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Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage

William Morris, Mary Morris

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William Morris, Mary Morris : Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Best Reference for Word UsageBy Tom HollowayI've been through both editions of this book and just wish there was a third edition to buy. Virtually every word I've ever looked up is in this usually with a well written explanation and often a usage vote by their very distinguished panel.I often pick it up and read a page just because it is interesting. This is one of those books that should be in everyone's library.4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. A treasure of knowledge and funBy jazmaanI learned everything I know about grammar and usage from this book! It was a gift to me as a teenager and it guided me to A's throughout high school and college. Who would have thought a dictionary could actually be FUN to read? Well this one is because it poses a multitude of common problems in contemporary usage, e.g. "to split or not to split infinitives", and then lets a range of academics and humorists tackle them. The results are both enlightening and amusing.Too bad its out of print.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. The Morrises (And 131 Other Experts) Explain It All...By Gregor von KallahannI recently picked this item up at a library book sale--and what a find. This is the 1975, and it's hard to believe that so much (apparently) has changed in terms of "acceptable" usage. Who knew that "contact" as a verb was ever all that controversial, for instance? Or "convince" in the sense of "persuade"? I have to admit (sheepishly) that, as fussy as I can be about language, it never crossed my mind that these were points of controversy--let alone, actual linguistic no-no's in anyone's book.Apparently, "contact" in the sense of "get in touch with" was considered "colloquial" in '75, although the impressive panel that editors William and Mary Morris (131 of the most

celebrated writers, editors and "word mavens" of the time) seemed dead set against its use in written English. As a verb, "contact" had been, it seems, a "commonplace of business jargon" for several decades by the mid-70s. The question the Morrises put to their esteemed panel (of 136 members) was whether it was acceptable as either spoken or written English even then. The comments of several panelists are included verbatim, and let's just say that most were not pleased with this linguistic development. And reading their remarks, I get where they're coming from (if THAT'S acceptable usage!). "Contact" does connote physical interaction, as panelist Davidson Taylor noted ("as in sports"). Then again, "get in TOUCH with" or even "reach" have a similar connotation. The very prescient Dwight McDonald noted, "...it IS neater; in another generation, it will sound OK." Well, it's a least a generation (maybe a generation and a half) since that was uttered, and I'd say the gentleman was right. But personally, I find myself having a grand old time pondering and sometimes debating (with myself, I mean) the various usage controversies set forth in this volume. I mean, everyone knows "ain't" ain't acceptable, but was that overkill? If--as the book's editors and the consulting panelists seem to think--the term was derived from a contraction of "am not" (with the two consecutive nasal sounds merged, resulting in "an't")--isn't there an argument for its use with the first person singular? Did generations of Miss Grundy-types do their job too well? Well, I remember as a pre-schooler reciting, "Don't say 'ain't,' or your mother will faint--and your father will fall in a bucket of paing." So I guess the word was out, even among illiterate four year olds. Linguistic hairsplitting can be fun, of course, at least until it starts to drive you crazy. I've also read (elsewhere, there's no mention here) that "ain't" may have been a corruption of "HAVE not," which given the tendency of some English dialects to drop "h's," would also seem plausible. In fact, it occurs to me that there may have been a couple of different "ain't's" floating around in the common parlance. Maybe they blended and formed the all-purpose negative that "ain't" seems to have served as--until it was hounded out of the language by the schoolmarm's worldwide. You can see why a reader like me is just having a ball with this chatty and sometimes rancorous reference work. Sometimes though, I'm not clear on just what point is being debated. The discussion on "ain't" referred me to an additional entry for "aren't I," a phrase I've used all my life but am not told is used mostly in England (Well, I AM from NEW England, if that makes a difference." I'm not sure if the editors are concerned about its use in general or simply as a kind of "tag question," given that the example they throw out to the panelists is "I'm late, aren't I?" Some of those same panelists (such as POGO originator Walt Kelly) seem more concerned with the use of tag questions at all ("If the man is late, he's late. Why the question"). That's all very amusing, but I would use "aren't I" in ANY interrogative context (well, any concerning MYSELF), and it sounds a lot tidier and less hoity-toity than the apparently more GRAMMATICAL "am I not." This has got to be one of the funnest usage books ever! (Now parse THAT sentence for me.)

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