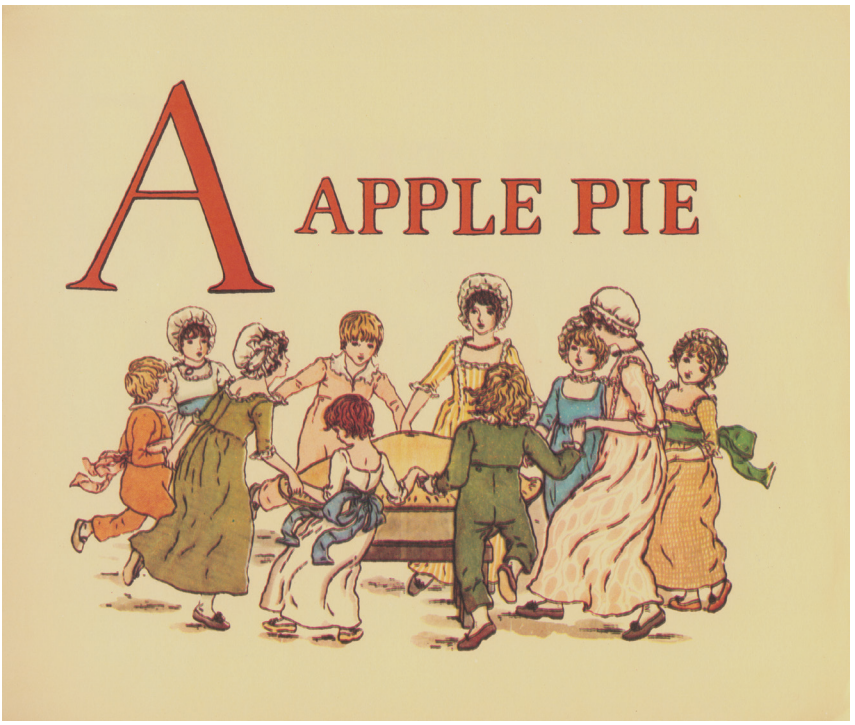

From Kate Greenaway, A Apple Pie, *1886. Courtesy of A Celebration of Women Writers, Mary Mark Ockerbloom, editor.*

ADRIENNE RAPHEL

A Is for A

What is "A"?

The A is the root: it's where we begin, the building block of anything else we want to say. "Everything begins with A" begins Gertrude Stein's *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays*.[1] The alphabet is radical. Spell-casters have looked to the runic alphabet for centuries. The Ouija board relies on the mystical space of the alphabet as the medium through which we will contact the spirits. In Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Levin proposes to Kitty using an alphabetical code. Double abecedarians have the alphabet running from a to z down the left-hand side of the poem and from z to a down the right-hand side; *Albert the Mason wears a fez, / But the fez is shaped like a cherry* might be the first two lines in such a form.[2]

Philosophically, we go from A to Z; geographically, from A to B; tautologically, A to A. A is the universal affirmative: "All X are Y." A is the first in a series of hypothetical things: A is partners with B. Everything in the universe is either A or not-A. A means acceleration. A is the most common blood group. Ace. Ampere. Alto. The scarlet letter. Q and.

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How to Spell "A"

A was originally a consonant.

Ever since the beginnings of the alphabet, A has always been the beginning of the alphabet. In 1998, archaeologist John Darnell discovered rock carvings in Egypt's Valley of Terror, about thirty miles north of the ancient city of Thebes, that proved that the alphabet as we know it was invented around 2000 B.C. by Semitic peoples living in Egypt. That first alphabet was sixteen to twenty-two characters long and based on hieroglyphs. This early alphabet was technically an *abjad*, or consonant-only, alphabet. (Semitic writing systems don't have symbols for vowels.) The first letter, the Semitic consonant *aleph*, meaning "ox," was drawn with the sign of an ox's head. *Beth*, the next letter, was adapted

1. Gertrude Stein, *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays*, ill. Giselle Potter (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).
2. See Cody Walker, "Double Double, Part 2 (Abecedarians)" in the *Kenyon Review* blog, December 30, 2010.

from the glyph for "house." Though the characters in this aleph-beth had meanings, they were used as arbitrary symbols to combine into new words, not as rebuses. Neighboring Phoenicians picked up the alphabet and adapted it into a twenty-two-character system that, around 1700 B.C., began to be disseminated widely through commerce and trade. Eventually, the consonant *aleph* became the vowel *alpha*, and the aleph-beth became the alphabet.

