



Alphabetical: How Every Letter Tells a Story

Michael Rosen

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From minding your Ps and Qs to wondering why X should mark the spot, Alphabetical is a book for everyone who loves words and language. Whether it's how letters are arranged on keyboards or Viking runes, textspeak or zip codes, this book will change the way you think about letters for ever. How on Earth did we fix upon our twenty-six letters, what do they really mean, and how did we come to write them down in the first place? Michael Rosen takes you on an unforgettable adventure through the history of the alphabet in twenty-six vivid chapters, fizzing with personal anecdotes and fascinating facts. Starting with the mysterious Phoenicians and how sounds first came to be written down, he races on to show how nonsense poems work, pins down the strange story of OK, traces our five lost letters and tackles the tyranny of spelling, among many many other things. His heroes of the alphabet range from Edward Lear to Phyllis Pearsall (the inventor of the A-Z), and from the two scribes of Beowulf to rappers. Each chapter takes on a different subject - whether it's codes, umlauts or the writing of dictionaries. Rosen's enthusiasm for letters positively leaps off the page, whether it's the story of his life told through the typewriters he's owned or a chapter on jokes written in a string of gags and word games. So if you ever wondered why Hawaiian only has a thirteen-letter alphabet or how exactly to write down the sound of a wild raspberry, read on ...

Alphabetical: How Every Letter Tells a Story Details

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John says

A series of lectures on the history of letters, signs, symbols, writing, spelling, printing, rhymes and related literary topics. I found it something of a struggle to read. Each entry begins with a description of how a letter of our alphabet, and its pronunciation, has changed through written history--the former a rather tedious exercise in describing visual changes that would have been much improved by illustrations; the latter an extended string of examples that as a model goes from amusing to pedantic after about "C" or "D".

The ensuing essays likewise suffer from their lack of pictures, since much of the subject matter is visual in nature. When it's not, he piles example upon example, as if he's been collecting them for many years and insists on dumping his whole card file into the narrative. Also, over the course of one after another after another the entries acquired to me a certain sameness of style or tone. Maybe I shouldn't have gone for the straight run, but read the chapters piecemeal?

Or, perhaps I was just the wrong reader, though I do love most of Rosen's other books, and think no public library collection up to snuff that doesn't include several. Nonetheless, I will still recommend Oscar Ogg's ancient 26 LETTERS as the best general intro to the English alphabet.

Tracey says

nonfiction; history of the alphabet. I requested this one from the library because I was curious to see what Michael Rosen (the children's book author/illustrator) spends his spare time pondering. It turned out to be waaaay more academic than I cared to get into, but still kind of interesting to know that there was this whole layer of an author that I didn't know anything about.

Paul says

This is a story about letters; which make words; which make stories.

Split into 26 chapters, Rosen delves into the history of each letter, from their very earliest history and origins, the way that it should be pronounced, or the sounds that it makes in certain words, including all the oddities. Following this introduction to each letter, he then has an essay on a subject connected with that letter. Some time these are closely connected, for example A is about the alphabet, and other times they are not very closely linked, L is on LSD.

That said, it is full of fascinating facts, anecdotes and stories about these 26 strange symbols that we use day in and day out when talking, writing and reading. Even though it is 400 pages long it really is quick to read, and really enjoyable. There are two things that I felt that could have improved it, one would be to show the graphical evolution of each of the letters, and also more on letters that have vanished from our current alphabet like æ. Was an interesting book on the building blocks of our language.

I don't normally include an image with my reviews, but I thought that this one was suitable and mildly amusing:

Sandra says

This is an Alphabet book for adults. We all probably remember A for apple, B for boy, C for cat, etc. There are 26 chapters, one for each letter of the English alphabet. Each chapter begins with the etymology of the letter, some common or uncommon uses of the letter then moves onto A is for Alphabet, B is for Battledore and to the end where Z is for Zip Codes, an acronym for Zone Improvement Plan. I wonder if I ever knew that before? Most of his essays were fantastic, some ho hum. I was looking forward to S, as that is what my name begins with. S was for signs, interesting, but not nearly as interesting as C is for Codes/Ciphers. I know if I had been a young adult during WW1 I would have been right in there working on code breaking. If they would have had me.

