

ARTICLE

A is for . . . what? The function of alphabet books

PERRY NODELMAN *University of Winnipeg, Canada*



**Journal of Early
Childhood Literacy**

Copyright © 2001
SAGE PUBLICATIONS
London, Thousand Oaks, CA
and New Delhi

VOL 1(2) 193-211
[1468-7984(200104)1:2;
193-211;018300]

Abstract This article is an exploration of the large repertoire of knowledge and strategies for meaning-making that reader/viewers must possess (or be in the process of learning to possess) in order to make sense of the relatively simple information provided by even the simplest of alphabet books. The complex relationships between real objects and concepts, their visual images, the sounds that represent them in language, the visual symbols that represent those sounds, and the names we provide for those sounds make the act of decoding any alphabet book a form of puzzle – and thus, allow, creative writers and illustrators to produce intriguingly sophisticated versions of the genre.

Key words alphabet; alphabet books; children's books; illustration; reading acquisition

In a book outlining uses of alphabet books from preschool to high school, Cooper (1996) celebrates their benefits:

Perhaps the most valuable thing about alphabet books is that they expose the reader to the sounds of the language and show both the visual and auditory connection between letters and words. Alphabet books provide opportunities for readers to develop and enhance identification skills, to encourage letter recognition, to acquire and understand new words, to promote the mastery of letter forms, and to provide a variety of other learning experiences. Within the context of alphabet books, children are exposed to skills such as sequencing, matching, classification, discrimination of likenesses and differences, rhyming, recall, memory, drawing conclusions, and following directions. All of these are important life skills that lead to literacy. (Cooper, 1996: 3)

They are indeed – and it is certainly possible that alphabet books help children to learn them. But so do other books. What Cooper's list does not make clear is what special part alphabet books might play, what specifically and uniquely they offer – why, indeed, they exist at all.

JOURNAL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY 1(2)

Nevertheless they do exist, and at least in the English language tradition I am familiar with, have existed in great numbers for centuries. Indeed, evidence suggests that alphabet books are most prevalent within the English language tradition,¹ and it is logical to suppose that they continue to exist within that tradition because they always have, as part of a specific cultural attitude towards language and language learning. As Cooper points out, alphabet books emerged some centuries ago in England from the educational tradition that 'children had to be able to recite the entire alphabet before being allowed to learn to read' (Cooper, 1996: 1).

But, she adds, 'While children still need to "know the alphabet," the emphasis today is on reading of whole words in context so as to ascertain the meaning rather than a close familiarity with and recitation of the letters.' The apparent implication of the 'whole language' approaches she refers to is that knowledge of the alphabet is not all that important a part of learning to read, particularly in the early stages with which we tend to associate alphabet books. The range of learning outcomes Cooper offers for alphabet books, echoed in the suggestions of many other professional experts in the educational uses of books for children,² seems to be a way of justifying something that theories about teaching reading still widely powerful in North America and elsewhere suggest might be pointless or even counterproductive. So does the insistence of many professional experts that teaching relating specifically to the alphabet is merely a small part of what alphabet books have to offer – they also provide access to a range of other verbal and visual skills.³ Alphabet books do exist, these, writers seem to be saying – so let us find a way of making them useful.

Alphabet books do indeed represent the same range of learning opportunities that many kinds of children's picture books do. But presumably, they also offer or at least are intended to offer something more specific, something those other books cannot do so well – something surely related to the alphabet itself. But *what* about it? There are a number of possible answers to this question, each one focusing on some aspect or attribute of the alphabet. Alphabet books might teach the appearance of the letters – what each letter looks like. They might teach the names of the letters and their usual sequence. Or they might teach the sounds of the letters.

But *how* do they do it? How, for instance, do alphabet books 'expose the reader to the sounds of the language', as Cooper claims? Books cannot talk. Cooper seems to be assuming, in addition to a child learner, the presence of a reader who already knows the alphabet enough to decode the text a child is looking at, and who also understands enough about the conventions of sharing books with children to speak the text. Only then can children have exposure to the sounds, and presumably, make the connection

NODELMAN: A IS FOR . . . WHAT?

between those sounds and the letters or words printed in the book.⁴ Rather than teaching this connection, as Cooper claims, alphabet books are merely a tool that allows the learning to take place in certain quite specific circumstances involving other people and a context of strategies to make sense of the interactions with those other people.

Below I explore what those strategies might be and how likely it is that children can understand them well enough to learn the specifically alphabetic knowledge that alphabet books try to convey. My purpose is to consider the value of that knowledge and of alphabet books in general – the learning potential of their basic and most characteristic features. For that reason, I have focused my attention, not on specific alphabet books, but on the sort of lowest-common-denominator book that most typically represents the genre. In books of this sort, most readily available in supermarkets or discount stores, each page or opening usually contains one letter of the alphabet and one or more undistinguished but readily recognizable pictures of common objects whose name begin with that letter, each picture accompanied by a printed version of the object's name. Later, I will discuss the kinds of alphabet books published by the children's divisions of large publishing houses and available in the children's departments of book stores – books that tend to be more complex versions of the basic type.

