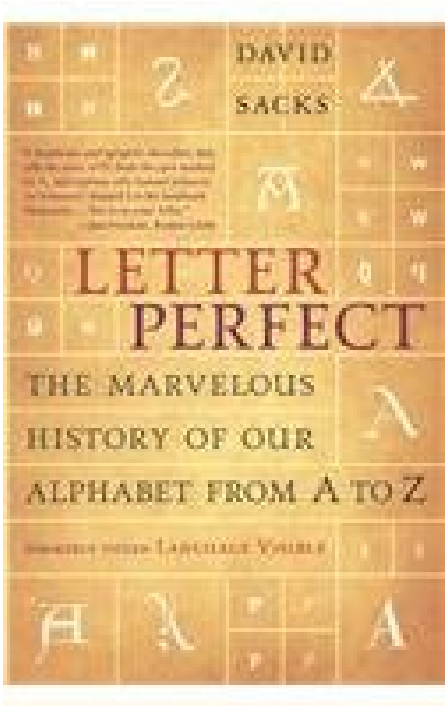

Letter Perfect: The Marvelous History of Our Alphabet From A to Z

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David Sacks has embarked on a fun, lively, and learned excursion into the alphabet–and into cultural history–in *Letter Perfect*. Clearly explaining the letters as symbols of precise sounds of speech, the book begins with the earliest known alphabetic inscriptions (circa 1800 b.c.), recently discovered by archaeologists in Egypt, and traces the history of our alphabet through the ancient Phoenicians, Greeks, and Romans and up through medieval Europe to the present day. But the heart of the book is the twenty-six fact-filled “biographies” of letters A through Z, each one identifying the letter’s particular significance for modern readers, tracing its development from ancient forms, and discussing its noteworthy role in literature and other media. We learn, for example, why letter X may have a sinister and sexual aura, how B came to signify second best, why the word *mother* in many languages starts with M. Combining facts both odd and essential, *Letter Perfect* is cultural history at its most accessible and enjoyable.

Letter Perfect: The Marvelous History of Our Alphabet From A to Z Details

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From Reader Review Letter Perfect: The Marvelous History of Our Alphabet From A to Z for online ebook

Kirsten says

I received this book from someone who didn't finish it, on the chance that I would.
I won't.

Me, reading:
Oh, this chapter is quickly interrupted by an inset. A seven page inset? Well let's find the rest of my paragraph and finish it. Right, now back to the inset. Hang on, this inset is interrupted mid-paragraph by a 2 page nested inset! Alright, let's finish that paragraph and the rest of the inset, then the nested inset... now, where was I? Right, page three of the actual chapter.

I assume these special boxes and graphics are to break up the text and keep the reader going, as in a textbook. After all, who would want to read a whole long chapter on lexicography? But the answer is: me. I'm an adult and no one is forcing me to read; I chose to be here, you don't have to trick me into staying.

The problems with these sidebars are many. Much of the history is here, but broken up and spread throughout the chapters, so that often it seems to have at best a tangential relationship to the chapter topic (here I am in the chapter on 'B', reading about the Etruscan lack of the vowel 'O'). Also, the smaller / more nested the box, the more the font changes. It's awful hard to read lightly shaded 8 point italic when we're talking about individual letters. Is that a lowercase k? a b? Wait is it a Hebrew character? For fun I showed someone the (tiny) map of Phoenician territories and asked them to read a place name for me - any place shown. They couldn't. Maybe that information isn't important - but then why include the map at all? Finally, each separate narrative - chapter text, inset, nested graphic - seems to assume that I won't read the others, and is thus increasingly repetitive. Unfortunately the most interesting details have been in the sidebars, and without them the chapters are only maybe 8 pages long, so I'd have to keep reading them.

My biggest grievance is in the tone. Too often it's assumed that avoiding technical terms is the way to make a book 'accessible.' Let's say you introduce the concept of a glottal stop. You explain the sound, and when it's used, and that we don't have it consistently our language or in our orthography, but others do, etc... thereafter, you can refer to it as a glottal stop. Refusing to, or calling it some weird unidentifiable other sound thingy or whatever, does not make your text accessible or lively, it just makes me think you think I'm stupid. And maybe I expect more scholarly speech from linguistic books, but I don't think that's the problem. Yes, there's an extra annoyance when I already know the terms, but I've run into this in various other books on topics in which I'm hardly an expert, and it bothers me every time.

All that being said, I do applaud the interest and research. This might be a decent book for a very casual reader or someone hunting for cocktail tidbits. And I might look up one or two topics that I'd like to read more about - I just won't read them here.

