Final Word: Gaiman and Grimly's *The Dangerous Alphabet*—Diverting, Deranged, De-Lovely

Philip Nel

In the tradition of Dr. Seuss's *On Beyond Zebra!* (1955) and Crockett Johnson's *Harold's ABC* (1963), Neil Gaiman and Gris Grimly's *The Dangerous Alphabet* (2008) is not so much an alphabet book as it is a meditation on the abecedarian. It is a meta-alphabet book, and it is meta in other ways, too. Gaiman and Grimly also reflect on the reading primer, on tales of moral instruction, and on the nature of language itself. Its multiplicity of meanings invites re-reading and offers appeals for readers of a range of interests.

As her "A Dangerous Alphabet or Just an Indulgence?" indicates, Priya Johnson has neither met these readers, nor is such a reader herself. That said, one must applaud her willingness to include the perspectives of readers, ranging from children to adult. Their responses remind us that the term "children" is vast, encompassing a range of ages and tastes; adults are wont to speak of children as a homogenous group, but children are as heterogeneous an assembly as grown-ups are. Indeed, the unexamined assumption of Johnson's essay is its implication that *these* children and *these* adults be allowed to stand in for *all* children and *all* adults. As she writes, "[a]ll the parents" thought the book "not for the enjoyment of a child audience," and the "children […] thought it to be an unappealing read." The piece does not explain why these children and adults might be considered a representative sample, nor does it offer clues as to how were they selected. Indeed, it provides no indication why the "young reader" quoted at the end of the review—"There are a lot of great books out there; I would rather be reading one of them instead!"—should be given the final word.

After all, a child who enjoys the slipperiness of language might be amused by *The Dangerous Alphabet*. Punning on letters that are homophones for words, it recalls the so-called "Cockney Alphabet," which gave us "C for yourself," "L for Leather," "U for me," and "Y for Heaven's sake?" In Gaiman's version, "see," "Hell," "you," and "why" appear in "C is the way we find and we look," "L is, like 'eaven, their last destination," "U are the reader who shivers with dread," and "Y's your last question, the end of the ring." Recognizing that language is slippery, *The Dangerous Alphabet* has fun sliding between letters and words, sounds and meanings.

That "Y" also playfully challenges alphabet books' tendency to make each letter's primary referent a noun, a verb, or a modifier, but not an interjection. (W is more likely to be for "whale" or "wolf" than for "why?") If a noun, then the ABC book is likely to offer a substantial, tangible one—as in the newt and narwhal in Roberto de Vicq de Cumptich's

Bembo's Zoo (2000) or the nest in Alison Jay's *ABC: A Child's First Alphabet Book* (2003). If a verb, then it may give us a common one—Kate Greenaway's *A Apple Pie* (1886) has "N nodded for it," and Wanda Gág's *The ABC Bunny* (1933) shows the title character "Napping in a Nook." In contrast, Gaiman mischievously offers abstraction; though "N" names "Night," it also proffers "Nothing" and "Never," words more conceptual than concrete. Like *Harold's ABC* (which gives us "nobody") and Donald Crews's *We Read: A to Z* (1967, also has n for "nothing"), Gaiman's *The Dangerous Alphabet* assumes readers know the genre and are ready to play with it. This is a book for the person—child or adult—who is already a connoisseur of the alphabet book genre.

That said, the book may also resonate with beginning readers and other non-connoisseurs. Switching the order of the letters W and V, Gaiman and Grimly underscore the arbitrary nature of the alphabet as a system of signs—an idea Seuss emphasizes when creating an entirely new alphabet in *On Beyond Zebra!* (in order to spell the "things that I see / That I *never* could spell if I stopped with the Z"). Experienced readers have likely forgotten the pure randomness of the alphabet's order, accepting it as natural. However, new readers still remember—and may indeed struggle with—the alphabet's essential foreignness. (Why should these letters be in this sequence anyway?) If calling attention to these subjective rules invites questioning them, it simultaneously reinforces them, as does *The Dangerous Alphabet*'s playful announcement that the "alphabet, as given in this publication, is *not to be relied upon* and has a dangerous flaw that an eagle-eyed reader may be able to discern." This note, which appears on the page prior to "A," makes a game of checking the book's alphabet against one's memory of the alphabet. For the "eagle-eyed reader" to win at this game, she or he will need to rehearse his or her abecedarian skills. In signaling the correct order and upsetting it, Gaiman and Grimly show the alphabet as both an arbitrary system and a necessary one, both capricious and reassuring.