First: what would a reader have to know and think and do in order to learn the names of the letters from a typical alphabet book? Not knowing how to read the words, this reader would, presumably, begin by looking at and understanding the pictures, in order to determine what is being named. The reader must, therefore, understand what pictures are – that they are representations of the visual appearances of objects – and know how to make sense of those representations. Pictures tend to be less arbitrary than written signs, and a photograph of a cat resembles an actual cat far more obviously than do the letters *CAT* – which is, presumably, why a photograph of a cat might appear in an alphabet book as way of encouraging a child viewer to learn the name of the letter *C*. Nevertheless, understanding even an image as apparently realistic as a photograph does requires special knowledge. Anthropological literature describing early contact with groups unfamiliar with contemporary Euro-American civilization frequently contain reports of people without previous knowledge of photographs or representational drawings who could make little sense of the examples they were shown.⁵ Presumably, young children do learn this knowledge as they look at pictures in books – but without it, they will not be able to move from pictorial to alphabetic knowledge.

Furthermore and more obviously, knowing how to decipher a particular

JOURNAL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY 1(2)

picture also requires knowledge of the reality the signs represent. Viewers will not be able to think about what a picture of a cat represents if they do not know what an actual cat is.

Once having looked at and understood the picture, child viewers must determine which one specific part of whatever it represents is what specifically requires attention. For instance, they need to decide whether the significant object in a picture of a bird sitting on a nest in a tree on a cloudy day is the bird, not the wing or the nest or the leaves or the whole tree or the cloudy sky in the background. In order to do that, they must understand that the information in a picture consists, not just of a continuous flow of equally significant visual information, but of distinguishable parts, depictions of nameable objects. They must know that pictures contain figures and that figures must be distinguished from their grounds. They must also understand that while many different parts of an image can be isolated as separate figures and named – not just the bird, but also the wing and the beak – only one such figure and one such name is the relevant one in the context of the intended alphabetical learning. This is a strategy specific to the intended decoding of alphabetic books. Furthermore, deciding which object is the right one might require some access to a repertoire of visual conventions – the shapes and sizes of objects, the varying intensities of their colours, their position in the picture plane, the relationships between different visual objects, figure/ground contrasts, and so on – that draw attention towards some specific visual objects and away from others.⁶ Developing alphabetic literacy by this means depends on first possessing visual literacy.

Having identified an object as the one they are supposed to single out, viewers must now name it – which means they must already know its name. Furthermore, they must name it as the people who made the book expect them to name it. A child learned enough to identify the bird on the B page as a robin might assume that the B symbol stands for the sound *r*. A child with a stuffed toy bird named Mitzi might assume that B stands for the sound *m*.⁷ Interestingly, this game of figuring out the right name for the object depicted is much easier for those who already know the letter symbol and its name. Someone who knows what a B is will not identify the bird as a robin or Mitzi. But someone who knows that has no need for the book as an aid to learning the names of the visual symbols for sounds.

Having decided on one specific name for one specific object in the picture as the key information being elicited, viewers must now determine the sound that begins that name. The accomplishment of this apparently simple task is dependent upon a surprisingly complex repertoire of information about language. It depends on the general knowledge that there

NODELMAN: A IS FOR . . . WHAT?

exist such things as words and that they can be thought of not just in terms of the objects and ideas they refer to but in and for themselves, *as* language. In this sense, merely determining the sound that begins a word is a meta-linguistic act, a matter of thinking about language as language. It specifically requires the knowledge that words are made up of separate sounds or phonemic elements – that even the monosyllabic word *cat* can be broken down into three distinguishable sounds that appear in a specific sequence. It then requires that act of breaking down, the separation of the first sound from the remainder of the word: ‘This is a bird, and the word *bird* begins with a *b* sound. So the *b* sound is what I’m looking for here’. As Logan (1986) suggests, there is some very abstract thinking going on here:

All spoken words are abstractions of the things they represent. The written word is a further abstraction of the spoken word, and the phonetic letters give it an even greater abstraction than ideographs or pictographs. The use of an alphabet thus represents a double level of abstraction over a spoken word because the transcription of a spoken word takes place in two steps. A spoken word is first broken up into semantically meaningless phonemes or sounds, and the sounds are then represented by semantically meaningless signs, the letters of the alphabet. (Logan, 1986: 104)

Those who follow sequential theories of the development of childhood thinking based in the work of Piaget assume that children in the process of learning the alphabet from alphabet books are some years away from being capable of the order of abstract thinking that the process of identifying a word’s initial sound seems to require.

But let us assume that child readers do manage that act of identification. Experience, after all, suggests they do.⁸ There are still two steps left in this complex process. The first is to make the connection between the sound one has decided upon and the visual symbol on the page – to understand that the *b* sound that begins *bird* is represented by the symbol *B*. Note, also, that in order to do that, one must also have some pre-existing knowledge about letters. One must understand that we can and do represent the sounds we make in words by means of visual symbols. One must also understand that this sort of visual symbol, the visually depicted letters of words, is different and separate from the other visual information on the page, the part we call a picture. Finally, after having connected the sound with the visually depicted letter, child viewers can say the name of the letter.

But of course they cannot, not even after all that – not without assistance or prior knowledge. Just looking at the letter *B* and understanding it represents the first sound in the word *bird* does not communicate that the letter

JOURNAL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY 1(2)

is named, not just the sound *b*, but also the sound of the word *bee*. A child either needs to know the names of the letters already, or to have someone there already possessed of this knowledge that can communicate it.