A can have several different sounds. For most languages that use the Latin alphabet, "A" represents an open, unrounded vowel, but in the Canadian language Saanich, the symbol "a" means the sound "/e/" as in "bet." A's are broad (as in *all, wall, salt*), open (*father, rather, fancy* in a fahncy accent), or slender (*place, waste, nation*).

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What Does "A" Mean?

Many abecedaries introduce children to potential adult lives. In early abecedaries, A is an Archer, and shot at a Frog; A is an Angler who caught a fine fish. Illustrator Oliver Jeffers's A is an Astronaut afraid of heights. Innosanto Nagara's A is for Activist. Delinquents lurk farther in the alphabet––D is a Drunkard—but the A's tend to be exemplars.

A is for ape, A is for ant, A is for aardvark, antelope, Australian pitcher plant. If Q is for Quinoa, then A is for Allergy. A is often delicious. Victorian illustrator Kate Greenaway's A was an Apple Pie that B bit, C cut, and Q quartered.

Johann Amos Comenius's 1658 *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, or *Visible World*, is a children's picture encyclopedia that begins with the alphabet. *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* combines sounds and images to create a memory palace for the child: "For the yong A b c Scholar," writes Comenius, "will easily remember the force of every Character by the very looking upon the Creature, till the image being strengthened by use can readily afford all things." Comenius introduces the alphabet with a dialogue between schoolmaster and boy. "I will shew thee all," says the master. "Before all things thou oughtest to learn the plain sounds." Initial letters relate to sounds, not objects: "Cornix cornicatur," or "The Crow cryeth," begins the alphabet, because the crow cries "*a a*." (The Horse Fly comes last: "*ds ds*," that is, "*z z*.")

By the eighteenth century, the letter "A" had replaced the crow's cry as the beginning of abecedaries. A is first seen, then heard. "In Adams fall / We sinned all," begins "The Childes Guide," an alphabet verse in couplets that appeared at the beginning of the *New England Primer*. The

Primer, first printed in 1690, was the first reading primer designed for the American colonies. First published in 1687, the *Primer* was the first book that American schoolchildren would have read, and A is for Adam's fall one of their first pieces of alphabetic knowledge.

In John Harris's 1813 tongue-twisting abecedary *Peter Piper's Practical Principles of Plain and Perfect Pronunciation*, "Andrew Airpump asked his aunt her ailment." Edward Lear's Absolutely Abstemious Ass resides in a barrel and lives on Soda Water and Pickled Cucumbers. Edward Gorey's A is for Amy who fell down the stairs. A is Aunt Annie's alligator in *Dr. Seuss's ABC*; A is an anonymous alligator in Alice and Martin Provensen's Shaker abecedarius. In Kate Schwartz's *Rad American Women A–Z*, A is for Angela Davis.

From Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, Johann Amos Comenius, 1658. Courtesy of Boston Public Library/Rare Books*

According to Swedish law, parents cannot name their children without submitting the name for governmental approval. In 1991, two parents attempted to name their child Brfxxccxxmnpccclllmmnprxvclmnckssqlbb11116. The court rejected this name, and the parents were fined five thousand kronor. In response, the parents tried to change the spelling of the boy's name to "A." The court denied the change.

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What Is "A" For?

