



# Doing Our Own Thing: The Degradation of Language and Music and Why We Should, Like, Care

*John H. McWhorter*

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A rousing polemic in defense of the written word by the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Losing the Race* and the widely acclaimed history of language *The Power of Babel*.

Critically acclaimed linguist John McWhorter has devoted his career to exploring the evolution of language. He has often argued that language change is inevitable and in general culturally neutral-languages change rapidly even in indigenous cultures where traditions perpetuate; and among modernized peoples, culture endures despite linguistic shifts. But in his provocative new book, *Doing Our Own Thing*, McWhorter draws the line when it comes to how cultural change is turning the English language upside down in America today, and how public English is being overwhelmed by street English, with serious consequences for our writing, our music, and our society.

McWhorter explores the triumph of casual over formal speech-particularly since the dawn of 1960s counterculture-and its effect on Americans' ability to write, read, critique, argue, and imagine. In the face of this growing rift between written English and spoken English, the intricate vocabularies and syntactic roadmaps of our language appear to be slipping away, eroding our intellectual and artistic capacities. He argues that "our increasing alienation from 'written language' signals a gutting of our intellectual powers, our self-regard as a nation, and thus our very substance as a people."

Timely, thought-provoking, and compellingly written, *Doing Our Own Thing* is sure to stoke many debates about the fate of our threatened intellectual culture, and the destiny of our democracy.

## Doing Our Own Thing: The Degradation of Language and Music and Why We Should, Like, Care Details

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# **From Reader Review Doing Our Own Thing: The Degradation of Language and Music and Why We Should, Like, Care for online ebook**

**Dave Peticolas says**

The subtitle of this book is "The Degradation of Language and Music and Why We Should, Like, Care". A linguist, McWhorter takes pains to explain that this is not another book decrying the "declining" standards of English grammar and that, e.g., there is no meaningful way in which "is not" is more correct than "ain't".

Instead, McWhorter offers three theses:

1. American's relationship to written and publicly spoken language has changed, with formal, carefully prepared prose and speech giving way to informal, off-the-cuff "talk".
2. The reason for this change is primarily the anti-Establishment movement of the sixties in which formal language was equated with the controlling hand and deceptive designs of the Powers That Be.
3. This change has both positive and negative implications.

Through a wealth of anecdotes, McWhorter does seem to establish his first point. Although he sometimes takes cheap shots, like comparing Lincoln's Gettysburg Address to a speech by George W. Bush, a picture does emerge of an earlier time in which formal language, and a love of English, was far more prevalent than today.

When he comes to the second thesis, McWhorter is on rockier ground. Although the influence of the sixties is no doubt present, he raises and then dismisses a number of possible additional factors such as the rise of radio and television and the invention of Jazz. These factors are dismissed due to issues of "timing", as if cultural effects have to happen all at once or not at all, a premise he never defends but merely uses. Jazz in particular seems to be a worthy candidate since "Doing Your Own Thing" is basically Article I of the Jazz Constitution.

Strangely, he devotes the least amount of space to the third point. The benefits and drawbacks of formal language are usually mentioned only in passing and rarely spelled out in a detailed argument.

Finally, and also strange for a work which emphasizes the benefits of formal language for structuring an argument, the book is not especially well written. The sections seem to ramble from one topic to another without a gradual buildup to a convincing conclusion. Possible contradictions between earlier and later statements are not noticed or accounted for.

Nevertheless, it does seem as if McWhorter is on to something. Our relationship to our language does seem to have changed and we may have lost something of value in the transition. As to exactly how it happened, what the consequences are, and what we might do about it -- these questions require another book.

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## Mark Jr. says

I'm a big McWhorter fan. His lecturing style, which is just like his writing style, is so engagingly brilliant.

This was such a wonderful and odd book; it revealed more of McWhorter's personality than previous reads and listens, specifically his dedication to musical theater—and the fact that his pop culture knowledge is almost scarily extensive.