I suspect that many of the children who are the main audience for alphabet books do already know the names of the letters. As I suggested earlier, alphabets have a long history of connections with childhood education, at least in English-speaking countries, and exist in vast numbers in the English-language culture of childhood simply because cultural convention places them there. In the countries where alphabet books are common, then, children are likely to have heard ABC jingles from their caregivers, watched programs like the American *Sesame Street* on TV, or looked at the alphabets on their bedroom walls or in other books they have seen. They might well also know the visual symbols associated with the names. If they do, then they will be able to make the move from the initial sound of the depicted object to the letter shown and then finally to the name of that letter, which they can now, presumably, associate with a particular sound: 'It's a bird, so it's a *b* sound, so the letter *B*, which I recognize from elsewhere, makes the sound *b*'. In other words, alphabet books can teach associations between names and sounds only in the context of some pre-existing alphabetic knowledge. If children do not already know the names of the letters, then they will not be able to make this final leap.

In describing this complex process, I have tended to take for granted that the outcome is indeed a desirable one – that children do need to know the names of the letters of the alphabet and the connections between their names, their visual depictions and the sounds they are associated with. It is safe to assume that the letter/sound connections are important. If we did not know what sounds letters conventionally represent, we would be unable to translate written language into spoken language. In other words, we would be unable to read.⁹ But the value of knowledge of the names of the letters seems, at least at first glance, less obvious. For beginning readers, it might even seem to be counter-productive. A child who has learned the names of the letters from an ABC rhyme but not the sounds, and who has had an adult point to a wall chart and thus learned to connect the names to the visual symbols, might try to sound out the word *cat* as something like *sea-eight-tea* – not what was intended at all.

As happens, however, the apparent counter-productivity of knowing the names of letters seems in fact to be merely apparent. In her overview of research into these matters, Riley (1996) quotes studies that 'reveal that the recognition of and ability to label the letters of the alphabet at school entry is strongly related to reading ability at 7 years of age'" (p. 27). This is not to say that deliberately setting out to teach children the names of the letters

NODELMAN: A IS FOR . . . WHAT?

is a good idea. Indeed, research suggests that doing so has no positive link with successful later reading, and, says Riley, that ‘seems to suggest that this skill has to be acquired in a more “hard won” and “incidental” manner through long-term exposure to books and environmental print in the emergent, preschool literacy phase’ (p. 12). In other words: the best encouragement to learning to read is an overall experience of language that gradually makes those new to it aware of what it is and how it functions:

The child who has learned to identify his or her letters, incidentally as it were over time and through many meaningful encounters with print, has developed a deeper, more sophisticated appreciation of the role of letters in the representation of sounds. The child in possession of this understanding at school entry is further along the road to reading than the child who is merely able to recite the alphabet. (Riley, 1996: 14)

The knowledge of letter names encouraged by alphabet books might well be part of a child’s useful awareness of language. But specifically encouraging a child to learn them exclusively from an alphabet book, as alphabet books seem to be inviting, is not necessarily a good idea.

But I might then argue that children can make better use of alphabet books by learning the correct sounds to attach to the names and letters they already know. A viewer could look at a picture, figure out which object in it is to be singled out for attention, name the object, break the name down into its phonemic components and figure out what sound begins that name, then look at the letter, recognize it, name it, and finally, make the connection between the letter, the name and the sound in question.

Many of the same problems and provisos apply here as they do in the case I described above where the names and symbols of the letters were as yet not known. There is the same need for knowledge of what pictures are and how they communicate, the same set of confusions about which specific objects should be named and which names they might be given. In order to arrive at the correct connections between name, visual symbol and sound, viewers need a lot of information about books, about pictures, and about the world they live in. They need to know how to handle some specific and complex interpretive strategies. And they need to make a number of right guesses.

There are also further problems when it comes to already knowing the visual symbol and using an alphabet book to learn the sound connected with it. Many of the letters of the alphabet have connections with more than one sound. A can represent the various a sounds of *ant* and *ale* and *awning*, G the g sounds of *goat* and *gelatine*. In order to represent these possibilities, an alphabet book must contain pictures of more than one object and

JOURNAL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY 1(2)

include objects whose names represent the different possibilities – which complicates the supposedly simple transaction taking place.¹⁰ With more than one object and more than one sound, a child viewer has to understand that, yes, the beginning sounds of the names of the objects depicted are represented by specific letters – which is why we can have alphabet books at all – but nevertheless, you cannot simply say that A is for *ah* or *awe* or *aye*. It can be all of them – which casts doubt on the basic principle that you can always guess a sound from knowing a letter.

Nor can you always guess a letter from knowing a sound. The *c* sound in *cow*, for instance, can be represented by either C or K. A picture of a king would do just as well as one of a cow as a way of teaching the connection between the letter C and the sound it often represents. Intriguingly, however, makers of alphabet books never put a king of the C page or a cow on the K page.¹¹

Nor do they put a picture of children on the C page of an alphabet book. C usually represents the first sound of *children* only in combination with another letter (except in words borrowed from other languages, like *cioppino*), a fact that undermines the basic assumption of alphabet books that there is a one-on-one relationship between sounds and letters. Alphabet books can represent only the cases in which that is in fact true – as when C stands for the opening sound of *cow*. In other words: if alphabet books do help teach sound/letter connections, they certainly do not teach all the connections there are. For all the complexities of the process of learning they imply, they inevitably represent a simplified and simplistic view of the complexities of alphabet knowledge.

