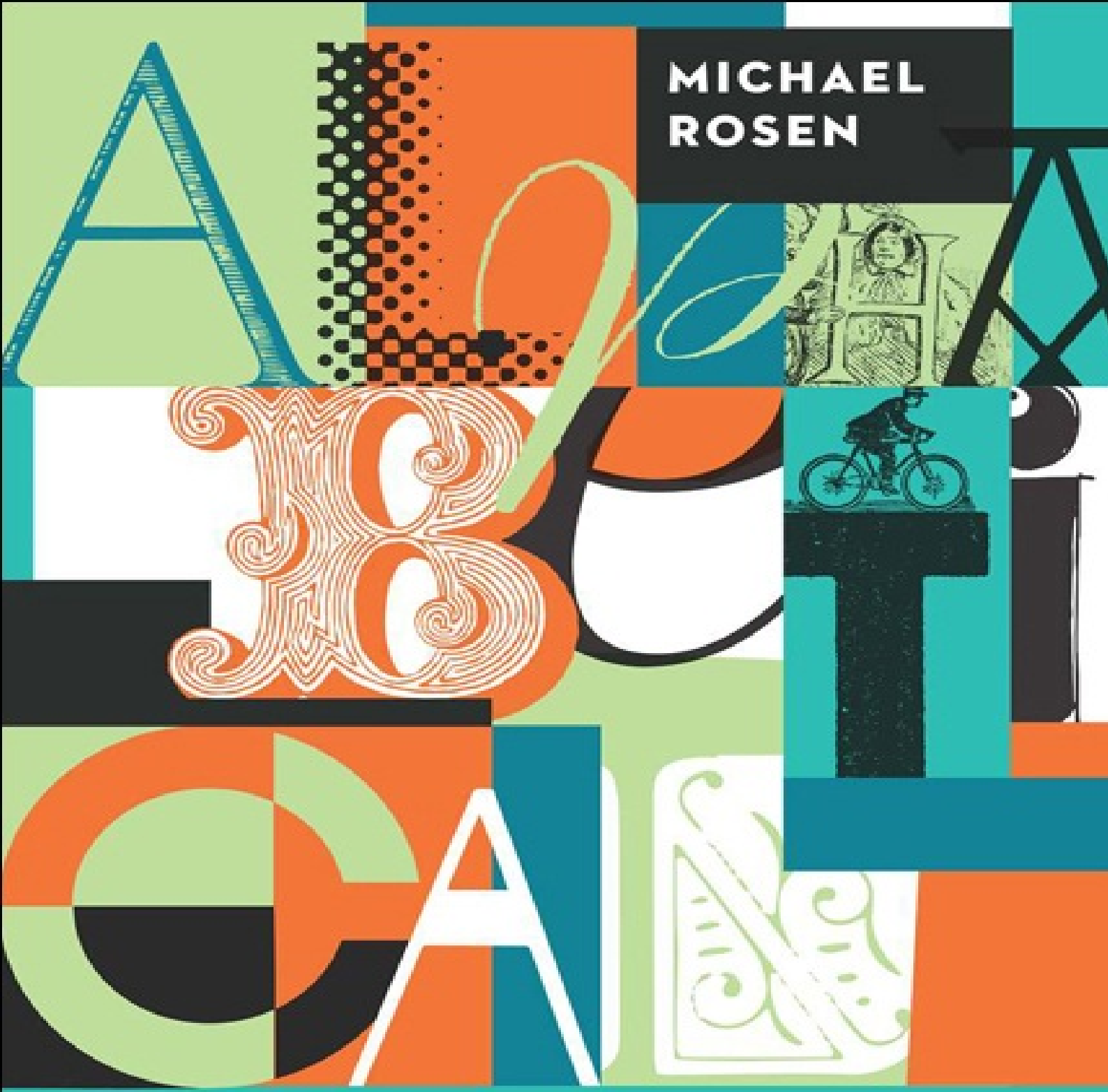


MICHAEL ROSEN

ALPHABETICAL

HOW EVERY LETTER TELLS A STORY

ALPHABETICAL

Also by Michael Rosen

Selected Poems
Fighters for Life: Selected Poems
William Shakespeare, In His Time For Our Time
Michael Rosen's Sad Book, illustrated by Quentin Blake
The Penguin Book of Childhood

ALPHABETICAL

How Every Letter Tells a Story

Michael Rosen

COUNTERPOINT
BERKELEY

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Is Available

ISBN 978-1-61902-516-5

Cover design by Jen Heuer

COUNTERPOINT
2560 Ninth Street, Suite 318
Berkeley, CA 94710
www.counterpointpress.com

Distributed by Publishers Group West

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For the three Es, Emma, Elsie and Emile

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

IN FRONT OF me is a line of children and parents who want me to sign their books. As each child com up to the table I ask their name. For most of the names, I check how it's spelled. Sometimes this because it's one I haven't heard of, sometimes it's because there are several ways to spell the nam sometimes it's because it's quite possible that the parents have invented a new spelling. So I ask. Th child or the parent spells it out for me: 'S-h-e-r-r-i-l-e-e-n.' 'Thank you,' I say. 'Did you come up wi that spelling?'

