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News that Inspires

Great Writers on the Letters of the Alphabet
by Maria Popova

Illustrated by David Hockney

A choral serenade to the building blocks of language starring Susan Sontag, Iris Murdoch, Ian McEwan, Joyce Carol Oates, Martin Amis, Doris Lessing, John Updike, and more titans of literature.

In the final years of his life, the English poet, novelist, essayist, and social justice advocate Sir Stephen Spender undertook a playful and poignant labor of love — he asked artist David Hockney to draw each letter of the alphabet, then invited twenty-nine of the greatest writers in the English language to each contribute a short original text for one of the letters. The result was the 1991 out-of-print treasure Hockney's Alphabet (public library) — a sublime addition to the canon of imaginative alphabet books, with all proceeds going toward AIDS research and care for people living and dying with AIDS.

The twenty-nine pieces — essays, poems, micro-memoirs — come from such titans of literature as Susan Sontag, Seamus Heaney, Martin Amis, John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, Ted Hughes, Ian McEwan, Erica Jong, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Iris Murdoch.

X by David Hockney

"I have never liked the look of E," Gore Vidal declares, "so very like a comb, unsnarling hyacinthine locks, taming Medusan curls — E — a cry!" Anthony Burgess writes a long elegy for X, the "unnecessary" letter that is also our mightiest cypher, "the great unknown." Dorris Lessing takes P on a culinary adventure in pumpkin. "'Why' is the only question which bothers people enough to have an entire letter of the alphabet named after it," quips Douglas Adams as he launches into an eulogy for the unanswerable. Norman Mailer alone declined to participate in the project, but his feisty rejection so befits the letter F he had been assigned that, with his permission, it appears in the book in place of an actual contribution.

B by David Hockney

One of the most beautiful, arresting, and nuanced entires comes from Joyce Carol Oates, for B — a roaming part-Aristotelian, part-Darwinian, wholly Oatsian meditation on existence, time, and the universe itself:

Of all Bs surely BIRTH is the most profound. The most mysterious. BIRTH. BEGET. BEING. BEGINNING. BEFORE. Nothing is so intimidating, so elusive. No riddle so haunting. If death is decomposition, and (mere) decomposition is death, the disintegration of BEING, still we can grasp its principle: the shattering of a pane of glass, the melting of a snowflake, the shredding of a flower's perfect petals by a fool's nervous fingernails, so idle, so purposeless, so common. But BIRTH? BEGETTING? BEGIN? Who can grasp such principles, such phantasmagoria? Out of what void can BEING spring? — not NON-BEING, surely. Is there a time BEFORE time? Are we BEGOTTEN out of nothing? at a point equidistant from various nowheres? How I wish, before I die, I could know how, still less why, a seemingly undirected flow of energy washes life, consciousness, particularity, BEING into the universe!

Our BIRTHS are double. The human, historical BIRTHDAY. A time, a place; a mother, a father. The BIRTHDAY to be linked, eventually, with a deathday. But there is also the BIRTH of the idea of us; the BIRTH of the species, excruciatingly slow, apparently blind, groping, relentless; the BIRTH of all animate matter, out of the inanimate materials of stars; the mysterious composition of disparate elements out of the singularity of time zero. Our collective BIRTH out of a single BEGETTING, how many billions of years ago.

Thus BIRTH, of all Bs the most profound. The most mysterious.

C by David Hockney

Iris Murdoch, who herself had once considered the interplay of causality and chance in human existence, takes a much lighter lens to the letter C:

I find the letter C a warm comforting friendly sort of letter, perhaps because I first came across it in action in the word cat. However, there is much to be said against it. It lacks authority. It is not interesting or imposing, certainly not self-assertive. When scrawled by hand it can be easily overwhelmed by its more prominent neighbors. It may even be described as a mean shadowy unattractive little sign, scarcely more than an enlarged comma. It is not elegant and comely to contemplate; by comparison, for instance, with A or M it lacks form, it cannot claim to be in itself a little work of art. (Esthetically, surely the handsomest of letters is the Russian Ð–.) Moreover, a different charge, C may be said to be actually otiose. Some of our local languages do without it, leaving its tasks to unambiguous S and K signs, others persecute it almost to extinction or disfigure it with unseemly hats or tails. It suffers all sorts of bizarre pronunciations. Nevertheless, for the sake of that old friendship, I feel affection for the poor little letter. After all, who wants a kat?

D by David Hockney

Paul Theroux picks up where Oates left off — or, rather, where Emily Dickinson left off a century earlier — and takes on D for Death, that great consecrator of life:

Death is oblivion, the end of life. Sudden or slow, it is an impartial terror, respecting no one, visiting every being on earth, the old and the young, the sick and the healthy, the wise and the foolish, the innocent and the wicked.

We are dying every second and that unstoppable tick of our mortal clock can fill us with such anxiety that our fear may make us brilliant and ingenious. Throughout history people have invented ways to defy death, by creating works of art, imagining strange gods, taking risks, making sacrifices, attempting to appease its terror, even constructing a whole kingdom beyond death in order to bestow immortality on ourselves.

