

ABCs of ABCs: Two Canadian exemplars

Ted McGee

Résumé: *Dans son analyse des abécédaires, Ted McGee prend à partie l'opinion reçue selon laquelle la relation entre l'image et le réel est simple, claire et univoque. Bien que ces ouvrages encouragent les enfants à établir des liens nécessaires et importants entre 'les mots et les choses', il n'en reste pas moins vrai que leur polysémie soulève le problème de la compréhension immédiate du message verbal et iconique, à savoir: les jeunes lecteurs comprennent-ils effectivement ce qu'on veut qu'ils comprennent?*

To begin with, "A" is for Aristotle's apocryphal, alliterative ABC. Circulating in manuscript late in the Middle Ages, this prototypical alphabet book warned against extremism of various kinds, telling its readers not to be

Too Amorous, too Adventurous, nor Anger thee not too much;
Too Bold, nor too Busy, nor Board not too large.¹

And so on. The work recommended "a measurable mean" as the best way of life, and, as if the force of Aristotle's authority and the stress of the alliterative verse were not enough, some copies added several prefatory stanzas which urge the reader to "blame not the bairn that this a.b.c. made," but to "learn he of letter" in order to grow wise, command respect, and "his life save." One remarkable aspect of the preamble to the ABC is that it conjoins a child's work on the rudiments of language with lofty claims about the efficacy of "learning of letter."

Very few makers of Canadian alphabet books make such grand claims explicitly,² though their books do offer important samples of Canadian culture of different regions at various times. In what follows, however, I would like to attend not to the lofty purposes or salvific potentiality of alphabet books, but rather to their usefulness in the rudimentary business of learning letters. The role that alphabet books can play in developing literacy—reading and writing—is exemplified by two of the simplest instances of the form: Elizabeth Cleaver's *ABC* (1984) and *Alphabet book*, prepared in Canada's centennial year by the children on the Kettle Point Indian Reserve in southwestern Ontario.

Before examining these books, we should note that most Canadian children know their ABCs before they ever have recourse to an ABC book. This is not the case for adults learning English as a second language. For them, alphabet

books are a primary device for establishing the connection among letter forms, sounds, words, and their referents. But children of English-speaking parents usually learn their ABCs first as a series of sounds. As they can rattle off a series of numbers before they have much sense of what the numbers refer to or how they might be used, so they can recite with varying degrees of precision the sounds of the alphabet. Doing so may well be a source of some pride and a demonstration of a child's capacity to join in the activities of older children.

At this stage, however, elision (particularly of the l-m-n-o sequence) often reduces the twenty-six sounds of the alphabet to twenty-two or twenty-three. Careful enunciation is fostered by sound of another sort: song. Alphabet songs provide an especially positive starting point for learning because they associate the child's knowledge of the alphabet with other sources of pleasure, such as self-esteem, as in Sharon, Lois and Bram's version of the old standard "A, you're adorable, B, you're so beautiful, C, you're a cutie full of charms ..." (Hampson 6) or friendship, as in *The polka dot door's* "Now I know my ABCs;/ Next time won't you sing with me?". Nor are these songs without cultural significance: Canadian performers like Sharon, Lois and Bram affirm their Canadianness by choosing to pronounce "z" as "zed", in spite of the requirements of the rhyme scheme.³

More important for our purposes here, alphabet songs establish that the alphabet is a series of discrete sounds, but they also create the mistaken impression that for each letter there is but a single sound. Alphabet *books* confirm the former (particularly by their format) and correct the latter (principally through their illustrations).

Both *Alphabet book* by the children of the Kettle Point Reserve and Elizabeth Cleaver's *ABC* give a single two-page spread to each letter of the alphabet. This format individuates the sounds and symbols of the alphabet by requiring that a reader turn a page in order to proceed from letter to letter. The left-hand page of the two-page spread contains, sometimes along with other material, a representation of a letter of the alphabet; the page to the right contains an illustration of (at least) one thing, the word for which begins with the letter opposite (as in figure 1).