Thus far, I have discussed how one might use knowledge of visual objects, the names of those objects, and initial sounds to determine the names of letters, and how one might use knowledge of objects and the names of those objects and the names of letters to determine the sounds associated with the letters. Norton (1999) suggests a further possibility: ‘alphabet books have long been used to help young children identify familiar objects . . .’ (p. 22). One might use knowledge of the names and sounds of letters to determine the name of visual objects.

In this case, one would, presumably, look at the object and not recognize what it was – not, therefore have a name for it. One would then look at the letter, recognize it and probably but not necessarily name it, since the issue here is the sound, not the name. Knowing the sound, one would then look at the picture and – and what? If one did not have some idea about what the depicted object might be, one would not be much further ahead at this point. One would know it is something that begins with a *b* or an *f* sound, but nothing more.

NODELMAN: A IS FOR . . . WHAT?

But let us assume that one knows a series of possible names for the object depicted. Let us say one realizes that the picture depicts a Macintosh apple. What one does not know is which of a number of possible names for this object is the one being asked for. Is it fruit, or *apple*, or *Macintosh*? The answer will depend on whether the picture is on the F page or the A page or the M page.

That has some interesting implications. First, you cannot possibly figure out the one specific name required unless you have in your repertoire of knowledge a number of possibilities to choose from. In other words: you need to have a lot of information in order to get a little bit more. Second, you can arrive at the missing piece of information by engaging in a process of logical guesswork – the kind of process invited by puzzles of all kinds. In a crossword puzzle, for instance, you have a definition for a word and know the number of letters in it and, perhaps, because you have solved other words, what some of the letters have to be. You must then run through your pre-existing repertoire of words and meanings and determine which, if any, fit these conditions. In other words, you must use the large amount of information you already have to figure out the small bits of information you do not have yet. So, too, with identifying the names of objects from knowledge of the letters that begin their names – it requires a repertoire of pre-existing knowledge, knowledge and mastery of a logical process, and guesswork.

Indeed, I think I can make a case that these two qualities – the use of a lot of information to determine a little bit of information and the puzzle process of logical guesswork – are key to what and how alphabet books teach and otherwise engage young readers.

Understanding what the eye meets in the context of culture and language always requires more than meets the eye. That applies pointedly to children's literature, whose relatively simple texts make their best sense only in the context of an unspoken complexity that they evoke and that they require reader/viewers to know in order for make the intended sense of them. There is the complex knowledge of the nature and meanings of the places and people and events they refer to but, merely by virtue of their simplicity, do not completely describe. There are the linguistic patterns and conventions that make their language comprehensible. There are the more specifically literary and artistic patterns and conventions – what a character is, how plots are shaped – that make those meanings more specific and more pleasurable. The simple text is accompanied by an unspoken and much more complex shadow – a text not actually there but implied and required in order to make sense of the actual text. Alphabet books repre-

JOURNAL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY 1(2)

sent one specific form of this combination of simple text and implied shadow.

The key question here, then, is whether or not child reader/viewers of children's books in general and alphabet books in particular are aware of and able to manipulate the shadow text. Can they access the complexity that allows them to understand simplicity?

The most immediately obvious answer to that question is, 'No'. The very reason that children's literature exists and tries to be simple is our shared assumption about the limited abilities of the implied audience. Would not that mean that child readers see no more than the simple words actually say? Can they then ever really understand those simple words? And can they, then, understand alphabet books and learn from them?

There is evidence that they sometimes, at least, they cannot. In describing their research into how children respond to interactions in which adults guide them through alphabet books in order to learn the correct connections between the depicted visual objects and the names of letters, Yaden et al. (1993) report the following:

. . . what we have discovered in examining over 150 hours of parent-child conversation as it relates to the discussion of written forms is that even with parents' explicit attempts to focus their children's attention upon, for example, the oral referents of letters, the child themselves do not readily exhibit an understanding of their parents' purpose. And parents, interestingly enough, do not seem to be aware that they are being misunderstood . . . parent's comments and questions to their children reiterating the oral language counterpart of printed forms seldom, if ever, are immediately understood in the way the parents intended. (pp. 44-45)

As their parents flipped through books using the formula 'A is for . . .', the children in this study tended to respond sometimes with right answers, sometimes with wrong ones. One child, having identified the pictures of an opossum incorrectly, insisted that O was for mouse, despite having been corrected during an earlier reading. These children 'were very consistent in attributing to each letter most of the objects in and words associated with each picture, both those with the appropriate beginning sound and those without' (Yaden et al., 1993: 50). They seem to have assumed that the purpose of the game was to name every object on the page and then announce that the appropriate letter was 'for' it; thus, Z was for zebra, but also for balloon.

