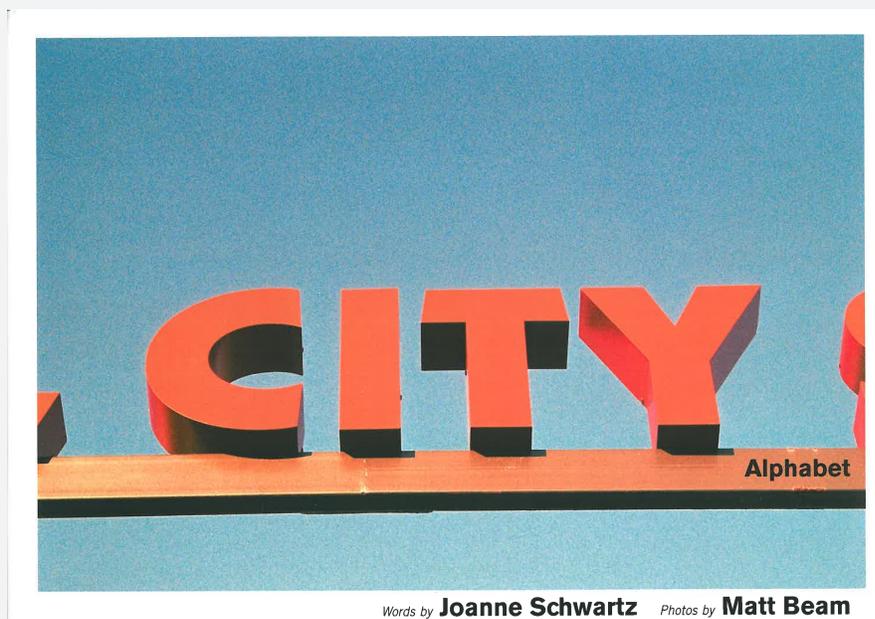


First Opinion: Contemporary Children’s Alphabet Books—The Conversation Continues

Schwartz, Joanne, and Matt Beam. *City Alphabet*. Toronto: Groundwood Books, 2009.

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Joanne Schwartz and Matt Beam’s *City Alphabet*, as the title implies, is a children’s alphabet book that teaches letters and words using photographs of objects found in the city. The picture of the letter A, for example, and the word Art to which it corresponds, are taken from a lamppost. A metal grate, spray-painted with the word Brute, is used to illustrate the letter B. This method continues through to the end of the alphabet: the page for the letter Z consists of a photograph of the word Zoo found on the sunlit cement of an alley wall. The photographs of the remaining letters and words are similarly eye-catching, evocative, and arresting (the pages that demonstrated the letter V and the word Vice are particularly so) and would generally be effective in teaching young readers the alphabet.

In part, what is intriguing about *City Alphabet*, at least from an adult’s point of view, is the writer and illustrator’s “Afterword.” Lest one thinks that the photographs of the objects are taken randomly, and that therefore any old object would do to illustrate a word,

Schwartz, who chose the words, and Beam, who took the photographs, are quick to point out that the images that constitute *City Alphabet* are in fact “word messages” that city dwellers use to communicate with one another. For Schwartz and Beam, *City Alphabet* attempts to reveal to readers the “silent yet noisy dialog” that constantly surrounds us—if only we stopped to listen. For Schwartz and Beam, *City Alphabet* is part of a conversation about city life and the way in which the words from that conversation might be used to teach kids the alphabet.

City Alphabet works because it is part of a trend in recent children’s literature that emphasizes diversity. There are alphabet books that teach the alphabet using African traditions such as *Ashanti to Zulu* by Margaret Musgrove with pictures by Leo and Diane Dillon. *City Alphabet* does not have much to do with ethnicity, but its use of the urban environment emphasizes that kids can learn from the diverse cultural conditions in which they live—if only adults keep the conversation alive. *City Alphabet* makes amply clear that the city speaks to us and that it is up to us to listen and pass on what we hear.

To be sure, *City Alphabet* is up against some stiff competition. One thinks here of all the famous children’s alphabet books that precede it such as *Ashanti to Zulu* as well as more recent examples such as *Animalia* by Graeme Base. Nonetheless, as befitting contemporary children’s illustrated texts generally, *City Alphabet*’s production values are obviously high. As mentioned earlier, the photographs are clear and concise (I wonder if they would have been more effective in black and white), but they also suggest something of the texture of the city. For example, the letter M and the word Meet are illustrated using photographs of a city surveyor’s spray-painted marks on a curb (sidewalk). The close-up of the curb and the spray-painted word allows readers to see the smooth roughness of the concrete and thus feel the way the city is alive in all its imperfections. *City Alphabet* certainly meets the high standards of children’s picture books expected today by publishers, reviewers, and educators and for this reason alone might be used effectively in a classroom. Of course, the question remains, would a beginning reader care about the high production values or the fact that his or her urban environment has found its way into the world of children’s literature?

Overall, it strikes me that *City Alphabet* provides a welcome addition to the genre of alphabet books aimed at the young. It takes itself seriously by trying to articulate the fact that the city speaks and that what it says might be used to teach the alphabet.

Works Cited

- Base, Graeme. *Animalia*. New York: Puffin, 1996.
- Musgrove, Margaret. Illus. Leo and Diane Dillon. *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions*. New York: Puffin, 1992.

About the Author

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