"Ages ago, Alex, Allen and Alva arrived at Antibes, and Alva allowing all, allowing anyone, against Alex's admonition, against Allen's angry assertion: another African amusement…anyhow, as all argued, an awesome African army assembled and arduously advanced against an

African anthill, assiduously annihilating ant after ant, and afterward, Alex astonishingly accuses Albert as also accepting Africa's antipodal any annexation,"[3] attests an antecedent assertion announcing Abish's *Alphabetical Africa*'s "A" area.

In *Eunoia*, Christian Bök writes each chapter with only a single vowel. "Awkward grammar appalls a craftsman," begins Chapter A. The book relies on the alphabet to determine its vowel sounds: all sounds that get spelled with the letter "A" are fair game for Chapter A. Bök lays out the rules of the game within the game's language: in Chapter A, we learn that "A law as harsh as a *fatwa* bans all paragraphs that lack an A as a standard hallmark."[4]

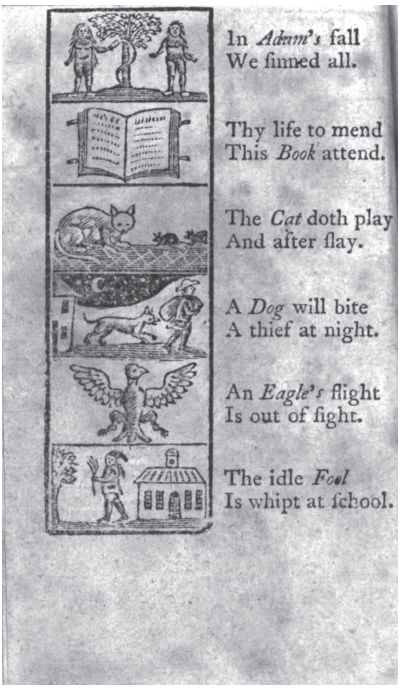
Single A's were found on Greek vessels at the sanctuary of Zeus at Mt. Hymettos in Greece. M.K. Langdon writes of an etched alpha on a fragment of an urn, "Single alphas are often found on objects dedicated to Athena, undoubtedly as abbreviations of the goddess' name. . . . The significance, if any, of single alpha from Hymettos is unknown."[5]

A is for ox. "a / is ox head: / dark snout and horn, body blank as milk," writes poet Orlando White in his 2015 collection *Letterrs*, poetic love letters to graphemes. "Originates from / measurement of animal to print," he continues; "first as labor on landscape, / then on page as libel."[6]

Inger Christensen's *alphabet*, a collection based on the Fibonacci sequence as well as the alphabet, begins "apricot trees exist, apricot trees exist."[7] The Latin for apricot is *praecocia*, or precocious fruit; it's also been suggested that Adam and Eve's apple was no McIntosh but a *Mala armeniaca*, or Armenian apple, or apricot. Orchard apples are typically propagated asexually, through grafting. When apples breed in the wild from seeds, they will most likely look and taste nothing like their parents.

James Merrill spent the better part of the second half of his life at the Ouija board. *The Changing Light at Sandover,* the five-hundred-page poem that emerged from these sessions, is virtuosic as only Merrill, or the vessel of Merrill, can be: he speaks with Auden and God B (Biology) and transcendental bats. The Ouija board gives him a double sestina. I once taught a student who told me he was cursed; he burned a Ouija board in the park, and deer gathered around him in a ring to watch. Ouija board dicta have a certain flatness, an arbitrariness girding the

3. Walter Abish, *Alphabetical Africa* (New York: New Directions, 1974), 1.
4. Christian Bök, *Eunoia* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2009), 12.
5. Merle K. Langdon, "A Sanctuary of Zeus at Mount Hymettos" (Athens, Greece: *Hesperia Supplements*, 1976), 39.
6. Orlando White, *Letterrs* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2015), 25.
7. Inger Christensen, *alphabet*, trans. Susanna Nied (New York: New Directions, 2000), 11.



From The New England Primer, *1810. Courtesy of University of Delaware Library Special Collections*

ironclad brilliance. Everything is as irrevocably true as a dream, and nothing is real.

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What Does "A" Mean?