'Yes,' says the mother.

'Great,' I say, enjoying the fact that people feel free to take the alphabet into their own hands an use it for their own purposes, making up names, making up spellings, getting the letters that are give to us to do a job that they want done.

The next child arrives. I write his name: 'Tariq', and have a quiet smile to myself how the rule th the letter 'q' must, must, *must* be accompanied by a 'u' and if it's at the end of a word with a 'u' an an 'e' is quietly but insistently laid to one side by people with Muslim names. Although we talk 'rules' in language, they are in fact more like treaties between consenting groups. We abide by thes until such time as someone or some group thinks that they would like to change things and so a ne clause is written into the treaty: people with Muslim names don't have to do that 'u' or 'u' plus ' thing.

I write my name in their book: 'Michael Rosen', and I look at it, trying to be the child or th parent looking at that name for the first time. Will they notice that the 'm' is always asymmetrica the dot on the 'i' is more like an acute accent, pointing up to the top right-hand corner of the page; th 'r' is flashily curly; the 's' is decidedly uncurly?

Like many people I'm curious about my name, but on occasions when the air in schools is full talk about 'phonics', I look at 'Michael' and wonder about the history that enabled the 'i' to be 'long and not short like the 'i' in 'pin'. I wonder why the 'ch' is there when a 'k' would have done the jo very well, and indeed some of the children standing in front of me come from places where it 'Mikel'. And then, what about that 'ae', which I and most English speakers pronounce with the al pervasive sound which has its own special name – the 'schwa': why is it 'ae'? Were the two lette once stuck together as we used to see in 'encyclopædia' and 'mediæval'? Or was it once an 'ae' whic was separated by one of the few dots and slashes that English used to be fairly free with? The doub dot that used to sit over the 'i' in 'naïve' – looking like the German 'umlaut' but, because it does different job, separating out vowels – gets its own special name, the 'dieresis'. And look, here comes girl to whom, when she tells me her name, I say, 'Is that Zoe with dots, or no dots?'

Then, on to the 'Rosen', which often gives people a moment's bother. Is the 's' like 's' in 'chosen or the 's' in 'closer'? I tell people it's 'Rose' with an 'n' on the end, a German name. A little flash o German lessons in the late 1950s appears in my thoughts, followed by the memory that the users English nearly got rid of those 'n' plurals but not quite: 'child' – 'children', 'man' – 'men', 'woman – 'women'. How interesting that one last refuge for the 'n' plural is to do with our sexes – and th result of those sexual differences. As you follow the development of English, starting out with tho cross-Channel migrants, the Frisians from what is now northern Holland, you can see how anoth

wave, the Norman French, put the ‘n’ to flight. In most circumstances, people change the languag they use by choice, not from being compelled to. Over hundreds of years, people swapped German Ns for Romance Ss. I remember being read a Walter de la Mare poem when I was at school that ha the word ‘shoon’ in it. ‘It means “shoes”,’ explained our teacher. ‘Rosen, it means “roses”,’ I think.

In the early years of the nineteenth century, Jews sought equal rights in the German principalitie Part of the deal was that they would take on German names in their daily affairs. This had its price quite literally; Jews had to buy these new names when some couldn’t afford to, and they we sometimes given derogatory, mocking or even obscene names: ‘Ochsenschwanz’ – ‘oxtail’ – with th tail being lewdly ambiguous; ‘Hinkediger’ – ‘hunchback’; ‘Kaufpisch’ – ‘sell-piss’. In my fami name, though, there is a memory that some forebear had enough money to buy an old German nam which was used to record that someone worked in the rose-water trade. What’s more, it has bee suggested that the Rosen-type names were popular amongst those Jews whose Hebrew name record a matronymic, a name that says: ‘I am the son of this woman’. So, a man might be Ezra ben Rosa son of Rosa, and to remember that, some people opted for one of the Rosen-type names. The sound ‘Rosa’, transferred across from Hebrew letters, conserved in the Roman letters ‘r’, ‘o’, ‘s’ and ‘e’, w perhaps a piece of cultural self-awareness, resistance even. I take it that people anywhere, any tim can make letters do this kind of work for them. If the situation demands it, they can switch language create hybrids, invent new spellings – new identities even. Naming ourselves and others is part of ho we show that we are at one and the same time ‘me’ and part of an ‘us’. Slight changes in spelling initials or even the particular script might signify a great deal.