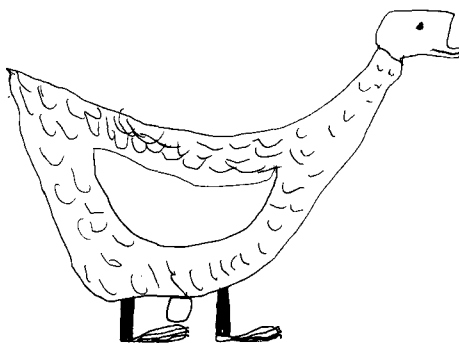
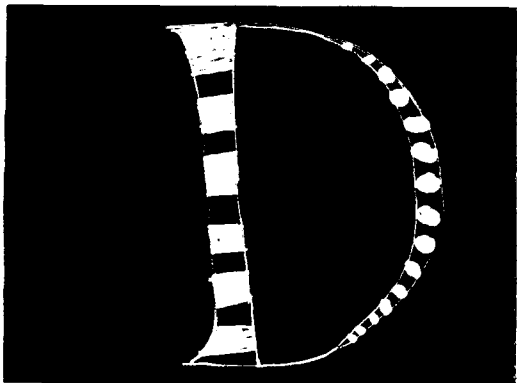


Figure 1

For nine of the letters in *Alphabet book*, including the first six, this is the sum total of the material set forth. Cleaver's illustrations—considered apart from the “text” on the left-hand page of each two-page spread (as in figure 2 below)—establish the same basic connection, by imposing a large, colourful roman capital on cut-out figures of various things. This format, the juxtaposition of a letter form and a picture, encourages a child to make a connection basic for literacy: the connection between the letter, its sound in a word, and the object to which that word refers.

Cleaver has designed the illustrations of *ABC* to facilitate this connection. The elements of each picture tend to cohere as a scene, but actually fail to do so. In each collage, Cleaver places strips of paper of different colours horizontally across the page to suggest a landscape with depth of field. The figures are then set against this background in such a way that they tend to be seen in naturalistic relationships to one another and to the background. Figure 2 provides a good example: two shades of blue paper create the lake in the foreground; a strip of brown and one of orange suggest the autumn woods in the middle distance; and the light blue background, mottled with white, represents the sky on a fair day.

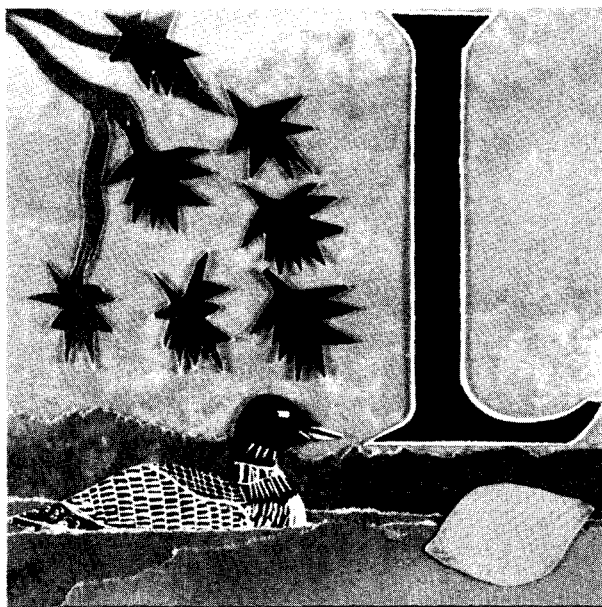


Figure 2

Setting the loon *into* the waters of the lake and somewhat behind an overhanging branch of red leaves produces the illusion of a recognizable, harmonious scene.

But one might well ask, having looked at figure 2, “what about the lemon?” Clearly it does not fit in, placed as it is on top of the water and over the trees. *That* it does not is crucial. Like the foregrounding of the leaves and the contrast

between the colour of the loon and the background, the incompatibility of the lemon helps a child reader to focus on that thing and say the word in which the relevant letter appears. Cleaver resists the very tendency toward naturalism that she creates.

She does so not only in the representation of things but also in the representation of the letters themselves. In some illustrations (those for A, B, C, H, M,

V, and Y) even the letter form—climbed on by caterpillars, perched on by birds, scurried over by mice, looked around by a yak—might be construed as a concrete thing in a landscape. However, as with the capital “L” in figure 2, so with every other letter of the alphabet: Cleaver scrupulously preserves a thin white border around the roman capitals, as if to suggest that the letters and the language are a set of symbols essentially different from the things they denote or distinguish.

In the last paragraph I deliberately oversimplified Cleaver’s *ABC*, by consistently noting that the words associated with each letter referred to “things.” Although nouns do predominate in most alphabet books (as they do in both the books under consideration here), Cleaver’s *ABC* suggests more complex sets of connections necessary for literacy, for reading in particular.⁵ Besides the “things” in Cleaver’s illustrations, there are three qualities (all quite basic: blue, red, and white), one action (“j” for “jump”), and one spatial relationship (“u” is for “under,” and under the umbrella both the “U” and a unicorn appear).