I find it especially revealing that the adults involved in these transactions did not seem to mind: 'Despite their repeated corrections, the parents, for the most part, are unaware that their children actually do not understand

NODELMAN: A IS FOR . . . WHAT?

what the activity is supposed to accomplish' (Yaden et al., 1993: 59). Apparently, these parents take the complex context of the shadow text that might allow for a proper understanding of the process (what sort of thinking might be engaged by the phrase 'A is for . . .') so much for granted that they did not notice their children's lack of awareness of it. This blindness suggests how completely these parents – and, I believe, most literate adults – are immersed in language and other shared meanings, which shape our world and govern our thinking about it in myriad ways we are not particularly aware of.¹²

But if adults are so unaware of what needs to be taught, how do children learn it? For obviously they do learn it, somewhere in the process of becoming adults who take it for granted. Yaden et al. (1993) suggest how the learning might occur when they assert that their study does not diminish,

the ultimate value of alphabet book reading as a component of the home story reading activity. Perhaps the most important early benefit is the fact that the parent introduces into the child's world the fact that these written symbols can call to mind common elements of experience . . . children learn early on that these letters symbolize something and are encouraged in the activity of making meaning when the symbols are displayed. It is this drive to make meaningful connections with the letters that perhaps keeps the process moving forward . . . (p. 60)

In other words, parents and others teach children what they take for granted about language and its operations simply by taking these things for granted. In doing so, they expose children to them – and then, it seems, children pick up what they need to know, in pieces, haltingly, intuitively or by using logic, simply by needing to make sense of it all. I suspect, indeed, that that might account for the conclusion that Riley (1996) reaches: that 'merely teaching the alphabet has no enduring value and fails to guarantee an early successful start to reading. The appreciation of the symbolic representation of letters for spoken sounds occurs slowly over time and with exposure to meaningful experiences of print and text' (Riley, 1996).

Such a process is not at all orderly or sequential or developmental. In making anything like the intended sense of alphabet books and other children's books – not to mention the conversation of adults and the meaning-filled world of household furniture layout and advertising and street signs and so on that surrounds them – children are inevitably gaining knowledge at every level of complexity from the most concrete to the most abstract, all at the same time.¹³ A child might well have learned or at least have some understanding of a theoretically more abstract or more complex aspect of

JOURNAL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY 1(2)

language before understanding a simple one. A child reader might be in the position of knowing something about the complex shadow text that would allow him or her to learn something simple about the alphabet he or she does in fact not yet know.

Alphabet books, then, might well be teaching something of significance. They certainly play their part in making children aware of the complexities of language in general and of the alphabet in particular. They might even have a special part to play in that process. Greenewald and Kulig (1995) report on research 'which suggested that repeated readings of alphabet books may indeed positively affect kindergartners' letter knowledge'. (p. 231). More specifically there is work by Murray et al. (1996):

The purpose of this study was to determine whether reading alphabet books to preschool children increases their awareness of phonemes in spoken words. Our results provide limited support for the hypothesis that children's phoneme awareness develops at least partially through exposure to alphabet books. By puzzling over what is meant by 'A is for apple' and 'B is for bear,' children examine phonemes in spoken words and are introduced to the idea that phonemes can be signified by letters. (p. 317)

Murray et al. (1996) propose that the children in their study developed more alphabetic knowledge from alphabet books than from other picture books at least in part because 'conversations about print are more likely to take place with alphabet books than with other genres of children's literature' (p. 309). Adults reading children a story do not usually stop, as they do in reading alphabet books, to remind their listeners that a particular visual sign relates to a particular visual object. Simply in being about language, then, alphabet books invite adults with knowledge of language to share their knowledge with children. In being a specific kind of book, furthermore, alphabet books invite adults with knowledge of them to partake in a conventional form of reading that focuses specifically on knowledge of some quite specific aspects of language that require surprisingly complex forms of thinking. As Murray et al. (1996) state, 'puzzling over how *M* relates to *mouse* . . . requires a metalinguistic shift from viewing mouse as signifying a particular animal to a simultaneous recognition of its phonological structure, a focus on the spoken word itself as well as seeing through that word to the concept it represents' (p. 310). In these and other ways, alphabet books help to introduce children to the shadow text they imply.

I suggested above that two aspects of the process of thinking which alphabet books invite readers to undergo are central to what and how they teach and otherwise engage young readers. So far I have focused on the

NODELMAN: A IS FOR . . . WHAT?

first of these, the use of a lot of information to determine a little bit of information. Let me now turn to the second, the puzzle process of logical guesswork.

The process of figuring out a sound, and/or a letter and/or the name of a letter from looking at a picture requires and reinforces a very specific way of looking at pictures. One approaches them, not to admire their beauty or even to get a general sense of what they depict, but with some very specific questions in mind – questions that relate to language. What is this thing I see, what is its name, and how does that name relate to the letter accompanying it? Or alternately, what is this word, and what is the thing in this picture that might be referred to by that word? Furthermore, there is an understanding that there is just one correct answer – that the object on the *A* page is indeed an *apple* and not a fruit or a *Macintosh*. This is a way of claiming visual information in the service of verbal information – of making pictures mean most centrally the specific words attached to them. On its own, a picture of an apple might suggest a whole range of emotions and ideas. In the context of an alphabet book and on the *A* page, the image correctly connects with just one word, *apple*, and is to be perused in terms either of trying to figure out what that word is or trying to figure out how the picture might match that word.

This process represents in its clearest and most basic form the process of meaning-making that all picture books – indeed, all uses of pictures as illustrations – invite viewers to engage in. As illustrations, pictures most significantly illustrate something else – almost always, a written text. Learning how a picture connects with, and has its intended meanings limited by, the printed text in an alphabet book operates as an introduction to a habit of thinking that will guide young readers in their future encounters with all kinds of picture books.