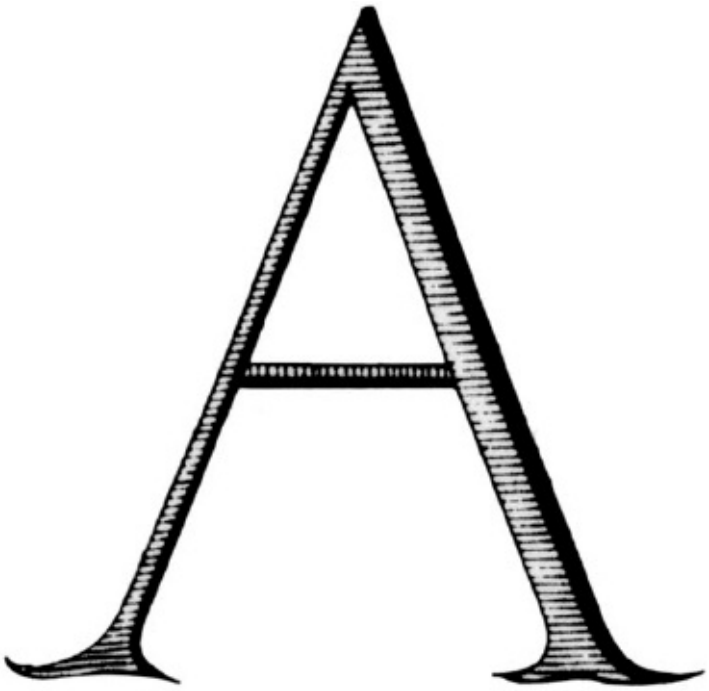
Letters, then, are ours; we inherit them in what look like fixed ways but there is some leeway f us to change their use. It’s this process of being within the history of language but also in possessio of the possibility of its change that has always fascinated me. It’s why I’ve written this book.

Before I get going, I should clear the decks. The book is apparently about ‘the’ alphabet, but in tru it’s about ‘an’ alphabet, the one that speakers of English use. It’s sometimes called the ‘Roma alphabet’ which is misleading because, no matter how beautifully we may think they carved the inscriptions in stone, the Romans didn’t have all twenty-six letters or the lower case. If we say it’s th alphabet used by European languages, that too is slightly misleading because languages other tha English that use the same letters have added special features of their own, like the German double ‘ symbol, ‘ß’, or the many varied ‘diacritics’ or ‘accents’. To my mind, the accents, the umlaut, th tilde, the circumflex, the cedilla and the rest are part of people’s alphabets. The alphabet of this boo which I’ll be calling ‘the alphabet’, hasn’t developed these useful signs. To be absolutely clear: ju because I’m calling it ‘the alphabet’, I’m not intending to lend it any particular glitter or glory; I’ not positioning it in any way higher in status than any other alphabet or system of writing. It’s ‘th alphabet, as in ‘the alphabet I use when I write in English’.

Each letter in the book is linked to a topic. Each chapter takes on different aspects of how th alphabet has been used. Each chapter is preceded by the short story of how that particular lett evolved, how its name came to be pronounced that way and something on how the letter itself spoken and played with. At the end of the book I have set some alphabetical challenges (see ‘Th Oulipo Olympics’).

The alphabet is not simply a phenomenon or a structure, it’s something we each come upon, lea and use in our own idiosyncratic ways. Our personal histories and feelings are wrapped up in what th letters and their means of transmission mean to each of us. The biography of the alphabet intertwined with one’s autobiography of the alphabet. I hope that my inclusion of my person

narrative will alert you to your own stories. It most certainly wasn’t included in order to tal
precedence over yours.



• **‘A’ STARTS ITS** life in around 1800 BCE. Turn our modern ‘A’ upside down and you can see somethin of its original shape. Can you see an ox’s head with its horns sticking up in the air? If so, you can see the remains of this letter’s original name, ‘ox’, or ‘aleph’ in the ancient Semitic languages. By the time the Phoenicians are using it in around 1000 BCE it is lying on its side and looks more like a ‘K’. Speed-writing seems to have taken the diagonals through the upright, making it more like a horizonta form of our modern ‘A’ with the point on the left-hand side. The ancient Greeks called it ‘alpha’ and reversed it, with the point on the right-hand side, probably because, eventually, they decided to write from left to right. Between around 750 BCE and 500 BCE the Greeks rotated it to what we would think of as its upright position. The Romans added the serifs which you can see on inscriptions like Trajan’ Column in Rome.

a AND ɑ

Writing the lower-case ‘A’ by hand seems to have produced first an upside-down ‘v’ shape, which slowly acquired a connecting loop making it resemble the ‘two-storey’ ‘a’ you’re looking at now. Th belongs to the standardized script known as ‘Carolingian minuscule’ which Charlemagne’s scribes created.

The ‘single-storey’, lower-case ‘a’ that persists in children’s reading books and a good deal of advertising began its life with Irish scribes.

PRONUNCIATION OF THE LETTER-NAME

The people who preceded the Romans on the Italian peninsula, the Etruscans, were probably the first people to give the name of the letter a monosyllabic sound: ‘ah’, derived from the Greek word ‘alpha The Romans followed suit and gave that name to the Romance languages of Europe. Surely, then, wit the arrival of the Norman French, we anglophones should be calling it ‘ah’ as well? However, betwee the Normans and us lies the ‘Great Vowel Shift’, a phenomenon that caused people between 1400 and 1600 to change their ‘ahs’ to ‘ays’. (In case you think this is beyond belief and some hokum invented by linguists, you should talk to New Zealanders who are, even as I write, in the throes of turning thei ‘pins’ to ‘pens’ and their ‘pens’ to ‘pins’. Shifting our vowels is something that groups of us like doing sometimes.)