The readers whom Johnson interviewed expressed concern that *The Dangerous Alphabet* was not sufficiently reassuring, and that Gris Grimly's images may give young people nightmares. Reporting that they found the book "too dark and sinister," she asks, "Perhaps this is the alphabet book of the Addams family?" While the macabre *Charles Addams Mother Goose* (1967) is not for everyone, children's literature has a long tradition of presenting dark subjects to young readers. As Joan I. Glazer notes in her "Shivers and Smiles from *The Dangerous Alphabet*," "if you have enjoyed books by Edward Gorey, this book's for you." The alphabetical parade of dying or dead children in Gorey's *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* (1963)—"A is for Amy who fell down the stairs / B is for Basil, assaulted by bears"—is not just a sick joke. It's an evocation of earlier didactic tales for children—such as Mary Martha Sherwood's *History of the Fairchild Family* (part 1, 1818)—where children's carelessness and other misbehavior results in their gruesome deaths, thus warning young readers both to behave better and to prepare their souls for their inevitable demise. Striving to teach both morality and literacy, early alphabets also do not shy away from serious

matters. *The New England Primer* (1690) begins "A—In Adam's fall, we sinned all.""A Was an Archer" from *Child's New Play-Thing* (1750) includes "D was a Drunkard."

As Gorey does, Gaiman and Grimly mock and partake of these earlier didactic texts. *The Dangerous Alphabet's* eighty-seven word, single-sentence introduction offers a wry glance back at nineteenth century subtitles, but it also pokes fun at the idea of defining age-appropriate readership in its mention of a "large number of extremely dangerous trolls, monsters, bugbears, creatures, and other such nastiness, many of which have perfectly disgusting habits and ought not, under any circumstances, to be encouraged." The apparent discouragement of such "disgusting habits" recedes under the weight of the mini-epic list of "nastiness," delivered with relish. Interrupting "not to be encouraged" with "under any circumstances" only draws out the pleasure of the forbidden. It is an enticement winkingly presented as a warning.

Gris Grimly amplifies the dual senses of both allure and danger in images that encourage alphabetical proliferation. Making each page a puzzle, he depicts the word named by the text, along with at least one other item (and often many other items) beginning with that letter. "T is for Treasure" is scrawled above pictures of pipes that cross in a "T," a typewriter, a teddy bear, a toilet, a tooth, a turtle, a teapot, and two telephones. "M is for Mirrors" accompanies monsters, manacles, manhole, mice, mousetrap, milk, meat, and maggots. Readers of any age can play Grimly's letter-hunting game, lingering on each illustration and finding all of the words beginning with that letter. While this may amuse, the pictures do—as Johnson notes—offer a grimness suitable for an illustrator who calls himself "Grimly." Strangers tempt a little girl with candy, kidnapping her. The Gerald Scarfe-like drawings show children in manacles, in a cauldron, in prison, in a shack, and in an octopus' tentacles. The book mixes fun with fright.

Yet, as Glazer notes, some children *enjoy* frightening stories. Is the book "disturbing?" she asks. Her response: "Yes, exactly the way that sitting around a campfire, listening to ghost stories, deliciously frightened while holding hands with your friend, is disturbing—but also fun." For those children who enjoy creepiness, *The Dangerous Alphabet* offers the pleasures of fear and then (at the book's conclusion) escape, when the children make their way back home.

In any case, while one does not, of course, wish to frighten children, many children lead lives much more terrifying than those depicted in fiction. In his recent hit "ABC's," Toronto-based rapper K'naan sings of child soldiers in Somalia, his childhood home (he emigrated at age thirteen). K'naan (born Kaynaan Warsame), who never became a child solider but did learn to fire a gun at age nine, raps that "We shoot, and all that is normal. / But it ain't just because we want to. / We ain't got nowhere we could run to. / Somebody please press the 'undo.' / They only teach us the things that guns do." Then, a children's chorus sings the refrain: "They don't teach us the ABCs. / We play on the hard concrete. / All we got is life for the streets. / All we got is life for the streets." Gaiman and

Grimly's fictional children do face many dangers and—as K'naan did when growing up in Mogadishu—are constantly escaping from those trying to kill them. However, they do have more than "life for the streets"; for all its terrors, *The Dangerous Alphabet* begins and ends with the children in safety.

That's why I wonder who Johnson's readers are and what their background might be. As Maurice Sendak said in his Caldecott acceptance speech for *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), while we "want to protect our children from new and painful experiences that are beyond their emotional comprehension and that intensify anxiety," nonetheless "from their earliest years children live on familiar terms with disrupting emotions," "fear and anxiety are an intrinsic part of their everyday lives," and "they continually cope with frustration as best they can." As Sendak's book (also accused of being too frightening for children) did, *The Dangerous Alphabet* offers ways for children to cope—language, persistence, imagination, and humor. "J" may be (as Gaiman suggests) for "the joke monsters make of their crimes," but *The Dangerous Alphabet* is about children who, using their wits and their grit, fight those crimes. Though some readers may find the book too scary, I hope that adults will allow children to decide for themselves whether this is for them. To conclude, then, with a line from Lucille Clifton's Afro-centric ABC, *The Black BC's* (1970), "F is for Freedom / whatever folk say / whoever can give it / can take it away."

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