265,000 words and proudly display the book as a sign of their literacy and stamina. There are people who read part of it forty years ago and have left it on the shelf "for later." There are people who tried to read the book but have found no romance and pitched it, even after skipping the first 100 pages as some literary counselors advise. And there are people who have never read it and don't intend to but like the idea of sharing a room with an Irish heavyweight.

I can hear you now. "I recognize the value that *Ulysses* offers the world, but I just don't feel up to it, especially after you just talked about it so disrespectfully," you say with concern. "I am willing to temporarily set aside my thoughts about whether you are a barbarian if you can give me some other books by Irish authors or about Ireland that I can read right now."

Well, that's not hard.

Sally Rooney. As if I had to tell you. As if you haven't already seen Hulu's version of *Normal People*.

Ken Bruen. The guy doesn't have his own website, doesn't tweet, and has a face that looks like he got into one too many bar fights. His Jack Taylor character reminds me of Nesbo's Harry Hole, but not Norwegian and with more alcohol.

And to undercut the misty-eyed, auld sod myths that green beer and Guinness can produce on March 17, *Say Nothing*, nonfiction by Patrick Radden Keefe, an American, is a sobering, deeply reported book about the Troubles.

Or maybe something by Tana French or Colum McCann, who have unusual reverse career patterns. French is an American who moved to Ireland to write, and McCann is a Dubliner who moved to the U.S. to write. Or even Mickey Spillane whose father was Irish. Or maybe novelist Michael Harvey, who once owned and may still own an Irish bar on Halsted Street in Chicago, a grand achievement that James Joyce never managed.

Sláinte.

**Kind regards,
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