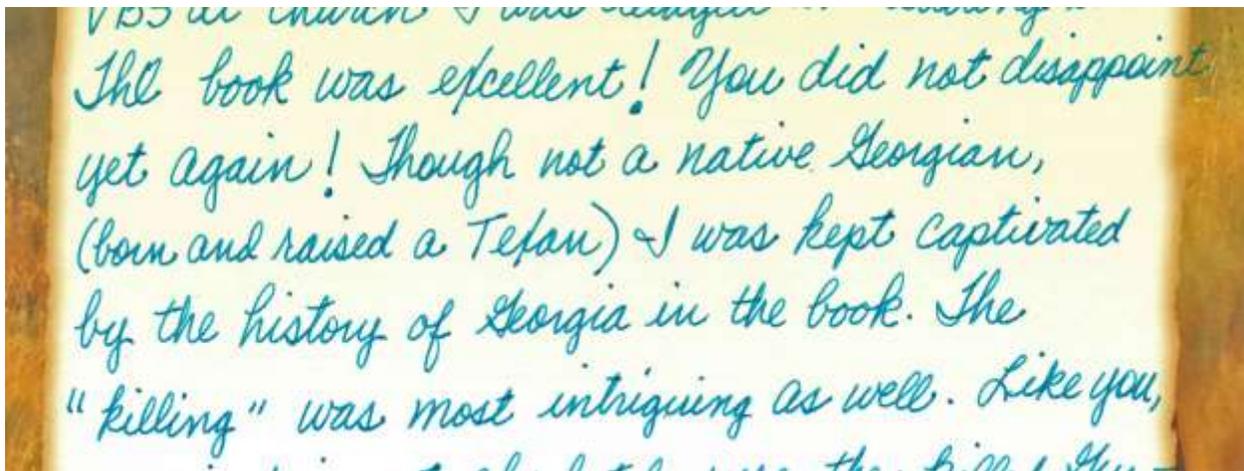


The Death of Cursive It's the End of the Wor(l)d as We Know It...

The last few weeks seem to have brought a steady stream of events and episodes that keeps reminding me that change is constant, even for the most basic of things. In this case I'm referring to the demise of the writing style we know as cursive.

It all started several weeks ago when I received a letter from someone who'd read my latest book and truly enjoyed it. The thoughts and the words were perfectly poised, but equally important was the exquisite script in which the letter was written. The curves and flourishes and finials penned in blue ink were amazing. It was a work of art, to be treasured not only for its kind sentiments, but for its intrinsic beauty.



At about the same time, the State of Georgia announced that it was closing its handwriting analysis unit. This "long-established crime-solving tool" was "going the way of snail mail and cursive penmanship," in the words of an *Atlanta Constitution* reporter. Gone are the days of deciphering ransom notes, forgeries, and faked suicide letters designed to cover up murders. The tasks, if ever needed, will be outsourced to "private vendors."

And then a couple of weeks ago I was doing a book signing at one of the regional outlets of a major national bookstore chain. A young couple walked in, both in their early twenties, he likely a construction worker based on his dress, and she a college student and eager reader. They approached my table, and after a few words of my standard sales pitch she was fascinated. We exchanged a bit more conversation, ending with the girl asking me to autograph the book to her personally. The boyfriend had stood to the side, silent, looking very much like a fish out of water. They headed off happily toward the check out. About fifteen minutes later the boyfriend stormed back over to my table, slammed the book down and demanded, "What did you write in my girlfriend's book?" I opened, looked, and replied, "To Carol, With Best Wishes," followed by my signature. He stammered, bushed, mumbled a few words that sounded like "Oh, sorry..." then slinked off, quite embarrassed. I'd inscribed it in florid cursive.

Finally, the George Zimmerman murder trial is underway in Florida. The state's star witness, a nineteen year-old named Rachel Jeantel was on the stand, poised to give damning testimony against the accused. When presented with a letter she had allegedly written to the victim's mother, she was unable to read it, stating, "I can't read cursive," and in the process destroying much of her credibility. (Turns out she hadn't written the letter, but had someone else do it for her.)

I have fond memories of my second grade teacher, Mrs. Snider, giving me a gold star for my writing skills, citing my properly crossed "t"s and my precisely dotted "i"s. She said that one's penmanship reflected one's personality, that a man's greatness was reflected in his handwriting, that one could judge a person's character from the way he wrote. I was impressed.

Sometime later, I think it was when I was in high school, I developed an interest in handwriting analysis. I discovered "graphology theory," reinforcing my grade school teacher's words. It is basically the belief that one's writing belies one's true character, "a very old and respected science" to borrow the words of a contemporary resource. Things like margins, word and line spacing, pressure, slant and angle, and multiple other minute and arcane features reveal all, defying attempts to hide or deceive. Hence, for example, a leftward slant indicates reserve and self-centeredness, while an upright slant shows independence. How one loops their "g"s or "y"s can define impatience, aggression, confrontation or a need for security. I tried analyzing the writing of my various girlfriends and was never very successful at it.

On a personal basis, I think I began to slip to the dark side somewhere in college or medical school—I'm not really sure. Looking back on the things I wrote then, I can see increasing use of printed script and shorthand in my notes. It got worse. By the time I had finished by residency my handwriting was a unholy chimera of print, abbreviations and personal style that only vaguely reflected the cursive training of my childhood. My "S"s were just squiggly lines, not the formal cleft sign-like figure I'd been taught. My "B"s might be best described as a variant on a Greek *beta*, with my "R"s and "P"s the same with missing strokes. After a decade or so of prescription writing, sometimes even I had trouble reading what I'd written.

Now we are in the age of electronics. Like many, I spend hours each day tapping a keyboard in front of a glowing screen. Hardly a hour in that day goes by that I don't "sign" something on a tablet or computer, often "inserting" an electronic "signature" on a PDF form, or other times making a squiggly set of lines when I sign for my credit card charge while checking out at Wal-Mart. My two girls, now in college, seem to have totally forsaken their cursive education in favor of a rapid printing style that could easily be adopted to Chinese calligraphy.

Even the schools have—for the most part—given up on cursive in favor of keyboarding and computer skills. National curriculum guidelines that are set to be adopted in 2014 have dropped cursive completely. Thus far, 45 states have signed on (can I still use

that term?), with only three thus far—including Georgia—retaining its teaching as a core skill. The reasoning seems to boil down to these considerations: Cursive is nice, but not necessary as a communication skill. Simple printing will do as well. The time spent on teaching it could be better spent elsewhere, including preparing for computer-based standardized testing. As time goes on, fewer and fewer people will write in cursive and fewer and fewer people will be able to read it with ease. Soon, perhaps, we'll all be like Rachel Jeantel, stating blandly and without emotion, "I can't read cursive." Times have changed. There's no shame in that.