Almost every chapter had some new piece of history that I had previously been unaware of. K is for Korea was perhaps my second favorite chapter. In 1446, under the auspices of King Sejong, a new 28 character alphabet was created because the king wanted "illiterate people to be able to communicate, and so all the people can conveniently learn all the letters to conveniently use for daily use."

Wow, and has Korea ever changed. Whatever happened?

The very last chapter, called The OULIPO Olymics, is word and letter games. I may try some

Cheryl says

I've loved many of the author's children's books, and I love word-play, history of language, that sort of thing. So I had hopes for this....

So far, 1/2-way through B, it's been trivial and self-indulgent in turn. Really not sure that it would have gotten published without Rosen's reputation. But we'll see, as I won't stop this early!

...

Ok, I'm in G. And I'm thinking this would be a lot more fun as an audiobook.

...

Q. Getting more interesting. A bit frustrating sometimes with the British slang... it seems almost as if Rosen didn't want Americans (or Canadians, or Australians...) to read it as his voice addresses Brits so distinctly and talks about 'other English speakers' kind of thing. But I just skip the little bits I don't understand and it's fine. (I admit, I found later chapters in which Rosen did use qualifiers like 'in my accent.')

Because I'm going to remember almost nothing anyway. It's not sticky information that slots into my worldview, but rather it truly is trivia, mostly. Oh well.

....

OK done. Off hand, I remember that Rosen says we can spell 'okay' any way we want to. And that there were some passages that remind me that I do still want to keep reading what I can find by the author. But that's about it. So, 2.5 stars rounded down. Let's see what I marked with bookdarts.

maybe want to read: a little satire called "Poor Letter H, its uses and abuses" by the Hon. Henry H, but it's not listed here nor on project gutenberg so probably not... Also 'Cargoes' by John Masefield for the work 'quinquireme.'... also Gerard Manley Hopkins for sprung rhythm, for poems that sound like 'play, jazz, experiment, and impro.'

want to research: the Voynich manuscript, which Rosen has opined is "a carefully constructed absurdist joke," a hoax, a parody aimed at those of the Renaissance who seemed to be too set on investigating and defining the world. "It doesn't encode crucial knowledge which will enable someone to exploit resources, or secure great wealth, which in turn will help him to enslave thousands in order to go on exploiting those resources and running governments.

want to play: some of the games from the Oulipo Olympics, and also a game he doesn't name but which I'll call "Zing" as that's a word he uses to describe the end, especially if you can say it quickly so your listener doesn't quite catch what's happening:

shampoo

hampoo

ampoo

mpoo (say: empoo)

poo

oo

o (say: oh!)

Want to try something a bit like geocaching, maybe, called derive (with a mark over the 'e'), a sort of psychogeography, a way of travelling (usually on foot) by whatever guidelines you choose.

Edward Lear, the nonsense poet, had an interesting life. Normally I don't want to know about authors, only about their work, but these data seem relevant to an appreciation of his work. "He was the twentieth of twenty-one children, the son of a stockbroker who went bust. He suffered from epilepsy and depression all his life, [personifying one as]... the 'Demon' and the other the 'Morbid'."

Pamela says

This book tells the 'story' of each letter of the alphabet. This story consists of its history, its pronunciation, and then an associated essay on some aspect of language (e.g. F is for fonts). This format can seem a bit repetitive at times, so I found this book worked best reading one or two letter stories at each sitting.

There are some fascinating facts here, historical and linguistic, and I especially enjoyed learning the background to developments such as Braille and Morse Code. The sheer range of topics covered is impressive and thought provoking. Rosen's style is impish and engaging, the only exception being when he occasionally gets on his soap box and becomes a bit political. Thankfully this isn't too often and the tone generally stays informative but not dull.

One minor criticism - it would have helped to have pictures of the letters as they appeared in their evolution - the descriptions are sometimes hard to follow.