Chris says

I really enjoyed this book! I was frequently sounding out phonemes and giving little tidbits of information to my wife. She wasn't as into it as I was. Lots of great information, very readable.

Lisa says

History of the Roman alphabet, letter by letter. Full of interesting bits of information, I learned a lot. It is a bit dated, though; the modern cultural references may not be recognizable to younger readers. Its also a bit repetitive. Maybe he meant readers to be able to pick it up at any letter, like a reference book? A quick and good read.

Abby says

Three and a half stars. I still don’t get why we needed pages in each chapter about all of the words that letter is used in and associated with; presumably anyone reading this in English is an English-speaker and has a sense for those things themself. Those associations also feel haphazard and subjective—they’re hardly a survey of every association a letter has. Stick to the history! That said, the letter history was solid, if presented rather piecemeal and growing repetitive as the book went on. I enjoyed learning the evolution of the alphabet—that’s why I picked this up to begin with.

Also this is an awful title. What on earth is “letter perfect” supposed to mean? That’s not an expression. No one says that.

Nicole says

It was a little repetitive at times, but on the whole, it was a very interesting look at how the English alphabet formed.

Natalie aka Tannat says

I would not recommend reading the book from cover to cover in one sitting, since the design that allows you to jump from one letter to another out-of-order means that there is some repetition that could become tedious. However, it's an accessible book filled with interesting details about the evolution of our Roman alphabet over the millennia. At least check out the chapters on F, G, T, U, Y, and maybe Z. Plus some more.

Shanti says

The main problem with this book is that it wasn't as interesting as I though it would be. I feel like Sacks could have done a lot with creating a cohesive flow, but it would have worked better as a serial series in a newspaper (which is how it originally started). While some of the facts were interesting, I felt like the story of the alphabet for each letter was basically repeated over and over, and so information- for example, I think he informed us what the unical style was about 20 times- was unecessarily repeated, and long, info heavy box sections just interrupted the flow of the text.

Karen says

A fascinating history of the English alphabet, broken down by letter. Sacks tells you who first created the letter (to the best of our knowledge), how it was used and pronounced in its original language, and how it came to be drawn and pronounced as it is today. A wonderful book for nerds. Now being published under an alternate title, Letter Perfect.

Douglas Summers-Stay says

It's very rare that I want to reread a popular nonfiction book-- the whole point is the interesting new facts you never knew before, and that's all gone after the first time you read it. But I enjoyed this one so much the first time, I picked this up at a used bookstore and just reread it, and it still holds up.
The book has 26 chapters, one for each letter of the alphabet. It goes through the history of each letter-- what the pictogram originally stood for, why it stands where it does in the alphabet, why the lower-case and upper-case versions look the way they do, the relationships it has with other letters, why it makes the sound it does, and what the letter has come to mean by itself-- the semantics of the letter (X for unknown, Q for weird, A for beginnings and Z for endings, etc...)
I've often gone looked through images showing the transformation of the alphabet from the original Phoenician through Greek and Latin. But--
why did the letters have the changes they did? Why did we add U, V, W, X, Y, and Z on the end, and why do so few words start with those letters? Why did we slip in G and J, and why do they look like C and I with little extra tags? What happened with I becoming J and Y? Why do we say "bee" "cee" "dee", but "eff" instead of "fee" and "aitch" instead of "hee"? Why are there multiple pronunciations for some letters? What's up with the different ways of writing lower case a and g? This book is the first place I found answers to these and many other questions I've had about the alphabet for a long time.
Sometimes the book is titled "Letter Perfect"-- it's the same book, just with a different name.

Biblio Curious says

Perfect for your purse or book bag! This book is a great errands accessory and conversation starter. A lot can be learned from people's reactions to things and this book is a portable social experiment.

It has 26 chapters, one for the history of each letter. Lots of pictures and humor. There's such a variety of information: trivia, history, humor, linguistics. All of it is presented in essay format that reads like a TV Series.

My copy has been out in the rain, chewed on by a puppy, on a ferry and in countless bathrooms. Reactions ranged from sudden linguaphiles to linguistic knuckle-draggers.

Caroline says

Language Visible is a most excellent book. Finally, all my questions about the alphabet are answered: why

we have hard and soft Gs, two sizes of letters, and two different styles of printing lowercase a. Now I know why the Spanish J is pronounced as the English H and why C is duplicated by K and S. It feels like I have been waiting for this for years.

It is written in an informal, conversational style, with the occasional dip into irreverence. Originally a series of magazine articles, there is a lot of redundancy. The same concepts are explained over and over again, in each chapter were they might apply. I did not mind this, however, because I found many of the concepts difficult to grasp. For me, it was very useful to have mouthfuls like fricative and bilabial defined in Chapter F and again in Chapter V and again in Chapter S and then again. Also fascinating were his many practical examples, demonstrating to the reader how one sound can change into another.