Teaching young readers this puzzle-solving process is an important means of inserting them into the shared meanings that define our sense of what our world means and who we are ourselves are. That might seem somehow limiting and repressive – and it is. But to not be limited or repressed in this way, to not know how to solve the puzzle as intended, would be to stand outside language altogether, to be incapable of communicating or sharing the world with others. It would be freedom, certainly – a freedom from meaningful contact with anyone else. In teaching young readers how to solve puzzles as others expect – to share meanings – alphabet books allow them important access to the community they belong to.

They also give pleasure – the pleasure of puzzle-solving – and that pleasure is an important part of what they have to offer. It also accounts for

JOURNAL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY 1(2)

something that bewilders a lot of adults. Alphabet books have the apparent purpose of teaching something basic and simple – but increasingly, the ones produced by reputable publishers of children’s literature tend to exude a complex sophistication that would seem inappropriate for their intended readers. As Camp and Tompkins (1990) say, ‘Artists have begun using this genre as a playground for their imaginations’ (p. 299). However sophisticated those imaginations might be, though, the ways they express themselves in alphabet books are, almost inevitably, only intricate variations on the same basic forms of puzzle to be found in the most typical and most undistinguished examples of the genre.

For instance, the lists of reputable children’s publishers include many books like Ruurs and Kiss’s (1996) *A Mountain Alphabet*, in which each picture of a Rocky Mountain landscape includes a lengthy list of objects, the names of which begin with the appropriate letter. A guide at the back of the book suggests, for instance, that the C page includes ‘climbers, cougar, cascading creek, chipmunk, canyon, crystal clear water, conifers, cedars . . . crow, chickadees . . . columbine’. This is merely the basic puzzle situation of any alphabet book expanded and become more obviously a puzzle. Indeed, it is instructive of the extent to which this book operates specifically as a language puzzle that the C list requires readers to identify ‘conifers’. The same objects on the F page require the name *firs*, and on other pages are meant to elicit *evergreens*, *needle trees*, *pin*s, and finally, just plain *trees*. The answer to the puzzle is not what the object is, but rather, one specific word out of the many possible words for the same object.

In some alphabet books, the word that solves the puzzle is even less apparent, and requires even a larger repertoire of knowledge of life and language from readers. But it is still just a more complex version of the standard ‘A is for apple’. For instance, Elting and Folsom’s (1980) *Q is for Duck* is explicitly set up as a series of riddling questions: ‘D is for mole. Why?’. One has to turn the page to discover the answer: ‘Because a mole Digs’. Before turning the page, one is being invited to engage in a process of exploring one’s knowledge of moles and the vocabulary associated with that knowledge in order to identify something – in this case not an object but an activity – that suitably starts with a D. There is a similar game in Shannon’s (1996) *Tomorrow’s Alphabet*, which asks readers to figure out why, for instance, ‘I is for water’ – because it is ‘tomorrow’s ice cubes’.

Somewhat differently, Johnson’s (1995) *Alphabet City* consists of photograph-like images of cityscapes, each of which contains, not objects whose names start with a particular sound, but rather, the actual shape of a letter of the alphabet itself. Thus, the two arches of a bridge form the shape of an

NODELMAN: A IS FOR . . . WHAT?

M. Similarly, Giesert's (1986) *Pigs from A to Z* promises readers that there are five forms of each letter and one form each of the previous letter and the following one hidden in each of its 26 images. Removed from the context of an alphabet book, the letter forms to be found in these pictures would not be a particularly obvious or noteworthy aspect of them. Within such a book, however, the pleasure the images offer is specifically the pleasure of looking at each image in the context of its place in the sequence of the book (and therefore of the alphabet), knowing therefore what specific letter to look for and knowing the shape of that letter, and then finding that linguistic information hidden in the visual image.

The pictures in Chris Van Allsburg's (1987) *The Z was Zapped* also contain images of letters, but not, this time, hidden ones. Each one is front and centre, suffering some sort of trauma. As the text tells us, 'the A was in an avalanche', and 'the B was badly bitten'. I find two things about this book especially revealing as confirmations of the centrality of the qualities of alphabet books that I have been focusing on.

The first is that some of the letters are so involved in acts of devastation that they are hardly visible at all. The H is 'partly hidden' under a cloth, only the bottom ends of its two legs in view. The M is 'melting', the O 'overgrown' (with an ivy vine), the Q 'neatly quartered'. The only way one can know what these pictures represent is to have a previous knowledge both of the individual letters and of the usual sequence they occur in. Having just read the G page, one knows to expect an H next, and reads one's knowledge of how an H usually looks to make sense of what the picture shows. In other words, in order to learn the alphabet from this book one would need to know, among other things, the alphabet. It is not much of a teaching tool, and in not being that, it reinforces the extent to which all alphabet books require knowledge more complicated and more extensive than the knowledge they purport to teach.

Second, the verbal explanations for what happens in the pictures of *The Z was Zapped* are printed, not on the same opening, but over the page, where they cannot be seen at the same time as the picture that they accompany. This makes the book even more clearly a puzzle. One can look at the picture and then, before turning the page, go through one's repertoire of possible words that start with the appropriate letter and that might account for the particular mayhem being undergone. As in all alphabet books, finding the right solution to this puzzle is pleasurable because it requires mastery of a wide range of knowledge about things that can happen and words that might accurately describe those things. In other words: the puzzle and the pleasure it offers depends on the use of a lot of information to discover a

JOURNAL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY 1(2)

small bit of information. The two key aspects of alphabet books – how they teach and the pleasure they offer – both require immersion in the shadow text that sustains them.