Overall, very enjoyable and would appeal to those who are interested in the written and spoken language, its history and its function.

Lisa Houlihan says

Fun and interesting but I don't know how much was reliable. Rosen needs a fact-checker and a copy-editor. I don't know if Britons do the "hokey-cokey" but I do know Usans don't do the "cokey-cokey." (162) HOMES is a mnemonic for the American Great Lakes but not for their order from upstream to down. (198) "T" is not the second-most common word in even British English; obviously he means "letter." (311). Noah Webster did indeed reverse the "re" in "theatre" but he didn't reverse the "ce" of "defence." (358)

Petra X says

Interesting, erudite, entertaining at the time. But on thinking back there was a lot of little bits of information put together well but not really of any depth. My favourite book right now by Michael Rosen is Bananas In My Ears. The story goes that the family are having breakfast when the son comes down and can't hear anyone because he has bananas stuck in his ears. (The book reduces me to tears every time. It doesn't actually make any sense, but then neither do I at times.)

I have earplugs stuck in my ears because the effing bitch upstairs has a 6000 kW generator out on her balcony right above me and she keeps it going all night. Everyone else turns theirs off at night. This awful noise might be why I've forgotten quite a bit about the book and not because it was either unmemorable or is an age-related brain-softening. I read the book before Irma when I had current, I hope to have current again someday soon.

As far as I remember it was entertaining but nothing like as much as his kids' poetry books.

Interesting information presented in a fairly lighthearted tone. Two things I learned so far: The Hebrew alphabet (first letter is alpha second is bet) isn't original at all but is actually Phoenician. That means I would be able to read Phoenician too. Secondly, Caesar was pronounced Ky Czar by the Romans. So the Czar went to Russia with unchanged pronunciation and meaning.

Jsavett1 says

This is a delightful book, especially for logophiles and poets like myself. Each chapter, quite logically, is about a letter of the alphabet. Each begins with a brief description of the letter's origins, shape and sound. But the really interesting parts of the book come after, in Rosen's fascinating chapters dedicated to various topics beginning with the letter at hand, for instance "C is for Codes." That chapter, by itself, set me off buying and reading several books about codes and cyphers. Though my daughter is tickled by the new

"secret" messages we can send each other, my wife can't seem to catch the FEVER! Alas.

This is just one example. But the real star of this book is Rosen's supremely charming curiosity and voice. He seems interested in just about anything, that's well, interesting, and his writing is direct, humorous, and self-effacing enough to take us on each of these journeys: from Viking runes to off rhymes, from LSD to TXTSPK. I read the book in a few days though it's the kind of thing one can pick up and read at leisure.

LobsterQuadrille says

You might expect a book on the history of the alphabet (and all 26 of its letters) to be incredibly dull, but this book managed to be very informative yet still engaging and accessible. The author shows not just the history and practical applications of the alphabet, but also how much fun it can be to play around with it. There is even a section each of word games and alphabet jokes included! A couple of my personal favorites? Q: Why can't pirates learn the alphabet?

A: They get lost at C.

Q: Why does the alphabet only have 25 letters at Christmas?

A: No-el, no-el, no-el, no-e-e-el...

Another thing I enjoyed about this book is that it made me actually think about our letters and language, and how many things they have made possible. And Rosen doesn't just talk about individual letters in this book; he addresses many different language-related topics, from disappeared letters, the origin of "OK", and pronunciation debates, to rhymes, nonsense, and acronyms.

This probably isn't a book I'd read over and over again, but there's a hodgepodge of interesting information inside that certainly makes it worth reading.

Leftbanker says

I guess that I could call myself a professional linguist, or at least I have been in past lives. I'm a total sucker for anything about language history, especially English which is my native tongue. I love hearing about word origins, so stories about letter origins is a bit like cells dividing.

Living in a country that speaks a language other than English and where almost everyone is trying to learn my language, it's nice to be able to give people detailed reasons as to why English is such a fucking train wreck to learn. Why do we spell it "night" instead of "nite," for instance?