I found this book to be informative and addicting. It has well earned its place on my bookshelf.

Sammy says

An interesting, if overlong, experiment. "The Alphabet" is a much-needed book and wonderful reading for people like myself. Because my personal and professional passions lie with writing and language, I'm always frustrated by dimwits who want to "Reform" the language, or somehow make it "easier" and "more logical". Look, every language has its advantages and disadvantages: this is what comes of being an organic creation, particularly for our culture which is lucky enough to have evolved with both written and oral histories. The beauty and depth of our language (even if it isn't quite as terrifyingly specific as, say, German!) has delighted me since I first learned to read, and I hope it does so forever.

Hmm. Pardon me for that.

"The Alphabet" gives each of our 26 letters a chapter, allowing Sacks to discuss how the letter came to be drawn, pronounced and utilised, as well as discussing the origin of any anomalies or odd facts about the letter. It's an admirable project which allows him to discuss anything under the umbrella topic - the similarities between C and G; the origins of why some letters such as F are pronounced ("ef") more forcefully than the majority ("vee", "tee", etc) - as well as providing some basic information on current theories of the development of language, and ways in which the various 'middlemen' - Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans - gave us the language we have today. Plus, if you ever wanted to impress people at a dinner party by knowing why A or Q are drawn that way, now's your chance!

It's not perfect, as some reviewers have mentioned, but I'm not sure how it COULD be. It's true that some elements become repetitive (understandably, given that many of our letters grew up together). Possibly, the book works best as a coffee table piece: read the introduction, which covers linguistics, and then pick a letter at random. Unfortunately, the downside is that if you read it cover to cover, you will find it to be hard-going at times, and it's clear that Sacks is struggling to make the last chapters as interesting as the first.

Still, I think that's rather unfair condemnation. "The Alphabet" is a worthy paean to the rich wonders of our 26 letters, showcasing just how much information each one of them can convey. By the end, I came to think of them like a family, and I'm glad to have read this insight into just why our language is the way it is. It's certainly not the greatest - or only - book you should read on the subject, but even if you only read the first few chapters and then pick your favourite letters, you're bound to learn something new!

Kate Schultz says

A love letter to our alphabet and all we can do with it. The bok can get repetitive, but that makes it easier to pick up and just read about a certain letter. Anyone interested in linguistics, language, words, etymology, and the like would love this book.

Steve says

Mid 2. Sachs provides a sporadically excellent description of the historic development of the alphabet. As opposed to a system based on actual visual representations of the word, pictographs, or writing systems based on symbols to represent words, logograms, the recognisable series of 26 letters can re-combine to form countless patterns of phonemes. Such flexibility can also be transferred across different languages, making the alphabet one of history's most enduring legacies. From it's emergence in Egypt around 2,000BC, probably as an aid to the humble masses of mercenaries and slave labour from semitic cultures in the Near East excluded from the mysteries of hieroglyphics, this small collection of symbols is easily memorised, and has thus become the vehicle for mass literacy. It was adopted by previously illiterate societies and spread through conquest, cultural politics, and as a corollary of trade. Though the Arabic alphabet is associated with Arabic culture, it serves other tongues such as Farsi in Iran or Pashto in Afghanistan. Even in the twentieth and twenty-first century, the adoption of an alphabet can signify desires to espouse modernism, such as Ataturk's switch from the Arabic to Roman alphabet in 1928, or the similar exchange by the trio of ex-Soviet republics of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan from Cyrillic to Roman. The adoption of an alphabet has also led to tragic cases which have spelt historical division - Serbo-Croat has shared features, but due to the rivalry of medieval missionary churches, is written in Cyrillic by Serbs and in Roman by Croats. Similarly, Hindi and Urdu are fundamentally the same but use different script. The author also provides commenatry on the history of attempts to rationalise the spelling rules of English and how the latter may conflict with how our letters have come down to us. Interestingly, he illustrates how American and British spellings diverged. Noah Webster was an American patriot, who took a hiatus in his studies at Yale to serve in the american war of independence, and became acquainted with both Washington and Franklin. Determined to contribute to American identity and unity, he argued that distinct American spellings would end cultural subservience to Britain. Thus, he introduced many spellings, many of which endured, in his dictionary published in 1828. The first traceable progenitor of most of our letters, due to the presence of sample script, is the Phoenician alphabet, which traversed the Near East and Mediterranean between 900-700BC. They were the innovators in seafaring and traded luxuries from the east for raw materials from the west, and composed a collection of trading ports in modern-day Lebanon who extended their influence to trading posts around the Mediterranean shores. Though the script had no vowel letters, being regarded as being of less import than consonants, the transferability allowed it to be adapted wholesale by the Greeks around 800BC. Sachs provides a letter-by-letter synopsis of the most interesting facts surrounding the alphabet, and the origins of some expressions. With regards to our letter 'A', the author reveals that it's progenitor was the Phoenician symbol 'aleph' which was representative of the head of an oxen, and phonetically was equivalent to the glottal stop which graces Cockney accents. It would be the Greeks who would turn the symbol through 90 degrees to our more familair upright position, and change the pronunciation to 'ah'. The author also details how this letter has become commonly identified with its primary position in the alphabet, denoting rank and supremacy. Moreover, Sachs reveals that the expression 'A-okay' has entered usage as the result of a case of mishearing and misinterpretation - during the first manned orbital NASA spaceflight, a simple response of 'okay' from Alan Shepard became misreported and seemingly captured a niche as classifying excellence. Our letter 'B' similarly stems from a Phoenician counterpart denoting 'house' and being named 'beth' - hence Bethlehem can be translated as 'house of bread' and Bethesda as 'merciful house'. Sachs lists the complexity in terms of pronunciation of 'c' when combined with other letters, with scholars as early as the 1550s suggesting spelling being closer tied to phonetics, with