PRONUNCIATION OF THE LETTER

In English, ‘a’ – either as a single letter in the middle of a single-syllable word, as the initial letter of a word, or in conjunction with other vowel-letters, ‘y’, ‘w’, ‘r’ and ‘h’ – can indicate a wide range of sounds: ‘cat’, ‘was’, ‘all’, ‘and’, ‘late’, ‘father’, ‘hail’, ‘haul’, ‘Michael’, ‘ray’, ‘threat’, ‘beat’, ‘boat ‘dial’, ‘ah’, ‘raw’, ‘cart’ and so on.

On rare occasions we can write ‘aa’ as in the names ‘Aaron’ and ‘Saab’.

‘A’ and its partner ‘an’ does service as our ‘indefinite article’. In many cases, this indicates that we are not referring to something that I the speaker or you the listener have referred to just before. ‘I was at a football match’, ‘I was eating an apple’. The plural of ‘a’ is no article at all or ‘some’, ‘both or a number. ‘I was eating apples.’ However, we do say things like, ‘That was a day to remember,’ where the total construction indicates we are ‘referring back’ to something that we all know about.

(The ‘definite article’, ‘the’, is usually for when you want to indicate that you, the listener, or the world beyond has been talking, writing or referring to the thing spoken about before. ‘I was eating th

apple,' i.e. the one you mentioned.)

The history of 'an' is a peculiar one. It seems as if there was once a sufficient number of words like 'nuncle' ('uncle') for the 'n' to migrate across from the 'a'. King Lear's Fool calls him 'nuncle'

'Ah!' is a very useful sound. It can mean many things depending on the notes you hit as you say i You can indicate that you're surprised, that you knew it all along, that you're satisfied, that you've been hurt, that you're sympathetic, or you're pretending you're sympathetic, that you've caught someone out and so on. It can be linked to 'ha' as in 'Ah-ha' or to four 'hahs' if you're the BeeGees.

A IS FOR ALPHABET

AN ALPHABET IS a stunningly brilliant invention. We could call it a ‘cunning code’ or a ‘system o signs’ whereby we use some symbols (letters) to indicate some of the sounds of a language. B combining two or more letters (as with ‘th’ or ‘sch’) we can indicate more of the sounds. Though it wonderful, there are some snags for users of what I’m calling the ‘English alphabet’:

- We do not use these letters and combinations to indicate the same sound every time we use them. The letter ‘c’ can be the soft ‘c’ in ‘ceiling’ or the hard ‘c’ in ‘cook’.
- We do not always use the letters to indicate the same sound to different readers over time (i.e. between now and the past), or across space (i.e. from region to region). In Shakespeare’s time, ‘d rhymed with ‘go’. People with a London accent pronounce the ‘u’ in ‘hut’ and the ‘a’ in ‘hat’ differently from people with a Yorkshire accent.
- We do not always use the same letter or combination of letters to indicate a given sound. We can make the ‘oo’ sound in ‘root’ by writing ‘oo’, or ‘ou’ as in ‘you’, or ‘ough’ as in ‘through’, or ‘o–e’ as in ‘lose’, or ‘u–e’ as in ‘rune’.
- We write letters side by side but this shape doesn’t always represent the timing of the sounds we make when we speak. Say ‘head’ and the ‘h’ carries over into the ‘ea’.
- Letters don’t represent all the sounds we make when we speak. Think ‘due’ and ‘sue’.

Becoming or being a reader of English involves absorbing all these variations and then forgettin that they exist. We’re able to do that mostly because we write and read in order to pass messages o ‘texts’ between us – messages that we want to be full of meaning, full of stuff that matters to us. A we read and write these messages, we learn the shape and look of words including the ones th grammarians call ‘irregular’. We learn that the word ‘debt’ sounds like ‘dett’ but is written ‘debt After all, we see it often enough.

Though it’s possible to describe all this as a ‘system of symbols and sounds’, it’s not only tha Our forebears devised alphabets so that they could store and retrieve meaning. ‘Meaning’ can be th meaning of names, directions, reports, feelings, ideas, dreams, experiments or investigations . . . W store meanings when writing with the alphabet, so that these meanings can survive over time and/ space: a graffito on the side of a train does both, as does an instruction on how to build a flatpac wardrobe. An inscription on a gravestone is usually intended to last over time but we want it to sta put. A tattoo is usually intended to last a lifetime, stay put on a person but move with that person. birthday card travels from sender to receiver, lasts for the length of the birthday celebration and mo often than not is destroyed. Some books have survived long beyond their authors’ wildest dream sometimes by staying in the same place for hundreds of years.

In the case of the alphabet I’m using, people have used some of the letters in a constant way ov thousands of years. Someone in what is now Italy, whose name began with an ‘s’ sound two thousan years ago, may have had someone carve an ‘S’ on a stone after he died just as someone might do th for ‘Sam’ in England today. This continuity has enabled us to access meanings going back hundreds o thousands of years.