And that fact also points to a fundamental ambivalence—I almost said "equivocation"—in the book: does he really and truly lament the collapse in the distance between casual English and the more elaborated written form of English that used to be common coin? He doesn't write in the formal language of yesteryear (and he knows this). He doesn't like poetry (and he knows this). He does draw the line, apparently, at the vapidness of much rap and pop. But he ends up providing reams of analysis with little explicit evaluation. There is *implicit* evaluation, the reader has to think, all the way along, but when the explicit evaluation comes it sputters. He doesn't think we can do anything to change our cultural-linguistic situation, and he's not even sure it's all bad (immigrants, for example, fare better in a cultural situation in which people aren't so prissy about English style). All he knows is that we have lost something we used to have. If anything, that something is love for our country, knowledge of and pride in its story—casual writing is a symptom of this malaise, he says. We're not proud of English because we're not proud to be Americans (or Brits as the case may be). That's not something a linguist, or any individual, can change.

McWhorter's is the only book-level treatment of this topic I've read. I don't know a *better* analysis. But I'm not entirely persuaded by this one. Correlation and causation just cannot be established with perfect certainty on a culture-wide scale. But I honor him for trying, and I'll be meditating on his analysis for years to come, I think. He's already proven to be one of the stickiest writers I read.

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## Reagan Simms says

Very little of this book is spent discussing actual linguistic theory, so don't get your hopes up. I have a lot of respect for McWhorter, but this read was convaluted and dry.

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## Rachel Gatwood says

This is a fun read. McWhorter's digressions on pop culture and literature are great. That said, the book as a whole doesn't hold together very well. The central argument is too simple and some of the examples given are unconvincing.

What's more, McWhorter is too honestly conflicted about his thesis to really drive the point home. Despite the abrasive title, he loves "low" culture for what it is and he studies it with the impartiality of a linguist. A more narrow-minded author might have written a more satisfying polemic.

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## Jennifer says

My mind was stimulated and tickled by this rollicking analysis of the changes in spoken and written language in America. McWhorter especially focuses on the changes brought about by the 1960s cultural revolution: the narrowing of the gap between written and oral language, the distrust and dislike of formality in language, and the loss of love of our native language. Pre-1960s Americans cherished a polished, formal, and dressed-up version of English, found in their speeches, letters, and entertainment, that in our ears today sounds stuffy and false. Our modern culture coming out of the "do your own thing" movement now reveres raw and unadorned communication, seeing it as more sincere (and therefore more attractive), and can hardly fathom a day when formal language could thrill hearts. It is quite startling to take an objective peek at the culture you find yourself in, and McWhorter quite successfully leads you to a place where you can do this. I found myself thinking over and over, "I am such a product of my culture."

There were some downsides to this book: rough, crude language that I found offensive; loads of obscure cultural references (understandably) to books, music, persons, and movies, half of which I had never heard of; and a very sprawling, open-ended, and wordy writing style that was a bit hard to follow at times.

I find that I am taking a very hard look at my own writing of this review and this is a direct result of reading this book. I don't think I will ever look at a speaker or writer in quite the same way. I will now be asking how culture is impacting the words they use, the way they put them together, and even the ideas that they are communicating.