A is generally premium: Grade A, A-plus, A-one. "A.1. Steak Sauce" was apparently so dubbed because King George IV deemed the spread "A.1." A used to denote the lowest social stratum; now, it's the highest socioeconomic class: from highest quantity of people to highest quality of life. In batteries and bras, A is larger than AA, which is larger than AAA. If you're a company, or a baseball player, you'd rather be rated AAA than AA.

Why is A the best? Because it's the top. In *Metaphors We Live By*, cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson suggest that we structure our world via conceptual metaphors; for example, up is good, down is bad. The 2003–04 Los Angeles Westwood Yellow Pages contains businesses like "A-Approved Chimney Services" and "A Budget Moves" to become A-named businesses and jump up the telephone list.

Writer Richard Wiseman conducted a survey for the UK newspaper *The Telegraph* to see how people's surnames impacted their perception of their success in life. Readers with names at the beginning of the alphabet rated themselves as significantly more successful, particularly at work, than those at the end of the alphabet.

Business professors Kurt A. Carlson and Jacqueline M. Conard discovered that people who grow up with names at the end of the alphabet have a much more Pavlovian response to deals than their earlier-alphabetted peers. Presented with an enticing sale or potential prize, R–Zs will leap at the opportunity, while Andersons and Bennetts will be more laissez-faire. Economists Liran Einav and Leeat Yariv analyzed the surnames of academics in the top thirty-five economics departments in the United States: faculty with surnames near the top of the alphabet are signifi-

cantly more likely to receive tenure, to become fellows of the Econometric Society, and to receive the Clark Medal and the Nobel Prize. (Sorry, Richard Zeckhauser.) A major part of the problem comes from the convention in economics of listing authors for academic papers in alphabetical order—when Einav and Yariv looked at professors in psychology, where authors are listed by amount of contribution to the study, the alphabetism lessens.

Photograph by Alexander Bradbury

In 2004, Tom Zych ran for president on a platform to end the tyranny of alphabetical order: "I spent many years in the back right-hand corner of classrooms, at the ends of lines," he said, and it was time for change.

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What Does "A" Look Like?

A can have many colors. "The long *a* of the English alphabet (and it is this alphabet I have in mind farther on unless otherwise stated)," writes Vladimir Nabokov, "has for me the tint of weathered wood, but the French *a* evokes polished ebony."[8] Arthur Rimbaud agrees: the beginning of "Voyelles," in which he describes colors for each vowel, is "*A noir.*" Synesthetic associations are idiosyncratic and immutable. Though Nabokov describes his son's mauve M as a mix of his own pink M and his wife's blue M, this is likely coincidence, as synesthetic alphabets tend to be highly individualized. Certain colors, however, are more commonly associated with certain letters: over a third of true synesthetes report A as red.

Nathan Witthoft and Jonathan Winawer of Stanford University traced eleven synesthetes' color-grapheme synesthesia to a set of Fisher-Price refrigerator magnets.[9] (The Fisher-Price A is red.) One synesthete in

8. Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 16.
9. NathanWitthoft and Jonathan Winawer, "Synesthetic Colors Determined by Having Colored Refrigerator Magnets in Childhood," *Cortex* 42.2 (2006): 175–183.

the study moved to Russia when she was three. Her Cyrillic letters had the same colors as the English letters that looked the most like them. Her synesthetic alphabet is a near-perfect match to Fisher-Price: The only color that is different is "B": in the woman's alphabet, B is blue, but Fisher-Price's B is orange. Upon further investigation, the researchers learned that the B magnet had gone missing during the woman's childhood.

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What Does "A" Sound Like?

All A's rise. The concert A wasn't standardized until well into the nineteenth century. In the Middle Ages, an A could be played as high as 567 Hz and as low as A = 377 Hz. Handel favored A = 423 Hz; Mozart preferred A = 422 Hz. A higher pitch creates a brighter, more brilliant sound, so the A kept going up and up: a 1720 pitch pipe gives A = 380 Hz, but an organ in Bach's time gives A = 480 Hz.