Some aspects of how we use letters change. Film-makers invented subtitles so that we can he words in one language, whilst reading it in another; people with impaired hearing can read wh

people on a screen are saying. When the Norman French took over the ruling class in England fro
1066, they brought some sounds (like 'j') that the Germanic peoples living in England did not us
Over time, the 'j' in 'jam' came to be used by everyone in England. Meanwhile, most people
England stopped using the 'ch' sound that most Scots people make today when saying the word 'loch
These changes show up in the letters of the alphabet. This is part of why and how the alphab +et
such a clever invention. We get it to do what we want it to do.

At any given moment, people in a locality or a country speaking the same language do not use th
alphabet in the same way. For thousands of years, most people hardly used it at all. The storage
meaning in letters was something that only a very few people knew how to do. The origins of th
alphabet lie within those castes of people who had the right to write: priests, the makers and executo
of laws and punishments, and accountants, mostly. With TV available on smartphones, voic
recognition, automated translation and the digitizing of image and sound, the use of the alphabet
changing rapidly. Another kind of code – based on the serial variations of two numbers – is storin
meaning. Though using the technology to store and read meaningful symbols (e.g. pictures, musi
speech and writing) is very simple, very few people know how to do the coding. It is quite possib
that the use of the alphabet of letters will decline in the next hundred years. We could ask whether
new clerisy has already emerged who have become the tiny minority who know how to write th
digital code.

The ultimate reason why the use of the alphabet changes is because we change, whether that
through war, migration, new technology, new kinds of work and leisure, new systems of governmen
or new forms of education. It seems odd to think that the reason why I say a 'j' sound and that there
a letter for that sound is because, nearly a thousand years ago, in the wars between the tribal warlor
of northern Europe, a French-speaking group got the upper hand in the part of the world where
happen to live. I can hold an instrument in my hand and tap the letters 'y-is-s-s-s' and ten second
later my son hundreds of miles away knows that we are both celebrating the same goal. Th
instrument that makes this possible comes after 250 years of scientific industrialization and som
dubious exploitation of labour and mineral resources that took place far from where I live. M
freedom to write a word in this non-standard way comes as a result of the mass education and artist
revolts of the last 150 years: my son and I have both learned to write but we don't get nervous makin
up new spellings. We're not scared we might get told off by the invisible teacher, grammarian
priest in our heads.

When I've texted my son, I put the instrument down on the table next to a newspaper and, let
say, my copy of *Emil and the Detectives*, and I go on watching the TV. Though this all seem
seamless, the frontiers of different technologies, different languages, different typefaces, and differe
uses of alphabets, symbols and codes are all nudging up against each other on my table. The names
the footballers I'm watching on the TV are a coming-together of different uses of letters: th
commentator tells us that Cazorla would like us to pronounce his name as 'Cathorla' with a soft 'th
as in 'thorn'. Giroud, the commentator explains, has a 'd' on the end of his name but we don't say th
'd', and the 'G' sounds like the 'j' in 'bijou'. The goalkeeper's name is Szczęsny. The commentato
explains that the team look like they're 'playing 4, 4, 1, 1' with Cazorla 'playing in the hole'. This to
is yet another system of signs created partly in language, partly by the movements of the players.

This running of languages and sign-systems in parallel to each other is not new. In the Britis
Museum sits the basalt slab known as 'the Rosetta Stone'. Though one of its languages – Egyptia
hieroglyphs – lay undeciphered for hundreds of years, the stone holds the key to understanding
crucial moment in the history of the alphabet: how human beings invented the idea that squiggles on

surface could indicate the sounds we make to each other in order to express ourselves, to communica and to make meanings for each other that last as long as the material they are written on. Matchi squiggles to sounds is known as the 'phonetic principle'. It's not known for certain who first invente it, and it's not known whether different groups of people invented it separately or influenced eac other. Though this kind of behaviour seems obvious to us, it was not how humans first invente writing. The first writing was a form of drawing. Matching signs to speech comes later.

The history of the alphabet is also a history of how we uncovered that history. The Rosetta Stone inscribed in three languages: Egyptian hieroglyphs and two kinds of Greek. The script gives out th terms of a decree from the 'Manifest God, King Ptolemy' – a decree which included that no row employed in the task of taking priests to the residence of Alexander should be press-ganged in service – a piece of humane legislation that I always spend a moment of pleasure thinking abou unless it was a neat way to prevent the Emperor from being surrounded by potentially recalcitrant an rebellious strong men. In comparison, the story of how the stone was handled by Europeans is squali If ever we were trying to find an example of how language, letters and alphabets can be the subject rivalries, wars and plunder, the Rosetta Stone does it all.

The British and French invaders of Egypt in the early nineteenth century fought over the ston Today, people still argue over which of the European scholars who pored over its three languages fir cracked the code of the hieroglyphs. The Frenchman Jean-François Champollion is usually given mo credit than the Englishman Thomas Young, though Champollion himself gave Young some credi This overlooks the fact that Ahmad Bakr ibn Wahshiyah, who lived in Egypt in the late ninth and earl tenth centuries, wrote a treatise on hieroglyphics, pointing out that the glyphs were both pictori images and single symbols signifying sounds.

