

## Ian McEWAN *Amsterdam* (1998 – Booker Prize Winner):

In a language as idiomatically stressed as English, opportunities for misreadings are bound to arise. By a mere backward movement of stress, a verb can become a noun, an act a thing. To refuse – to insist on saying no to what you believe is wrong – becomes at a stroke, refuse – an insurmountable pile of garbage. As with words, so with sentences. What Clive had intended on Thursday and posted on Friday was, You deserve to be *sacked* What Vernon was bound to understand on Tuesday in the aftermath of his dismissal was, You deserve to be sacked. Had the card arrived on Monday, he might have read it differently. This was the comic nature of their fate; a first-class stamp would have served both men well.

(page 148 of the 2009 Vintage edition)

## Robert LITTELL *The Sisters* (1986):

He would make an awkward declaration of love. Because the Russian language was devoid of articles, it would have the staccato quality of a telegram.

It was Piotr Borisovich who, during one of his English-polishing sessions with the Potter, had commented on the difference between English and Russian. Where English dallied, meandered, embellished, Russian took the shortest path between two points; Russian political thinking could trace its roots to the Russian language, Piotr Borisovich had said. In what sense? the Potter had asked. In the sense that Communism was essentially a shortcut. Are you against shortcuts? the Potter had asked; it had been early in their relationship and he was on the alert for ideological faults. I am all for them, Piotr Borisovich had replied, his head cocked, his eyes smiling, on the condition that they get you there sooner.

(p. 24 of the 1987 Pan Books edition)

## Martin AMIS *Time's Arrow* (1991):

I have a superb vocabulary (monad, retractile, necropolis, palindrome, antidisestablishmentarianism) and nonchalant command of all grammatical rules. The apostrophe in 'Please Respect Owner's Rights' isn't where it ought to be. (Nor is the one on the placard on Route 6 which locates and praises 'Rogers' Liquor Locker'.) Apart from the words for motion or process, which always have me reaching for my inverted commas ('give', 'fall', 'eat', 'defecate'), the written language makes plain sense, unlike the spoken. Here's another joke: 'She calls me up and says, "Get over here, There's nobody home." So I get over there, and guess what. There's nobody home.'

(p. 16-17 of the 1992 Penguin Edition)