Having studied Arabic and Modern Greek extensively, all of this letter history is just a blast for me. I can't get enough of it. Of course, I have a brain like a sieve and I'll forget about 99% of the fun facts laid out here in about two days, but it was fun while it lasted and I'll just have to read it again some day soon.

John says

Twenty-six entries each starting with a brief overview of a letter of the alphabet (historical background,

phonetics, etc.), used as a jumping off point for a digression of a specific linguistic (for lack of a better term) aspect. Some were (at least mildly) interesting, while others (often having to do with the author's own life) weren't. Overall, the book worked to pass time when I needed to fill short periods with background noise. Rosen's reading was okay as author-narrated books go, but I might've preferred to skim the print book I think if I had to go back and decide again.

One point that irritated me more as the book went on was the incredibly U. K. centric focus. I accept that Rosen is English himself, but as most folks for whom English is their primary language are NOT British, the short shrift he gives in passing to that fact seemed a bit ... patronizing - with a "zee"!

Meghan says

I may be the only person in the world who loves the history of the English language, writing and text and yet gave up on this book. To be honest, it was a little too personal for me. Michael Rosen seems like a lovely man, and I have no doubt that's why his radio appearances are so popular, but I didn't really want to hear about his experiences and thoughts evoked by each letter of the alphabet. I honestly just wanted more history. A book that did this perfectly for me was Shady Characters The Secret Life of Punctuation Symbols Other Typographical Marks. It had history, a fair sense of fun that didn't overshadow the text, and ample pictures, which are SO important to textual critic fanatics like me.

Again, this book might work for some, but I didn't love it.

Recommended to: a reader of book history who doesn't like textual criticism, or a casual book lover with a vague interest in history, or Michael Rosen aficionados.

Brian Clegg says

I heard the author Michael Rosen talking on the radio about his new book Alphabetical. He told how the capital letter A turned upside down looked like a stylised ox's head with two horns - and low and behold, this letter used to be called aleph, the word in ancient Semitic languages for an ox. I was hooked.

Along the way Rosen brings in so many stories. A lot of this is done by a cunning wheeze in the structure. The book is arranged alphabetically (how else?) and for each letter starts with a short section on the letter itself, its origins and its uses in English, then follows with a longer section that has a theme. So, for instance, D is for disappeared letters and V is for Vikings. We then get a meandering exploration of that theme - sometimes with many little deviations along the way, but always tying back to the alphabet and writing.

It ought to work brilliantly, and in many ways it does, but I was slightly put off by the chunkiness of the book - over 400 pages - and combined with the alphabetic approach, it is difficult not to occasionally have that sense of 'I must plough on to the end' rather than 'I'm enjoying it'. It's that same sense I might get when someone has kindly bought me, say, an encyclopaedia of science fiction and I feel I must my work my way through it whatever. On the whole it does work, but I couldn't help but feel it might have been better if Rosen had let go of the rather obvious strictures of the alphabet for the book's structure. I think there's an interesting comparison with a couple of books I reviewed once about the periodic table. The one that worked best wove the subject matter into a series of stories with no particular table-related structure. The other, more plodding

one worked through, period by period.

However, there is lots to enjoy, from Rosen's rant against the obsessive use of the systematic synthetic phonics approach in teaching reading these days to his really interesting observations on the importance of Pitman's shorthand and even his affection for the A to Z (or his knowledge of the absence of the London E19 district). It's a bit like being trapped in a lift with Stephen Fry when he's playing QI host. This is the QI of letters and words.

If you are interested in writing and words - or struggling for a present idea for someone who is - this could be an ideal buy.

Hilary says

I was so dissappointed with this book, I love word play, the history of the English language and origins of words and sayings but this seemed to ramble on without breaks from one subject to the next. Perhaps this would have been more appealing as a facts with nice illustrations, photographs of artifacts style book, I found that I was skimming through many pages.

In answer to Michael Rosens question, yes doctors really do use the abbreviation N.F.N on patient's medical records, meaning Normal for Norfolk, meaning someone they consider stupid because they haven't had the same opportunities as they have had. I know this is regularly used along with even more derogatory abbreviations.