How the international use of letters works across time and place can be seen in the thread scholarship which links ibn Wahshiyah to Champollion: there was first an Arabic manuscript of th book *Kitab Shawq al-Mustaham* in which ibn Wahshiyah deciphered a number of Egyptia hieroglyphs; there was then a translation of the Arabic manuscript in a book published in English 1806 by Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall as *Ancient Alphabets and Hieroglyphic Characters Explaine with an Account of the Egyptian Priests, their Classes, Initiation, and Sacrifices in the Arab Language by Ahmad Bin Abubekr Bin Wahishih*; someone called Silvestre de Sacy – a colleague Champollion – read this English version of the Arab manuscript; sixteen years later, Champollion complete decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs appeared. There is, then, the strong possibility that a Arab scholar and expert on magic, statues, agriculture, alchemy, physics and medicine, writing at th same time that King Alfred was trying to get people to read English, may have played a significa part in unlocking the crucial fact that hieroglyphs were not only pictures but that some of them als represented specific sounds. To grasp how this works, the Egyptians some four thousand years ago d the equivalent of changing a picture of an apple from representing the word we say as 'apple', representing the sound 'a', changing our picture of a ball representing the word we say as 'ball', representing the sound 'b' and so on.

What we don't know for certain is whether the ancient Egyptians were the first to do this, n whether they passed it on to others. In other words, we cannot be sure that the ancient Egyptia writing is an ancestor of what you're reading now. Around the same time, other peoples livin relatively near to the Egyptians were developing scripts that also used phonetic principles – but different ways. For example, the ancient Sumerians, from what is now present-day Iraq, developed way of using symbols to represent syllables. An analogy would be if we had a symbol for a bird's bea or 'bill' based on a picture of a bird's bill. This 'bill' symbol could be used again and again in a wor

like ‘building’ (where our ‘buil-’ sounds the same as ‘bill’), or in ‘possible’ (where our ‘-ble’ sound like ‘bill’). Another way to imagine the ‘syllabic principle’ is to think of the possibility of us using th ampersand, ‘&’, to write ‘hand’ as ‘h&’.

What has just taken me a few minutes to describe would have taken people hundreds of years evolve. Though these breakthroughs lie at the heart of our culture, we can only speculate why peop tried to make them. In terms of trade, pictograms are an easier way to translate words because yo don’t have to use abstract symbols like ‘h’ or ‘y’ representing sounds in different languages. Th pictogram for ‘eye’ will work for my word for ‘eye’ just as well as for your word for ‘eye’, each o which may well sound completely different.

Alphabets are extraordinarily useful to a group of people speaking the same language, as they ca be compressed and combined to indicate almost any sound – and therefore any word – we might wa to say, in any combination of phrases, sentences, verses or passages of any length. Inventing alphabe based on the ‘phonetic principle’ or the ‘syllabic principle’ suggests, therefore, some stability on th part of a group of people speaking the same language. But we shouldn’t forget that the Chinese hav had an incredible stability in terms of language-use but have not felt it necessary to develop a alphabet. And the Chinese are doing just fine.

The Sumerians and ancient Egyptians were clearly crucial players in the history of alphabet Their invention and the widespread use of their writings can be seen in a place like the Britis Museum today, where their writing tells stories, shows prayers, gives instructions on how to pass on the land of the dead and much more. However, we cannot know definitively whether their knowledg was picked up by the first people we know for certain are the key source for the alphabet I’m usin Moreover, in telling the story of deciphering old inscriptions like the Rosetta Stone (rather than that the evolution of the alphabet), it is important to mention that scholars transfer a principle they’v learned from one script across to another.

The archaeologist who applied what I’ll call the ‘ibn Wahshiyah–Champollion’ principle o decoding to ancient scripts was a man by the name of Alan Gardiner and he made the breakthrough i 1916 while studying an inscription of symbols from Sinai which he figured did not say, ‘box eye can cross’ but a word made from the initial letter of the Semitic words for ‘box’, ‘eye’, ‘cane’ and ‘cross’ making, he thought, the word ‘baalat’ or ‘lady’. This piece of writing dates from around 1750 BCE an it was produced by people who are described by scholars as ‘Semites’.

By the way, if you ever wonder how excited people get deciphering ancient scripts, you shou remember George Smith. Though this young man with no formal education beyond the age of fourtee wasn’t the first person to decipher the cuneiform script of the ancient Sumerians, he was responsib for spotting that they wrote about the Flood before the Old Testament writers did. This eureka mome came in 1872 as he pored over a dusty clay tablet, plucked from the desert sands of Iraq, whic constituted all that remained from the library of Nineveh. He was so excited by the discovery that h leaped up, ripped off his clothes and ran round the British Museum.

In the inscriptions of the Semitic people, scholars see the first certain forebears of the alphab you’re looking at. It’s possible that they adopted the phonetic principle from the Egyptians, th Sumerians and others, but not certain. It’s possible that they incorporated some of the symbols possible but not certain.

