



LITMUS PRESS

Standard American English Teaching Guide



Standard American English

By EL_S_TH H__ST_ON

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Book Description

Standard American English

By EL_S_TH H__ST_ON

In *Standard American English*, writer and multidisciplinary artist Elisabeth Houston brings her readers deep into the world of baby, a persona she has been developing in performance contexts àpsyche—where a self in formation staggers under the weight of sexual abuse, body image dysmorphia, rapacious materialism, fame obsession, and racial fetishism. What is witnessed here is the way late capitalism unfolds brutal games of power, affecting all dimensions of life, with the potential to consume and ravage individual actors, as well as entire communities and cultures.

Praise for *Standard American English*

This heartbreaking, experimental cycle of surrealist poems by Elisabeth Houston is a helluva ride in the Kathy Acker tradition of *Blood and Guts in High School*. As a meta-commentary and indictment of self-congratulatory New York cultural denizens, academia, art circles and romanticized self-harm, *Standard American English* considers how language and its resonances can hurt, box us in, destroy us even as it purports to make and save us. There are two primary characters in *S.A.E.*: Baby and the dissociating narrator that observes Baby's life, never once intervening to help, to save. Using the particularities of various New York representations, we see how people fall through the cracks, pick themselves up, harm and judge themselves, harm and judge others. Who is Baby? She's everyone we callously don't care about, everyone we're too cute to embrace. This rollicking hybrid tour-de-force from Elisabeth Houston evokes introspections on society from Acker, Wanda Coleman, Alfred Hitchcock, Jennifer Jazz, Akilah Oliver and Natalie Wynn. Houston indicts every individual's displaced capacity for cruelty under the patina of hipness. And yet, we root for Baby, we hope for Baby, and in doing so, in the end, maybe there's hope for us.

— Tracie Morris, author of *Who Do with Words*

There are writers who write and use language that already exists and lead us into new ways of seeing. There are also writers who invent language and form, who carve out words and names and experiences from earth's substance and bring a new universe into existence. Elisabeth Houston is an interdisciplinary artist, a poet, and is such an inventor, a new voice to ready ourselves for, a voice we need. What I admire in this debut book of poetry is not only the satire, social commentary, the swagger, the baby persona, the language fused from pop culture, but also the danger this writer flirts with, through subject matter, race and feminism, bulimia and sexual abuse and more... that in this book's great moments exposes and makes truth stare at you unabashed and it is moving.

— Pamela Sneed, author of *Funeral Diva*

Lesson Planning – Discussion Questions

- Examine [this website](#) and discuss your findings. What is an artist's website? What has captured your interest and why?
 - Take a look at the footnotes in the text. What purposes do footnotes usually serve? What [visual and / or textual] relationships exist between body text and the footnotes in SAE?
 - Consider moments in the book where consumer culture is referenced. What are the labels, brands, or celebrities? What is the context of these references? Research their history. How are race, class, and gender brought into each of these references?
 - From baby's experiences, what are some arguments that can be made about identity and bodies? How do these arguments relate to each other? Do you find one particularly (un)convincing?
 - Using a resource from the Supplementary Readings list to place alongside SAE. In the classroom, make a list of connections you can draw between the two materials and make note of the intersectional social commentary that is being made in *Standard American English*.
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Lesson Planning – Writing, Multimedia, and Creative Exercises

- Write an email to baby (whoisbaby.123@gmail.com). Use context from the book to think about what you would want to ask/tell/share. Think about the kind of reply you may be looking for (advice, comfort, etc.). Shape your email to the kind of response you are hoping for.
- SAE utilizes the footnote as a space for storytelling. Write a small piece (poem, vignette, etc.) in whichever form you choose, including a footnote that is essential to the narrative.

- Visit your local newsstand and choose a tabloid magazine – *Star*, *US Weekly*, *National Enquirer*, *OK!*
Read and review it: consider moments in the book which are drawing on the aesthetics and ideology of these tabloid magazines.
 - Compare and contrast: how would you describe the ideologies at work in the tabloids? Make a cut out poem using language from the tabloid magazine of your choice.
 - Make a commercial or ad that is a commentary on gender/race.
 - Design a digital or physical collage/mood board for the world of baby. Are there videos, advertisements, screenshots of articles, and/or words that feel relevant to the narrative and environment of SAE?
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Supplementary Readings — Extending the Conversation

- “China’s Selfie Obsession” by Jianyang Fan, *The New Yorker*, 2017:
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/18/chinas-selfie-obsession>
- [“The Uses of Anger”](#) and [“The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”](#) by Audre Lorde, 1981.
- [“If Black English Isn’t A Language Then Tell Me What Is?”](#) by James Baldwin, *The New York Times*, 1979
- [Sylvia Rivera](#) by Emma Rothberg, Women’s History Museum, 2021
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mprUOGBWCvY>
- “white castle powder puffs,” “SEVEN STEPS TO A GNARLY AWAKENING,” and “safari.” *The Offending Adam*, Feb 2017.
<https://theoffendingadam.com/2021/white-castle-powder-puffsseven-steps-to-a-gnarly-awakeningsafari-2/>

Reviews & Commentary

Jackson, Ashaki M. "Q&A with Elisabeth Houston, author of Standard American English." The Offing. Jan 20, 2023.

<https://theoffingmag.com/interviews/qa-with-elisabeth-houston-author-of-standard-american-english/>

Diana Arterian, "The Annotated Nightstand: What Elisabeth Houston is Reading Now and Next." LitHub. June 13, 2022.

<https://lithub.com/the-annotated-nightstand-what-elisabeth-houston-is-reading-now-and-next/>

Olga Mikolaivna "Standard American English- Elisabeth Houston" *Full Stop*, 2023

<https://www.full-stop.net/2023/05/19/reviews/olgam/elisabeth-houston/>

Author Biography

EL_S_TH H__ST_ON aka ELISABETH HOUSTON WROTE AN AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY and then deleted said biography and then decided instead to write a paperback romance novel, which riffed off the prolific priestess of romance Miss Danielle Steel; this romance novel also required an encyclopedia to accompany its reading, a long thick index which contained towering columns of notes which distinguished facts from fiction, fiction from friction, words from gibberish, gibberish from poetry, and on and on. The books stalled at the final stages – printers got jammed, machines convulsed, ink and bodies and language run amok. Elisabeth Houston refused to write a proper author biography to be penned on the book's final page, and readers were tired and angry. Then the readers decided to riot. They demanded authorial integrity, they demanded coherence, and so they violently destroyed the book.