The Right Word in the Right Place at the Right Time: Wit and Wisdom from the Popular Language Column in the New York Times Magazine by William Safire

For the past twenty-five years Americans have relied on Pulitzer Prize-winning wordsmith William Safire for their weekly dose of linguistic illumination in The New York Times Magazine's column On Language -- one of the most popular features of the magazine and a Sunday-morning staple for innumerable fans. He is the most widely read writer on the English language today. Safire is the guru of contemporary vocabulary, speech, language, usage and writing. Dedicated and disputatious readers itch to pick up each column and respond to the week's linguistic wisdom with a gotcha letter to the Times. The Right Word in the Right Place at the Right Time marks the publication of Safire's sixteenth book on language. This collection is a classic to be read, re-read, enjoyed and fought over. Fans, critics and fellow linguists wait with bated (from the French abattre to beat down) breath for each new anthology -- and, like its predecessors, this one is bound to satisfy and delight. Safire finds fodder for his columns in politics and current events, as well as in science, technology, entertainment and daily life. The self-proclaimed card-carrying language maven and pop grammarian is not above tackling his own linguistic blunders as he detects language trends and tracks words, phrases and clichés to their source. Scholarly, entertaining and thoughtful, Safire's critical observations about language and slang are at once provocative and enlightening. Safire is America's go-to guy when it comes to language, and he has included sharp and passionately opinionated letters from readers across the English-speaking world who have been unable to resist picking up a pen to put the maven himself in his place or to offer alternate interpretations, additional examples, amusing anecdotes or just props. The Right Word in the Right Place at the Right Time is a
fascinating, learned and piquant look at the oddities and foibles that find their way into the English language. Exposing linguistic hooey and rigamarole and filled with Safires trademark wisdom, this book has a place on the desk or bedside table of all who share his profound love of the English language -- as well as his penchant for asking What does that mean? Or, Wassat? This new collection is sure to delight readers, writers and word lovers everywhere and spark the interest of anyone who has ever wondered, Where did the phrase brazen hussy come from?

My Personal Review:
I expected that this compilation of his columns on English usage and grammar would be another exercise in [overanalysis] of the language from an old, out-of-touch crank, similar to Buckleys masturbatory celebration of his own good English, The Right Word or George Wills angry, irrational screeds against Ebonics. But I was pleasantly surprised to see that this 85 year old off-the-docks Jewish Conservative who is best known for his cranky anti-liberal editorials, is really quite knowledgeable about current popular culture and its effect on the language.

The section on Hip-Hop/Rap Influence on the language is what interested me the most. Safire provides valuable insight into the nuances of izzle-talk, first popularized by hip-hop artist Snoop Dogg. He also presents a thorough analysis of the origins and meanings of Rap artists names, reaching back to SugarHill Gang and covering rap artists all the way up to Nas. Did you know that Nas is not just an acronym for network attached storage? Me neither. How in the world would an artist come to choose Nas or Snoop Doggie Dogg or Lil Bow Wow for a name? Well, William Safire is just the man to answer that question. He is especially humorous when spoofing hip-hop terms which have been over-used into obsolescence , and yet linger on in the stunted vocabularies of deluded lay people who have no understanding of the culture and are always a year or 2 behind the times. The essays Bye Bye Homegirl in Da House, Yo Yo Yo..No No No, Hold on to Yo MC Hammer CDs, Boyeeee and You Go Girlfreind. I Mean It, Go On, Get Out Of Here were hilarious.

One major low point of the book was the overwrought study of Missy Eliots Get Yer Freak On. Safire expends nearly 2 pages dissecting Eliots use of suburban subjunctive clauses and east coast participles to the point of absurdity. How he chose this particular selection to expound on is puzzling. Although Get Yer Freak On is undoubtedly one of the groundbreaking pieces of recent times, there are countless compositions by Eminem, NWA, Public Enemy, or even 2 Live Crew that are more deserving of such intense review.

Nonetheless, considering his advanced age and extreme conservative political leanings, it was indeed refreshing to discover that a crotchety old crank like Safire still got game.