Following the Semites, the next group in the family tree that leads to what you are reading now a the Phoenicians who originated in what is modern Lebanon. They are known to have been a high inventive, active, trading people, working their way all round the Mediterranean and beyond, speakin a language, it’s thought, akin to ancient Hebrew. By about 1000 BCE, they were using a twenty-tw

letter alphabet probably inherited from the Semites. Anyone who remembers or knows their Roma history will remember Carthage and the Carthaginians. For some of us, Carthage was an inky word our Latin exercise books, but it was indeed a real place founded by Phoenicians near to present-da Tunis in Tunisia. We would have hundreds of Phoenician books today if it wasn't for the fact that th Romans sacked Carthage and burned the Phoenicians' library. The history of storing meanings is n always a pretty one.

The Phoenicians used abstract versions of objects to indicate letters: a bifurcated (horned?) sig was an 'ox' (in their language 'aleph'), and on down through the words for 'house', 'stick', 'door' an 'shout' up to 'tooth' and 'mark'. You don't have to be all that fanciful to see that in many of the cases the sign had evolved from the object and that the corresponding letter came to signify the first sou of the name of that object.

One other point: Phoenicians had no letters for vowels. These days, such an alphabet tends not be called an alphabet, or even a 'consonantal alphabet'; it's called an 'abjad' – which is transliteration of the Arabic word corresponding to 'alphabet'. The idea of trying to use an alphab that has no vowels may seem to some surprising or difficult. If you can read written Arabic this neither surprising nor difficult as it has no vowels either. Ancient Hebrew, another descendant fro Semitic writing, didn't have vowels either, though reforms have added them.

A quick digression (the first of many in this book) on Hebrew vowels: my family were not religiou so I didn't attend Hebrew classes. However, one day I was 'spotted' by a boy at my school wh 'claimed me'.

'You are, aren't you?' he said.

'What?' I said.

'Jewish,' he said.

'I think so,' I said, though I wasn't 100 per cent sure. So I went home and asked my parents if was Jewish.

'Why do you ask?' said my father.

(Remember here, in the kind of Jewish life I was part of, every comment gives rise to a question.)

'Because Peter Kelner says that I am,' I said.

'Oh yes,' said my father. 'And because he said so, you should believe him?'

'He says I should go to Hebrew classes with his mother,' I said.

'Did he? Why's that?'

I don't remember how or why my secular parents, who had spent some time separating themselv off from the religious traditions, enabled me and encouraged me to go to Hebrew classes with M Kelner.

To be honest, I don't remember much of what was taught. Yet, I can distinctly remember Mr Kelner teaching us some Hebrew vowel sounds.

'Look at that one,' she said, and she pointed at a letter that looked a bit like a 7 with a dot over th top.

'Now look at that one,' she said, and she pointed at another 7 with a dot halfway down th downstroke of the seven.

'How do you tell the difference between those two? I'll tell you. If a football lands on your hea you say, "Oh!" If it lands in your kishkes [your 'guts'] you say, "Ooo".'

'Oh' and 'Ooo'. That's just about the extent of my Hebrew alphabet, and given that one of th things that people know about ancient Hebrew is that it has no vowels, it's ironic that it's vowels

remember.

End of digression.

The Phoenicians didn't have the advantage of Mrs Kelner and her vowel sounds though it is thoug that they were just as creative in their teaching of the alphabet. That's why they retained 'ox', 'house 'wheel' and the rest – as popular memory devices or mnemonics. Though people with my educatio may well have ended up thinking of the Phoenicians as a people in Latin exercise books, waitin patiently for the Romans to obliterate them and their library, we can look at the Phoenicians' lette and see the objects they derive from; or we can then look at our own letters and trace them back these objects. Here is the Phoenician alphabet, its name, its sound and the modern letter in th alphabet it corresponds to.

A, 'aleph', 'ox'; *sound*: a stop in the breath

B, 'bayt', 'house'; *sound*: 'b'

C, 'gimel', 'stick'; *sound*: 'g'

D, 'dalet', 'door'; *sound*: 'd'

E, 'he', a 'shout'; *sound*: 'h'

F, U and Y, waw, 'peg'; *sound*: 'w'

G and Z, ‘zayin’, ‘axe’; *sound*: ‘z’

H, ‘khet’, ‘fence’; *sound*: ‘ch’ as in Scots ‘loch’

For which there is no equivalent, ‘tet’, ‘wheel’; *sound*: ‘heavy’ ‘t’

I, ‘yod’, ‘arm’ and ‘hand’; *sound*: ‘y’ as in ‘you’

K, ‘kaph’, ‘palm of the hand’; *sound*: ‘k’

L, ‘lamed’, ‘the goad you prod an ox with’; *sound*: ‘l’

M, ‘mem’, ‘water’; *sound:* ‘m’

N, ‘nun’, ‘water-based snake or fish’; *sound*: ‘n’

For which there is no equivalent, ‘samek’, ‘pillar’; *sound*: ‘s’

O, ‘ayin’, ‘eye’; *sound*: a guttural sound at the back of the throat

P, ‘pe’, ‘mouth’ *sound*: ‘p’

For which there is no equivalent, ‘tsade’, ‘papyrus’ plant; *sound*: ‘ts’

Q, ‘qoph’, ‘monkey’ or ‘ball of wool’; *sound*: ‘q’

R, ‘resh’, ‘head’; *sound*: ‘r’

S, ‘shin’, ‘tooth’; *sound*: ‘sh’

T, ‘taw’, ‘mark’; *sound*: ‘t’

This script took some thousand years to evolve from 1300 BCE to 300 BCE.