Cleaver’s *ABC* also complicates the basic connection between a letter, a sound, and their use in a word by including in the illustrations an array of things, things identified by words that use the same letters but produce different sounds: “c” is both for carrot and for “celery.” In figure 3, “e” is long, short, silent, and silenced, in “ear,” “egg,” “envelope,” and “eye” respectively.

Most important for developing the ability to read, *ABC* registers the letters and the words *as seen*. The letters appear on the left-hand page, in type, both upper and lower case—a feature of the book just hinting at conventions that should become meaningful later on. And the words, known as sounds, sounds prompted by the pictures, are all spelled out and listed in alphabetical order.

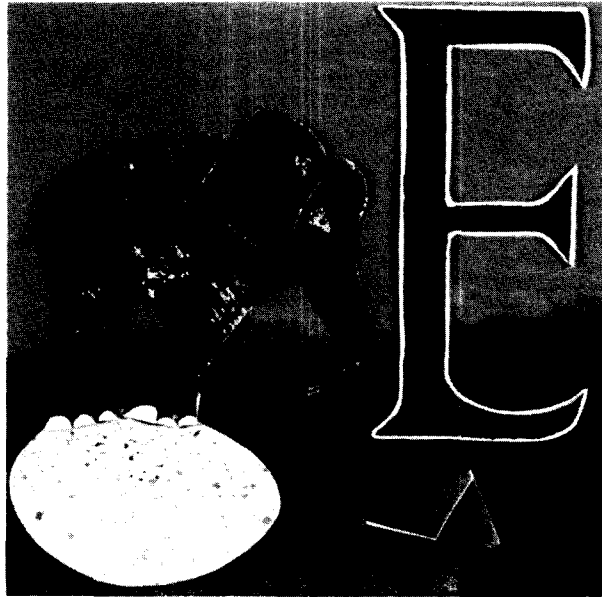


Figure 3

As a result, Cleaver’s *ABC*, through its conjunction of illustrations and text, establishes the network of connections basic to reading: connections of a letter, in various

forms, to its sound(s) as these sounds are heard, seen in the symbolic system of language, and used to distinguish things, actions, qualities, and relationships in the world around us.

Besides encouraging connections necessary for reading, the format of *ABC* creates a striking contrast between the text on the left-hand page and the pictures on the right. Stark columns of words set off colourful, playful, sometimes allusive illustrations. The power of the book to engage pre-literate readers comes largely from the illustrations. *Alphabet book*, on the other hand, dramatizes a process of engagement with the letter forms themselves.

The illustrations of this ABC book are not without interest, of course, for they represent “a spontaneous view of the many influences converging on the young Indian today” (*Alphabet book 2*). Many of the pictures confirm the impression that Canada’s native peoples live in close contact with nature: “f” is for “fish,” “g” is for “gulls,” “j” is for “jack-in-the-pulpit.” The first and last images, however, register the impact of modern technology; “a” is for “airplane” and “z” for the television hero of the day, Zorro. And at the centre of the book is a nostalgic reminder of the historical moment of this book, a picture of Sir John A. MacDonal which symbolizes the unity of Canada’s various peoples in centennial year. What is of more interest in a discussion of literacy, however, is

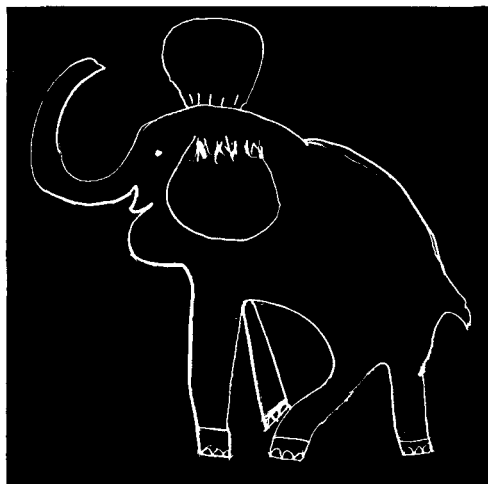
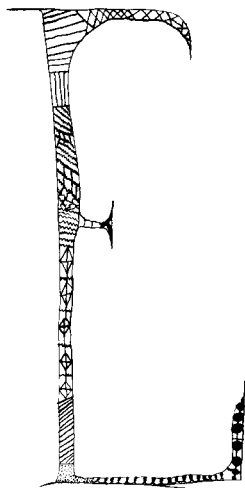


Figure 4

that *Alphabet book* presents a writing of the alphabet by children.