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## Emily says

Culled for musical theater anecdotes, *Doing Our Own Thing* could be a sizable essay on one heterosexual man's love of show tunes. In intention and result, it's a discussion of American English's transition from a written to an oral language, a change that's been happening gradually from the early part of the last century. It's an upsetting book, actually. John (we've left off formal titles) quotes a sixth grade textbook dating up to the 1920s, "When I am in a serious humor, I often walk by myself in Westminster Abbey," from 1960, "I decided, after my first voyage, to spend the rest of my days at Bagdad," and 1996, "Tachawin had packed the parfleche cases with clothing and food and strapped them to a travois." John says, "We read it thankful that we are too old to bother with a text so dingdong dull," and then he translates the passage without the vocabulary words, "Justin had packed the leather cases with clothing and food and strapped them to two trailing poles with a skin stretched between them." Dingdong dull is an awesome and apt description of a passive construction written for diversity not content. That is the thesis of *Doing Our Own Thing*, that American English (and British) is being written in less elegant, less complex ways; that people no longer care for (or acknowledge) rhetoric; they cannot use a formal, written variant of language in, for example, letters (which they don't write anymore) or books (which would never sell) or schools (where English is suspect as a tool of oppression); that adults today (including me) have never known a world where a command of English was explicitly valued (blame the Baby Boomers); and that written and formal English will continue to be expressed through traditionally oral and informal idioms. And English will rarely be valued for its own beauty and craft. Terrible, right? In a long chapter on the death of poetry, John points out that no culture has ever had less national poetry than the US today, and that people eat up, say, Annie Proulx's prose poetics because they are so starved of poetry in its own terms; poetry today has thrown off its suspectly artful language to become that arrhythmic, clunky, difficult to digest prose we all make fun of.

Reading to the end, I felt like I was standing at Fort Snelling looking over the Minnesota River, with the man dressed as Josiah Snelling saying, "Everything from here west to the Rockies was prairie," and you look out past the freeway and know that no matter what happens, that prairie will never come back. Doing Our Own Thing, bleak as it can be, is fun. John's a polyglot, and the area he covers is vast and comic. Read this book.

<http://surfeitofbooks.blogspot.com/20...>

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## Christopher says

John McWhorter has long had a double identity. As a professor of linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley, he's written on the evolution of languages over time (*The Power of Babel*) and on English dialectology (*Word on the Street*). But he's also a cultural commentator, until recently directing his attention to the issues facing African-Americans (*Losing the Race* and *Authentically Black*). In *DOING OUR OWN THING: The Degradation of Language and Music and Why We Should, Like, Care* he combines his two interests. McWhorter claims that there's indeed a real problem with the English that we hear today in the media and from our politics, and the English we read in popular literature.

McWhorter, like all reputable linguists, will readily state that all languages are essentially equal in that they serve the basic needs of their bodies of speakers. His argument is not that English is going downhill in a way that is reducing people to unintelligent brutes who can't get their message across. No, McWhorter believes that the decline of oratorical skills and literary flair is simply depriving English-speaking culture of some beauty that people could enjoy. He pairs letters from grade-school dropouts of the 1800s with newspaper articles by professional journalists of today to show that, yes, in days of yore people used to appreciate the skill they could display in writing elegant prose, and everyone was capable of giving it a go. He puts the Gettysburg Address next to what a professional speechwriter prepared for President Bush to show that nowadays our politicians provide uninspiring and half-hearted explanations of their motivations and goals. English in the public sphere, McWhorter claims, is lame.

McWhorter has no problem with people on the street talking like they are wont to. He notes that the civil engineer of a century ago who wrote a lovely letter to his sweetheart likely used much coarser language on the job with his construction men. But there should be a place for linguistic virtuosity. Great literature, which is the very exploitation of a language's possibilities, is today rarely encountered in the mainstream media. Poetry is replaced by the Spoken Word, where there's little elegance or artfulness in the construction, just rants against the Man. Indeed, McWhorter traces much of the downhill trend to the 1960s, when the rebellion against authorities tragically entailed a rejection of fine arts, which was mistakenly seen as elitist.

McWhorter extends the argument to music, feeling that popular music today concentrates on rhythm at the expense of other parameters of music. Compare a rap song to a fine jazz tune from half a century ago: once upon a time popular music was rich. This extension is reasonable, but the musical portion of the book is so slim that it seems an after-thought; would that he have fleshed it out a bit. I'm also not sure I buy McWhorter's assertion that English-speaking cultures are the only ones neglecting linguistic virtuosity. Sure, there are cultures out there where speaking eloquently still elicits wonder, but things like poetry are dead in lots of places. Just as the average Dane if he knows who Pia Tafdrup or Ole Sarvig are, or the average Japanese young person if he'd prefer to put down his manga and enjoy some Kawabata instead. The trend may have started in the United States, fount of much international popular culture, but all developed societies are going post-literary.