But the A can't rise forever. An A that's too high makes music harder and harder to sing. In 1859, to end the arms' race of rising pitches, the French government set A = 435 Hz as the legal standard. In 1896, the London Philharmonic Society reasoned that the French had set the pitch in a room that was 59° F, and they squeaked out a slightly brighter standard of A = 439 Hz at 68° F. Finally, in 1939, an international conference set the standard at A = 440 Hz. The BBC began broadcasting an electronic A = 440 Hz tuning note; orchestras were urged to tune to the tone instead of to the oboe. Today, the New York Philharmonic and the Boston Symphony Orchestra tune to A = 442 Hz. (The A above middle C is an 'a' in the British system of pitch designation and 'A4' in the American system. A4 paper is 210 mm by 297 mm, or 8.27 by 11.7 in.)

Kenny Ning, a data analyst for Spotify, analyzed all thirty million songs in the site's database. Of the twenty-four possible key signatures, A major is the fourth most popular, comprising 6.1% of Spotify's tracks. ABBA's "Dancing Queen" is in A major; so are the Beatles' "Lady Madonna," U2's "Beautiful Day," Schubert's "Trout Quintet," and Mozart's "Clarinet Concerto," his final instrumental piece. A minor is the most major minor; with 4.8% of the songs, it's the most popular of the minors, which tend

Capital A, Times New Roman font

to lag behind major keys. G major is the most popular, followed by C major: G is easy for both a guitar and a piano to play. A major's relative minor, F# minor, is more obscure than the relative minors for the other top major keys. (The relative minor key signature has the same number of sharps and flats as its relative major.) But F# minor is trickier than most keys to play on guitar, because it involves a lot of complex barre chords. So the key signatures that get popular often have less to do with tonal color for the listener than with ease of play.

"Take the 'A' Train," the signature song of the Duke Ellington orchestra, is in C major. Billy Strayhorn composed the tune in 1939, inspired when Ellington gave him directions to his house by subway that began, "Take the A Train." The A train, which opened in 1932, isn't the oldest train in Manhattan, but it's the oldest public train, and it's the longest, running thirty-one miles from northern Manhattan to Far Rockaway, Queens. According to New York City Transit, it's the longest subway line in the world.

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"A" Is for Me

I'm not unbiased. For me, of course, A is for Adrienne. I have an "A" name because I'm named after my great-uncle Arnie, who died before I was born. Arnie was seventeen years younger than his brother, my grandfather, and thirteen years older than my father, but he and my grandfather had nearly identical voices, and used to play pranks on the phone, calling their mother without telling her who was on the line. On a fairly routine day in the middle of August, 1988, Arnie, who was the American ambassador to Pakistan, boarded a plane with Pakistan's president at the time, Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq. The plane had a bomb onboard, and everyone was killed.

I've only used a Ouija board once in my life, around Halloween of 2010. I was in Iowa, and reading a lot of James Merrill, and it was a dark and stormy night. About three or four people gathered around the board, which was from the seventies. After some dithering and wobbling through the letters, the planchette circled around and around the A. It began to spell my name, then switched to A-R-N-I-E. No one else at the Ouija board knew about my great-uncle. We asked it a few questions, and the planchette swung YES—NO—YES—NO. Are you making a joke? someone said. H-A-H-A said Arnie.

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A Is an A Is an A

Intoxicated by the promise of the alphabet to say anything, we ask the alphabet to tell us everything. Though linguists have loved to suggest that the language we speak shapes the way we think, their theories quickly bump up against a classic chicken-and-egg scenario: language may shape what we think, but since much of our thinking is done through language, thinking also shapes how we speak. We can go philosophically from A to Z, or geographically from A to B, but when we try to define what an A is, asking too many Q's inevitably turns tautological: A is an A is an A. The alphabet allows us to say what we mean, and an A means many things, but simply grading ourselves with an A can't guarantee that we mean what we say, or that what the A says means anything at all. A exists, A exists.