Death for some is a virus, for others a bullet, a dagger, an oncoming car. It can be a fatal dose of gas or water or fire. For most it is within, the age and decay of the body — struggle, then collapse.

Still death grins at us, omnipotent, godlike — often death is depicted as a fearless skeleton with no sex, a bony comedian wearing a lipless grin. Some see death as evil, a murderer, a revenger, because it is all-powerful. But why see death as a hangman when it is truer to see it as a harvester leveling the earth with its scythe?

Oddly, we take hope from the seasons — the rebirth of spring after the death of winter — or from the rising and setting of the sun. But no spring, no dawn beyond death, has ever been proven. Death is an endless night so awful to contemplate that it can make us love life and value it with such passion that it may be the ultimate cause of all joy and all art.

G by David Hockney

Seamus Heaney contributes a poem for G — an ode to language itself, the riverine fluidity and richness of it:

Guh. Guh.
Like breath being shunted.
The sound of the Gaelic
word for voice —
written as guth
and in the plural
having the sense
of vowels and rhymes.
Another, different
voice is glór,
voice of the river, say,
voice of the wind
that shakes the barley in
gort, a cornfield.
And gort is the Irish
name for the letter:
field full of guh-grain,
granary of G-ness.

H by David Hockney

“H is for Homosexual” for Martin Amis, who relays a heartbreaking childhood memory of awakening to his difference, then writes:

I wish I understood homosexuality. I wish I could intuit more about it — the attraction to like, not to other. Is it nature or nurture, a predisposition, is it written in the DNA? When I think about it in relation to myself … its isolation and disquiet become something lifelong. In my mind I call homosexuality not a “condition” (and certainly not a “preference”), I call it a destiny. Because all I know for certain about homosexuality is that it asks for courage. It demands courage.

J by David Hockney

In a recollection that parallels Virginia Woolf’s epiphany about the interconnectedness of everything and echoes Willa Cather’s memorable passage about the essence of happiness, Ian McEwan chooses Joy for J:

When I was nine and living in Tripoli, Libya, I had an experience of joy, thirty seconds or so that count as the real beginning of my conscious life.

One early morning during the summer holidays my mother dropped me off at the local beach on her way in to work. I was to spend a few hours there alone. I had packed lunch and some piasters to spend on a fizzy drink.

It was probably seven-thirty when I stood at the top of a low cliff by a set of wooden stairs. The tranquility of the Mediterranean — a cleaner, brighter sea then — seemed inseparable from a sweetness in the air and the sound of small waves breaking. The beach of white sand was deserted. It was all mine. The space which separated me from what I saw sparkled with significance. Everything I looked at — yesterday’s footprints in the sand, an outcrop of rock, the wooden rail beneath my hand — seemed overpoweringly unique, etched in light, and somehow to be aware of itself, to “know.” At the same time, everything belonged together, and that unity was knowing, too, and seemed to say, Now you’ve seen us. I felt myself dissolving into what I saw. I was no longer a son or a schoolboy or a Wolf Cub. And yet I felt my individuality intensely, as though for the first time. I was coming into being. I murmured something like, “I am me,” or “This is me.” Even now, I sometimes find this kind of formulation useful.

The rest of that day is lost. As soon as I moved from where I stood, the memory fades. I suppose I must have run down the steps and across the sand to the water to begin…

W by David Hockney

Susan Sontag fills the twin trenches of W with her singular gift for wresting from the mundane the miraculous, the existential, the sublime:

W might be for the weather, an accordion topic of proven use in avoiding the not supposed to be mentioned or dwelt on… I usually don't want to talk about weather… But why not have a white topic, one that carries as much or as little weight as we wish?

Weather is always happening, always changing. What's going to happen? we ask fearfully. Whatever happens, it will be something else.

When we're talking about the weather, well, we're giving ourselves a break.

The wonder is that one thing does succeed another. Distracting us from the wound, from awareness of what coexists. I am walking in the woods or gulping fresh water or encircling a child with watchful tenderness. And at that very moment, at this very moment, in the final agonies of a torture session in the wicked war a nearby government is waging against its citizens, inside a cardboard box in the doorway of the windward corner of my street, someone is, someone has just…

I don't know, it's been explained, it's called having a whole world.

I was sleepy. Id' stayed up all night working on my book. But I went to the museum. It was the last day. It was worth it, the paintings were wonderful. Then came the news we were waiting for. She wept. He wept. I wept. What amazing weather we've been having. Then we wandered over to a bar (this is Berlin) very near where the wall was (how we had rejoiced) and drank some wine (and went on weeping). We move from one mood to another, giving due attention to each. ("Our moods do not believe in one another," Emerson said.) There is no final mood. It is winter now.

Hockney's Alphabet is magnificent in its totality, and perhaps its oblivion will not be total — perhaps someday, the publisher who mistook the temporal for the dated will bring its timeless splendor back into print. Complement it with David Hockney's rare illustrations for the Brothers Grimm fairy tales, then revisit other uncommonly wonderful alphabet books by Gertrude Stein, Oliver Jeffers, Maurice Sendak, Edward Gorey, Quentin Blake, and Maira Kalman.