Many primary school teachers in the Waterloo region plunder local libraries to make alphabet books available to their students. The same teachers report, however, that these books are most useful as models by which children make their own ABC books, just as the children of the Kettle Point Reserve have done

in *Alphabet book*. Through their illustrations, the Kettle Point children have made the alphabet their own by using it to structure important aspects of their experience. They have also used it as a taxonomical device, organizing the names of all the collaborating authors in alphabetical order. Most important, the children have written the letters (sometimes in upper case, sometimes in lower), drawn the roman capitals, and decorated some of them. The decoration sometimes confirms one's sense of the letter forms by replicating key features of them; for example, black and white triangles (v-shapes) appear on the arms of the "V," and the "D" is filled out with rectangles on its straight side and balls on its round part (as in figure 1). With x's, horizontal lines, vertical lines, squiggles on one diagonal, straight lines on the other diagonal, diamonds, loops, and circles, the "E" is most ornate (figure 4). The contrast here between the elaborate letter form and the simple drawing is no less striking than that between the text page and the illustration page of Cleaver's *ABC*. The implication of the contrast in figure 4 is quite different, however: it reveals that the child's energy and interest have been engaged by the letter itself. Throughout *Alphabet book*, the letters command attention not only as parts of a useful symbolic system but also as intriguing, if not beautiful, graphic shapes. In *Alphabet book*, the letters themselves, more than the illustrations, are *objets d'art*. The importance of the graphic design of the alphabet is clear from the very start of the book, the cover of which spells out the title in type of various fonts and various sizes, all, it seems, imprinted by means of primitive wooden blocks.

Throughout this essay, I have tried to suggest ways in which the art of ABC books engages the interest of children and suggests a complex network of connections fundamental to reading and writing. Even very simple alphabet books, such as the two on which I have focused attention, try to involve children in a process of hearing and speaking and seeing and reproducing and appropriating and applying the language.

For the children of the Kettle Point Reserve that process was fun, as the representation of themselves in the background of the illustration for "T" and as the centrepoint of that for "U" clearly reveal: in *Alphabet book*, "U" is for "us." Similarly, Elizabeth Cleaver's "child-like love for cutting paper" and the delight she derived from playing with paper dolls inform her collage technique in *ABC* as in other works. The art of both these books, the letter forms of *Alphabet book* and the pictures of *ABC*, tries to stir up and to sustain the interest of children by providing pleasure too. To the extent that they do, they become useful tools for those teaching literacy by means of whole language programmes, which encourage explorations of the language and foster them by means of positive reinforcement even of the most rudimentary work with language.

That reinforcement can be doubly effective, as one experiment in a local school revealed, if children learning their ABCs teach others learning theirs. This experiment allows me to end as I began, with a manuscript, but a contemporary one written by a seven-year-old girl to her "reading buddy" in

junior kindergarten. Working with the language herself, and “not blaming the bairn that his a.b.c. made” but imitating with relish the encouraging responses of her own teacher, the girl wrote of her buddy’s efforts to write “n”: “he stase with it. he likes to do later. he dusint git sad iF he dus sumthing rong. Rory is a exalinte kidd.”

NOTES

- 1 Furnivall 11. I have modernized Furnivall’s diplomatic transcription of Lambeth Palace MS. 853, p. 30.
- 2 Lyn Cook is one who does; in the final poem of *A Canadian ABC*, she urges readers to give voice to a necessary creative urge and “see what magic/ you can make/ with scenes from history/ and far-flung places/ and all the diverse faces/ of our country.”
- 3 In the printed version of the lyrics to “A, you’re adorable,” found in a twelve-page booklet inserted with the album *Smorgasbord*, Sharon, Lois and Bram add a postscript to explain their failure to rhyme the last letter of the alphabet with “me”: “We’ve taken the liberty of using the Canadian pronunciation of ‘Zed.’ Artistic license.”
- 4 In her illustrations for Phyllis Gottlieb’s *A bestiary of the garden for children who should know better*, Cleaver integrates the letter form more fully into the natural scene by eliminating the white border. Five of the letters from *A bestiary* have been reproduced in *The new wind has wings*.
- 5 For a more systematic development of the possibilities that Cleaver just suggests, see Ted Harrison’s *A Northern alphabet*.

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Illustrations:

- Figure 1 and 4:** *Alphabet book* © copyright 1969 Anne and Alex Wyse (U of Toronto Press, 1969) reprinted with permission of Alex and Anne Wyse.
- Figures 2. and 3:** *ABC* © copyright 1984 Elizabeth Cleaver (Oxford U Press, 1984) reprinted with permission of Frank J. Mrazik.

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