The next step in the evolution occurs when the ancient Greeks adopt the Phoenician alphabet an use it to express their language. The inscriptions showing this date from 800 BCE so scholars tend date the first borrowing from two hundred years earlier. Over several hundred years the Greeks we responsible for five major changes:

i) they used some of the Phoenician symbols to express vowel sounds – ‘a’ (from Phoenician ‘aleph’), ‘e’ (from Phoenician ‘he’), ‘i’ (from Phoenician ‘yod’) and ‘o’ (from Phoenician ‘ayin’);

ii) they introduced some new signs for the sounds ‘u’ (pronounced ‘oo’ or German ‘ü’) and ‘long o (as in ‘phone’);
iii) they created three new signs which they used interchangeably for ‘ph’, ‘kh’, ‘ks’ and ‘ps’;
iv) they fixed their writing to run from left to right;
v) they fixed the Ionian alphabet as standard for use for all Greek dialects.

Because Greek culture and ideas had a major influence on Europe, the alphabet which expresse those ideas had a great chance for survival amongst the European elite and ultimately all Europeans.

It was this alphabet that the Etruscans in what is now Italy adopted for their language – a langua that still hasn’t been fully deciphered from the 13,000 or so inscriptions discovered so far. The scri was written right to left and had twenty-six letters, some of which were separated by dots, indicati perhaps that they worked with syllables.

The Romans started adopting this alphabet from about the seventh and the sixth century BC onwards. The oldest Roman alphabet had twenty-one letters as the Romans didn’t need letters th didn’t speak, like ‘th’, ‘kh’ and ‘ph’. The Romans adapted the letters they adopted from the Greek letters we now call ‘upper case’, to produce them in the form we know them today.

The exceptions are the letters that were added in medieval times, a story you can follow in th book in the sections for each letter.

But I’m jumping ahead of myself. Part of the story of the English alphabet has to include an accou of what happened to the writing of those who first spoke Germanic dialects in England. This happene in the time between the end of the Roman occupation and the arrival in 1066 of the Norman Frenc Frisians, Jutes, Franks, Angles and Saxons settled in Britain, certainly from AD 400 onwards and fro possibly earlier. The specialized few who knew how to write could write, either in the old way wi the letters of ‘runes’ (see ‘V is for Vikings’) or in the new way with the Roman alphabet. Wh happened to the Roman alphabet in their hands is a good example of people inventing ways of writi letters to suit their needs. The letters they incorporated appear more fully in ‘D is for Disappeare Letters’. They include ‘thorn’, ‘ash’, ‘eth’ and ‘wynn’. The Roman letters that the Old Englis speakers hardly ever used were ‘k’, ‘q’ and ‘z’. (You may be able to find the symbols for ‘thorn’, ‘eth and ‘ash’ on your keyboard using ‘alt’ because they are used in the Icelandic alphabet.) Saying th ‘the Anglo-Saxons wrote using Roman letters’ obscures something remarkable: people speaking on language adopted letters being used for another. Imagine writing English with Arabic script.

When the Norman French invaded England in 1066, two slightly different alphabets (and tw different uses of the alphabet) met up, representing the two languages in contact: Norman French an Old English. The alphabet you’re reading was made by the people who amalgamated these tw languages. Some Old English letters disappeared – along with another, ‘yogh’, which was invente and then retired in the ‘Middle English’ period of the late twelfth to the late fifteenth centuries. Thes disappearances happened primarily because, to start off with, the Latin-influenced Normans controlle most activities involving writing (see ‘D is for Disappeared Letters’).Two Old English letters, n recited as part of ‘the alphabet’, survived: ‘ash’ and ‘ethel’.

The story of the changes in the English alphabet carried on until as late as the end of th seventeenth century with the letters ‘i’, ‘j’, ‘u’, ‘v’ and ‘w’, by which time their present-day use wa fixed. Accounts of their individual histories can be found in the chapters for those letters.

A point about Latin. The Romans influenced a good deal of what is now Europe directly or indirectl

through conquest, Imperial rule and religion. Their laws, histories and ideas were of course expresse using the Roman alphabet. The ruling, religious and intellectual elites of Europe went on using th Romans' language, Latin, as an international language for several hundred years after the fall of th Roman Empire, a period that secured versions of that alphabet all across western Europe.

One note of caution: because to tell the story as an 'evolution' in a lone chapter called 'A is fo Alphabet' might suggest some kind of speedy, easy-flowing passage, with one stage movin inexorably into the next. This would be a gross misrepresentation. All we can say is that at any give moment in time, a writing system is asked, by the people who know how to use it, to perform tasks. any of these tasks break down because the symbols don't work or are thought to be insufficient redundant, then it will follow that people will invent new symbols and processes for writing an reading.

There can be no full, unabridged story of the alphabet. That can be found only in the total mass everything that has ever been written. This book is twenty-six scenes – with digressions – taken fro the drama.