FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Reference

**Plain Style: A Guide to Written English**
Christopher Lasch
University of Pennsylvania Press
978-0-8122-3673-6
(May 31, 2002)

It was May, 1985, and the author, a professor at the University of Rochester, was grading papers "with the usual sense of futility" (as he recalled in a letter to his father) when he noticed that the sentence through which he was muddling had trailed off irretrievably into blurry incoherence.

The paper itself was probably no worse than others turned in by his students in Twentieth-Century American History and only happened to lie under his scrutiny at the moment when his patience ran out.

To his credit as a teacher, he took the time to write an 865-word note to the errant student explaining his various missteps. More important, Lasch also returned with renewed purpose to an old project, initially consisting of stray notes on historiography and writing in general, which evolved into this posthumously published book. (Lasch died in 1994. Among the books that survive him are Haven in a Heartless World, The Culture of Narcissism, The True and Only Heaven, The Revolt of the Elites, and The Betrayal of Democracy.)

At one stage in its development, Plain English, as Lasch called it, was required reading for history majors. Parts of it deal with fundamentals of composition, about which Lasch's doctoral students might have learned something in elementary school, but their writing bore little evidence of earlier encounters with such mundane matters as placement of commas and rules of capitalization.

The book opens with a cogent point-by-point analysis of Randolph Bourne's small masterpiece "The Undergraduate," which serves to illustrate elementary principles of literary composition. Part III, "Characteristics of Bad Writing," is itself something of a masterpiece—a cataloguing, with stunningly good examples, of what makes writing bad, such as excessive reliance on nouns and adjectives to carry the thought, resulting in "the dull, noun-heavy, Germanic prose churned out in such abundance by the academy."

Passive voice, he says, is a mainstay of bad scholarly writing because it gives the

appearance of objectivity and provides a refuge of self-effacement for timid scholars who are unwilling to risk a straightforward judgment. Similarly, using abstract language "convey[s] an impression of scientific precision, of painfully acquired learning and scholarship, of Olympian detachment from the commonplace facts of everyday life."

Stewart Weaver, who worked with Lasch at Rochester, has provided an introduction that might have upstaged a lesser figure. Besides giving readers an overview of Lasch's thought and writings, Weaver offers a fascinating analysis of Plain Style as a populist document behind which is the abiding spirit of George Orwell. He also argues that the book has a solid base in Protestantism and that it reflects the author's movement toward acceptance of religion in the last years of his life.

*Harold Cordry*