I am a graduate student of linguistics because I love the diversity of human speech. I am fascinated by the rainbow of languages on Earth, and how within each there is a lively array of registers. But in English, as well as various other languages I speak, things are getting awfully monochromatic and the spice is gone. With *DOING OUR OWN THING* McWhorter might not be able to stop this massive trend, but it's admirable that he notices there's a problem, and the book is sure to be thought-provoking for the lovers of language, literature, and fine music among us.

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### **Alex Allain says**

The central argument of this book is that there is a qualitative difference between written and oral communication, that this difference is important, and that current culture privileges oral communication over written communication, to its detriment.

Written communication differs from oral communication by being less overtly biased, more detailed--relying less on context and more thorough in presenting context, and more concise (oral communication is typically extraordinarily redundant). Written communication also allows more elaborated, complex communication.

McWhorter argues that this difference affects political discourse by favoring a style of communication that communicates less information, less clearly. Furthermore, other means of communication--from poetry to music--suffer from similar issues. For example, modern music focuses on rhythm favoring repetition of themes or interesting voices rather than constantly varying the melody. Similarly, poetry has become more free-form, which simplifies the task of the poet.

It's not entirely clear that there is any inherent reason why relaxing these constraints is a bad thing. In fact, McWhorter points out that in many ways the elaborated communication patterns that are out of vogue served as markers of class, and that the loss of prestige for this patterns of communication coincides with the loss of respect for authority that characterized the 60s.

I didn't find this book completely convincing in the argument that the degradation of language and music matters, but I certainly now find myself noticing when communication follows the written or oral style.

Maybe the most interesting thing about this book is that people used to listen to really long speeches written in the highfalutin style that most people today find incredibly tedious and pretentious.

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### **Renan says**

I read this book after reading *The Power of Babel*, (which I think is excellent), expecting a similar argument enlivened by careful observation and reasoning. What a disappointment! The thesis here is the decline of the west as shown in written language, popular music, and a host of other "trends". Besides showing his personal tastes, McWhorter claims to know the reason for this general decline: the 60s!

No careful weighting of evidence, no room for opposing views this book feels like a rant against the people that dared to challenge the given truth and therefore, in addition to be expelled from Eden, they took all of us with them.

McWhorter is a fine writer and some of his observations are worth pondering. But as a logical argument this book is a mess...



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## Todd Stockslager says

Not what you think, or at least not what I expected when I started. I expected this to be a more-or-less standard expression of the downward spiral of the English language due to the failures of our education system, the influence of television and music, and the influx of immigrants for whom English is at best a second language.

McWhorter, a young African-American (I wasn't familiar with McWhorter before picking up this book, and I also wasn't expecting either until seeing the author's picture on the back flap) linguist, in fact does examine the decline of the quality of written English, but not as a result of these influences, which he labels as symptoms, not causes. Rather he points to the general cultural rebellion against authority and formality that occurred in the US in the mid 1960s as the source of the problem. Rejection of political authority and bureaucratic and organizational formality quickly spread to language and music.

McWhorter's position is well-argued; he has not gone off half-cocked. He spends considerable time establishing that there have always been different standards between spoken English that American's used in casual speech and written language, which is easier to edit and subject to standards of grammar, vocabulary and precision. But he traces the trend of lowered expectations for written speech from, for example, Wilson's speeches in favor of the League of Nations, to Congressional speeches on December 8, 1941 in support of the declaration of war against Japan, to Congressional speeches on September 12, 2001, in response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

His conclusions and predictions, now six years old and made just at the cusp of ubiquitous available-everywhere communication technology, have proved quite prescient. This is not a gloom-and-doom treatise predicting the sudden downfall of America or English at the hands of a Casual-speech horde, nor is it a rose-colored call for a return to a "simpler time" of oratorical stump speeches and ornate letter writing.