this particular letter drawing the ire of dramatist Ben Jonson in his posthumously published english Grammar of 1640. Likewise Benjamin Franklin proposed in 1768 that the letters C,J,W and Y be abandoned with their values assigned to other letters or other symbols. Indeed, the author reveals that in both Phoenician and Greek alphabets, the third letter was their equivalent of our letter 'g' and that 'c' evolved from Etruscan interpretation of the former letter that they did not possess, and gained prominence in the Roman alphabet - though until the later period of the Roman Empire it was pronounced as a 'hard c' so that Caesar would have been pronounced 'Kye-sar'. Today the majority of 'soft c' words such as 'grace' or 'cellar' entered our language through Norman French. The letter 'e' is by far the most commonly encountered in our language representing 15 different vowel sounds, while the diminutive form of the letter has now become enmeshed with technological progress through representing 'electronic' in 'email' or 'e-commerce'. As Sachs explains, it is also unique in appearing to denote silence by a uniquely English spelling rule. When 'e' appears at the end of a word preceded by a string of letters formed by a vowel followed by a consonant, signalling that the previous vowel sound is long. Thus, we can distinguish 'fat' from 'fate' and 'wine' as against 'win'. This aspect was introduced in the late 1600s to simplify the chaos which characterised spelling in the language as a result of proposals made a hundred years earlier by the Elizabethan grammarian and headmaster, Richard Mulcaster,tutor of Edmund Spenser and Thomas Kyd. Amazingly, the original Semitic meaning of this letter was 'hey' and was represented by a stick figure with arms raised denoting surprise. The very pronunciation of 'f' as a fricative has perhaps led to its denoting swear words and negative concepts such as 'failure' with Cicero calling it the 'unsweetest sound' in Latin, which is ironic as the symbol 'f' historically denoted the sound 'w', there being no 'f' sound in the Phoenician language. It would be the Romans who would associate the ltter with the sound we know today. The transplanting of 'g'g by 'c' as third letter in the alphabet also entailed the latter serving as symbol for both sounds, until in the later Roman empire 'g' was reintroduced in its now familiar spot. With regard to 'h' many early grammarians questioned its true value as a letter, and the author suggests that in other languages it would be an accent mark accompanying another letter, as it is in modern Greek. The history of 'i' and 'j' are interconnected with the former serving as the latter's symbol until late Medieval Europe. In fact, both lower-case 'i' and 'j' are inventions which accompanied the rise of the printing press in the fifteenth century to make script more distinguishable. The modernity of 'j' is also evidenced by the fact that Samuel Johnson in his renowned dictionary of 1755, though recognising its role in spelling, does not include the letter within the alphabet - hence Johnson's listings under 'i' include words such as 'jabber' and 'jealous'. Those who seek to rationalise the spelling rules of English have recommended the abandonment of both 'c' and 'q' for the more purely phonetic 'k'. Sachs reveals that this unnecessary complexity has been bequeathed to us by the Etruscans who introduced three distinct symbols for 'k' which are the forebears of 'c', 'k', and 'q'. Being a labial sound 'm' is one of the most accessible sounds to infants and some linguists theorise that just as babies learn to imitate adult sounds, so could baby sounds have influenced the development of adult words - hence the word for 'mother' can be 'mama' in English or Swahili or 'ma' in Chinese or 'maa' in Hindi. As the letters pass the reader by, