



Picture Window

Margot Beggs, editor



Face and Body: Alphabet Books and Beyond

Michael Solomon

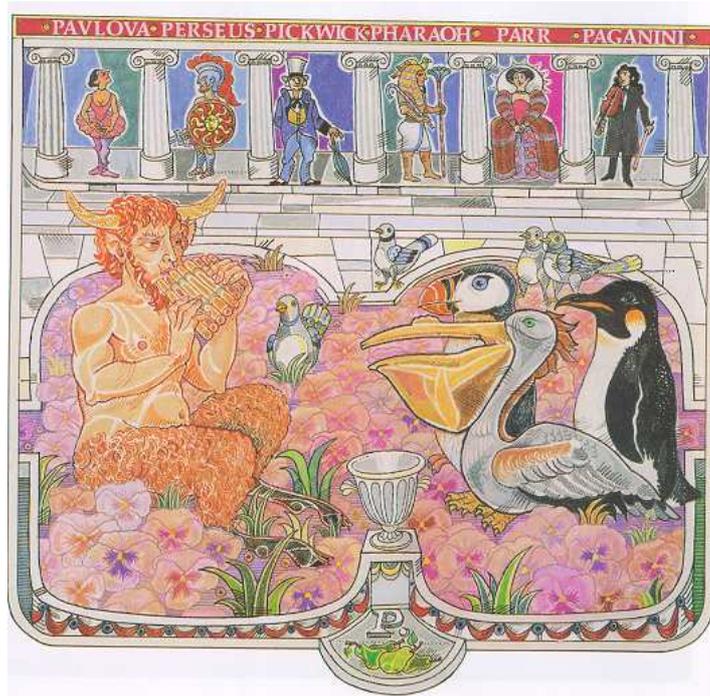
Michael Solomon is the art director at Greenwood Books, Toronto.

The mind at play easily enjoys a powerful, naturally assumed imagery in the forms of the letters of the alphabet. Animated letters have been with us in manuscript since the eighth century and in mechanical media from the fifteenth. Modern publicity is replete with letter pictures, from the ambitious and serious to the witty and playful, in logos and trademarks. And not just the single letter but the page of set type has this metaphoric potential -- countless letters form a crowd, a nation, the stars.

Alphabet books represent the great forum for the children's book artist wishing to extend these abstract linguistic entities into the pictorial arena. Broadly speaking, these books break down into two types, which I will call, for want of official names, the initial-associative and the graphic. The first can be represented by the formula A is an apple pie. Initial-associative alphabet books may be free and unrestrained, with subjects as diverse as apple, ball, cat, zebra. Often, though, the artist chooses to work within a circumscribed theme. I am thinking of works like Kate Greenaway's 1886 classic [A Apple Pie: An Old Fashioned Alphabet Book](#). In graphic alphabet books, images take their cues from the letter's shape: I is a column, S a snake. Ponder the apple-pieness of A and you may conclude that the image is latent until the pie is cut into wedges.

There need not be a clear line dividing the initial-associative from the graphic alphabet book, but the two titles I will consider first are rather pure examples of each. Frank Newfeld's new book *Creatures: An Alphabet for Adults and Worldly Children* (Groundwood 1998) is an unabashed example of the free-ranging, initial-associative type. This wordless book displays specially drawn decorative capital letters adorning pages that hold up to three illustrations. These in turn are fields in which the initial-mates (animal, vegetable or mineral) disport themselves. Hence a gryphon sits for Grandma Moses at her easel in one of the less populated spreads, while a sphinx, sparrow, snail, skull, strawberries, spyglass, sailing ship, and many others of their initial-kin, including Satan himself, congregate under the bristling banner S.

These two examples suggest the glee with which Newfeld, a highly regarded Canadian designer, revels in his project. At the same time, we become aware as we survey his crazy-quilt assemblies, of an ironic background atmosphere of absurdity: these guests, invited on the gossamer pretext of their English names, must to a greater or lesser extent break up and reassemble in different permutations and settings if suddenly the parties were to reconvene in another language. The great god Pan and his several companions (Perseus and Paganini among them) would still be at the P party in a German book. So would their bird friends the penguin, pelican and puffin -- but the pigeon must fly off to the T field. And a gardener would have to replace with some other plant the beautiful carpet of pansies upon which this pleasant panpipes recital takes place.



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A bold, beautiful and strikingly original example of the graphic alphabet book claims this terrain in the title itself. In David Pelletier's Caldecott Honor Book [The Graphic Alphabet](#), the artist triumphs by deploying the most widely ranging conceptions for the illustrated letter that I've ever found between covers. And yet he brings to his task the designer's demand for the simple, the elegant, almost the minimal expressive means to elucidate each conception. His illustrations are, I suppose, visual puns, but only a few are so in the most obvious and familiar way; it is Pelletier's exuberantly free way with the alphabetic forms -- now wresting expressive performances from letters, now manipulating objects and phenomena to take on the persona of letters -- that keeps the reader on his or her conceptual toes. A is an avalanche whose pointy peak crumbles and falls. B is the visible trace of a bouncing ball (or perhaps a bouncing subatomic particle, since the electric blue trace against the book's uniform deep rich black square field suggests pure light and energy). Orange, crimson and purple circles become Cs by cutting themselves off as they gravitate past the edge of the night sky field. They may still be typographic entities, but they are at the threshold.

Pelletier soon boldly goes beyond it to employ nontypographic forms to tackle the problem of the illustrated letter from the other direction: from the natural-object world back to the symbol. In an animated flock, elbow-macaroni jog each other as they orient themselves like magnets to perform N-Noodles. Lower-case r is simply a jagged rip in the black fabric, shown thereby to be transformed magically from an intangible night sky to very down-to-earth torn paper, as though the machinery behind a theatrical illusion stands revealed.

I don't suppose that [Face to Face](#), by the Swiss designers and photographers François and Jean Robert, is a children's book, but I can't help but think that children who are absorbed by a book like *The Graphic Alphabet* will find it as captivating as I do. The game of seeing pictures in letters is allied with a pattern-perceiving faculty of another kind -- face recognition. Even the slightest suggestion of forms approximating eyes, nose and mouth will conjure up a face. Who has not lain in bed and seen the faces that emerge from broken plaster, woodgrain and wallpaper flora? The Robert brothers embarked on a project to capture in black-and-white photographs the faces that manifested themselves from a great variety of (nearly exclusively) man-made objects.

And what a gallery of affecting, amusing, touching, and above all haunting faces engages us. I am not very mechanically-inclined, but the (to me) obscure function of many of the objects does not diminish



one bit their power to catch my eye, then my sympathy. A European door buzzer suavely and mischievously regards us with jaunty cap and beetling Groucho eyebrows. A wing-type corkscrew pricks up its ears, a leporine alien caught in the act. The side of a small leather case accosts us questioningly, toothlessly. A sweetly dopey alarm clock begs only to be allowed to go back to sleep. Two small electrical connectors appear side-by-side, their mouths dripping dental machinery, imploring that the imminent operation not hurt. A medieval knight of an old mailbox is ready to impart its ancient wisdom from an elegant gothic mouth and tired old visored eyes. An old stone tower peers out over the countryside, its mouth a round o, nonchalantly, soundlessly whistling and yet betraying a disarming self-consciousness in its gorgeous headgear. A vacuum cleaner frowns and puffs up its cheeks, a Louis Armstrong in reverse. A chest of drawers is as serene and contemplative as any Buddha. The second section of the book is devoted to faces in profile, and interestingly, now reptiles and birds far outnumber humans. Corkscrew rooster. Pliers parrot. Caulking gun goose. Pruning shears flamingo. Tree trunk dinosaur. In all its unforced simplicity and tireless playfulness, this is an exquisite, elegant, eloquent book.

Bibliographical information

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