Note: I have not read any of McWhorter's other books, but other reviewers here have praised his *The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language* as a superior book. I am not a linguist by trade, so I found this book quite interesting as it touches on uses of the language that are accessible to non-specialists like me and most readers. I would also reference Michael Adams' recent *Slang: The People's Poetry* (which I did read and review) as a companion to "Doing Our Own Thing" in its examination of the oral tradition of slang.

"Doing Our Own thing" is also a good companion to Elijah Wald's *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock n Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music*, a new book I read and reviewed recently, as McWhorter finds (six years before Wald and without reference by him!) the genetic marker of how the Beatles did the deed Wald claims for them in his mistitled book

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## Mark says

A very interesting book about how our written language and music have degraded over time, especially since 1965. The author almost seems to be upset about it, but then he says that it's a pretty natural thing to happen. He blames it on the non-conformist movement of the 60s...at least that's what sped things up. Before that, our written language was very florid and showed how much we loved our language. Now we are very skeptical

of authority and formality, so we write like we talk. Pre-1965, this review would have been pages long. Now it will only be a few lines. Even newspapers were more florid in their prose.

And music is a total lost cause. We've gone from classical music being on television to rap/hip-hop, which is the ultimate form of song as talk. The rock and roll in the middle is populated by singers who aren't trained. They basically talk the lyrics with some musical notes thrown in for good measure.

Not that I'm complaining. I would rather hear U2 than Mozart. Maybe that's sad in a way, but it's the way I was brought up. And it's what I like.

And it's what the author likes, too. He can appreciate classical, but he also loves showtunes. Even those have been dumbed down since 1965. Compare "I've Got You Under My Skin" to anything by Andrew Lloyd Webber (who he calls dishwater...heh heh).

Anyway, this book is, unfortunately, out of print. But it's a very interesting book for those of us interested in our language.

My copy had just about an entire chapter missing, which sucked. And it happened to be a chapter about music. Blah.

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## **Emily says**

Review pending.

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## **Lance says**

Overall, I enjoyed reading this book. McWhorter's study of the cultural side of linguistics, and especially the change in the relationship that Americans have had with their language, was simply fascinating. There were a couple or so places where he uses a wirty dord, so if that offends you, you may want to steer away from this book. Even with that, I appreciated that his use of that sort of language was not indiscriminate but used to make the point that he was trying to make. I do not say this to excuse him; rather I say it to announce that I do not automatically reject him. His ideas on the changing relationship Americans have had with their language are dead-on right. The 60s really did change America, and while some change was good, other change was not. Our culture and our society have both suffered not only from the depleted relationship with language but also with that a depleted relationship with everything connected with language --- politics, the arts, even our sense of identity. At the same time, I appreciated McWhorter's sense of common sense: Let's recognize that grammar is merely a convention and therefore subject to change with time, thus enabling us to free ourselves from some of the ridiculousness inherent in hanging on to grammar rules inherited from Latin, a language that is not only not our own but also no longer in common use. The way McWhorter unravels the historical examples in his book is fascinating. Overall, I found the book a very engaging read and would recommend it to those interested in languages, culture, history, or all of the above.

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## **David says**

Having read and enjoyed "The Power of Babel", I expected better from McWhorter. But this was a lazy, sloppy, pointless, self-indulgent, piece of nothing. Somehow I find it more annoying when someone as obviously talented as this author perpetrates something as sloppy as this book

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**Christy says**

The most important idea I gleaned from this book is that written language and spoken language are very different. Other than that... I lost interest about halfway through this book. It's repetitive and unfocused.

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