Notes

1. In private correspondence, Nigel Hall, Manchester Metropolitan University, informs me that his efforts to help a colleague develop an international collection of alphabet books turned up relatively few from non-English-speaking countries: 'In many places we found people did not even know what we meant by alphabet books. Five years ago I was at a huge children's publishing exhibition in Buenos Aires. In the whole place I found only three alphabet books and two of these were simply translations of English books'.
2. Kormanski and Stevens (1993) suggest 'learning the alphabet and matching beginning letters' (p. 55). Russell (1994) claims that alphabet books 'attempt to teach children the sounds and the forms of the letters,' (p. 61) and adds that '... the purpose of the alphabet is to help the child associate the shape of the letter with the sound it customarily makes' (p. 64). Stewig (1980) adds some further skills: 'Most alphabet books can help teach letter sequence, form, and style, and sound-symbol correspondence . . .' (p. 76). For Hillman (1999), 'These books teach the concepts of naming, alphabet recognition (visual discrimination), the sound of the initial consonant or vowel, and alphabetical order. These skills form a necessary part of the foundation for reading success' (p. 98). Norton (1999) offers a quite different suggestion: 'Alphabet books have long been used to help young children identify familiar objects, as well as letters and sounds' (p. 22). And among Roberts' (1987) suggestions is yet a different one: '... alphabet books with letter-object-word arrangements are word charts between covers. They contain labeled objects that become spelling aids, visual aids, and word lists to support the child's writing' (p. 32).
3. Russell (1994) asserts, 'Modern alphabet . . . books have become more than vehicles of education and purveyors of fact; they have joined the ranks of the picture storybooks in becoming works of art and objects of pleasure' (p. 61). For Hillman (1999), 'The very nature of alphabet books helps children explore print and graphics in new ways, thus reinforcing visual literacy. If selected wisely, alphabet books can enhance the reading and language arts curriculum as well as providing opportunities for interdisciplinary study' (p. 61). For Roberts (1987), 'The variety of alphabet books supports different curriculum areas and topics of interest' (p. 29). According to Stewig (1980), 'In using illustrations from alphabet books as stimuli, the teacher is helping children study the illustrations for their own sake – not for the letter form, sequence, or concept development' (p. 80). According to Camp and Tompkins (1990), 'To develop mature literacy, students need guided practice as they examine, listen to, read, describe and discuss a wide variety of written materials. Alphabet books provide teachers with a plentiful supply of excellent materials for this purpose' (p. 300).
4. I'll say more about the degree to which children do in fact make these connections later.
5. For a discussion of this literature and its significance for considering the ways in which children view pictures, see my book *Words about Pictures*, (Nodelman, 1988: 10–16).

NODELMAN: A IS FOR . . . WHAT?

6. *Words about Pictures* (Nodelman, 1988) provides detailed catalog of these features of pictures.
7. There are also issues of culture and language. In *My First Book of ABC* (1999), a book published in England that I purchased in Australia, the object on the J page is identified as a jumper. To a North American like me, it looks like a sweater. A non-reading North American child who recognized this object correctly might quite logically assume that the letter J makes an s sound.
8. Indeed, Maclean et al. (1988) assert 'that children acquire phonological awareness a long time before learning to read, through experiences which at the time have nothing to do with reading' (p. 34), Liberman and Liberman (1992) claim that children cannot possibly learn to read without understanding 'the alphabetic principle, the insight that words are distinguished from each other by the phonological structure that the alphabet represents'. If these researchers are right, then the abstract thinking I'm describing here necessarily predates any ability to read at all.
9. I'm speaking here of the ability to read as conventionally understood. It is instructive that learners of second languages (and those without hearing abilities) often learn to make sense of written language without the intermediary ability of knowing the sounds that the visual symbols represent.
10. That seems to be why guidelines for alphabet books included in books about sharing literature with children often recommend that there be only one or two objects depicted and that the names of these objects should begin with the featured letter in its 'most commonly pronounced way' (Sutherland et al., 1981: 94) – which assumes, surely incorrectly, that there always is one most common pronunciation. Among others who offer the same guidelines are Cooper (1996), Criscoe (1988), Huck (1979) and Norton (1999).
11. I suspect this suggests some confusion about whether the purpose of such books is the identification of sounds with letters or an introduction to spelling. In the latter case, it would seem wrong to put a king on the C page, even though a child learning the sounds of letters would not be aware of that which might confuse or annoy adults who already know the alphabet and the vagaries of English spelling.
12. A spectrum of research reveals some of the complex operations of alphabetic knowledge adults tend to take for granted. Mann (1987) reports on a range of studies 'raising the possibility that knowledge of the alphabet is essential to awareness of phonemes' (p. 66). Ehri reports on 'numerous studies revealing a high positive correlation between letter-name knowledge upon entry into the first grade and end-of-the-year reading achievement' (Ehri, 1983a: 131), and also states that 'knowledge of letter-sound relations facilitates acquisition of a reading vocabulary more than letter-name knowledge does' (Ehri, 1983b: 134). As Perfetti et al. (1988) state, 'Knowing explicitly about the phonemic structure of language is a curious and apparently important skill . . . it is actually quite remarkable that ordinary persons should develop such arcane knowledge' (p. 39).
13. For insight into the complexity of children's knowledge of the spaces in which they live, see Wood and Beck (1994).

JOURNAL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY 1(2)

References

- Camp, D. and Tompkins, G. (1990) 'The Abecedarius: Soldier of Literacy', *Childhood Education* 66(5): 298–302.
- Cooper, C. (1996) *ABC Books and Activities: From Preschool to High School*. School Library Media Services No. 5. Lanham, MD and London: Scarecrow P.
- Criscoe, B. (1988) 'A Pleasant Reminder: There Is an Established Criteria for Writing Alphabet Books', *Reading Horizons* 28(4): 232–4.
- Ehri, L. (1983a) 'Summary of S.J. Samuels's Study: The Effect of Letter-Name Knowledge on Learning to Read', in L. Gentile, M. Kamil and J. Blanchard (eds) *Reading Research Revisited*, pp. 131–2. Columbus: Merrill.
- Ehri, L. (1983b) 'Summary of Jenkins, Bausell, and Jenkins's study: comparisons of letter-name and letter-sound training as transfer variables', in L. Gentile, M. Kamil and J. Blanchard (eds) *Reading Research Revisited*, pp. 132–4. Columbus: Merrill.
- Elting, M. and Folsom, M. (1980) *Q is for Duck*, Illus. J. Kent. New York: Clarion-Houghton Mifflin.
- Giesert, A. (1986) *Pigs from A to Z*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Greenewald, M. and Kulig, R. (1995) 'Effects of Repeated Readings of Alphabet Books on Kindergartners' Letter Recognition', *Yearbook of the National Reading Conference* 44: 231–5.
- Hillman, J. (1999) *Discovering Children's Literature*, 2nd edn. Upper Saddle River, NJ and Columbus, OH: Merrill-Prentice-Hall.
- Huck, C. (1979) *Children's Literature in the Elementary School*, 3rd edn. New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston.
- Kormanski, L. and Stevens, C. (1993) 'Alphabet books can be used with fluent readers and writers', *Reading Horizons* 34(1): 55–61.
- Johnson, S. (1995) *Alphabet City*. New York: Puffin.
- Liberman, I.Y. and Liberman, A.M. (1992) 'Whole Language versus Code Emphasis: Underlying Assumptions and their Implications for Reading Instruction', P. Gough, L. Ehri and R. Tremain (eds) *Reading Acquisition*, pp. 343–66. Hillsdale, NJ: L Erlbaum.
- Logan, R. (1986) *The Alphabet Effect: The Impact of the Phonetic Alphabet on the Development of Western Civilization*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Maclean, M., Bryant, P and Bradley, L. (1988) 'Rhymes, Nursery Rhymes and Reading in Early Childhood', in K. Stanovich (ed.) *Children's Reading and the Development of Phonological Awareness*, pp. 11–34. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Mann, V. (1987) 'Phonological Awareness: The Role of Reading Experience', P. Bertelson (ed.) *The Onset of Literacy: Cognitive Processes in Reading Acquisition*, pp. 65–91. London and Cambridge, MA: Bradford-MIT.
- Murray, B., Stahl, S. and Ivey, M. (1996) 'Developing Phoneme Awareness through Alphabet Books', *Reading and Writing* 8(4): 307–22.
- My First Book of ABC* (1999) London: Grandreams.
- Nodelman, P. (1988) *Words about Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Norton, D. (1999) *Through the Eyes of a Child: An Introduction to Children's Literature*, 5th edn. Upper Saddle River, NJ and Columbus, OH: Merrill-Prentice-Hall.
- Perfetti, C., Beck, I., Bell, L. and Hughes, C. (1988) 'Phonemic Knowledge and Learning to Read are Reciprocal: A Longitudinal Study of First Grade Children', in K. Stanovich (ed.) *Children's Reading and the Development of Phonological Awareness*, pp. 39–75. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

NODELMAN: A IS FOR . . . WHAT?

- Riley, J. (1996) *The Teaching of Reading: The Development of Literacy in the Early Years of School*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Roberts, P. (1987) *Alphabet Books as a Key to Language Patterns*. Hamden, CT: Library Professional Publications—Shoestring Press.
- Russell, D. (1994) *Literature for Children: A Short Introduction*, 2nd edn. New York and London: Longman.
- Ruurs, M. (1996) *A Mountain Alphabet*, illus. A. Kiss. Toronto and Plattsburgh, NY: Tundra.
- Shannon, G. (1996) *Tomorrow's Alphabet*, illus. Donald Crews. New York: Mulberry-Greenwillow.
- Stewig, J. (1980) *Children and Literature*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Sutherland, Z., Monson, D. and Arbuthnot, M. (1981) *Children and Books*, 6th edn. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.
- Van Allsburg, C. (1987) *The Z was Zapped*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Wood, D. and Beck, R. (1994) *Home Rules*. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins Press.
- Yaden, D., Smolkin, L. and MacGillivray, L. (1993) 'A Psychogenetic Perspective on Children's Understanding about Letter Associations during Alphabet Book Readings', *Journal of Reading Behavior* 25(1): 43–68.

Correspondence to:

PERRY NODELMAN, University of Winnipeg, 515 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba, CANADA R3B 2E9. [email: perry.nodelman@uwinnipeg.ca]

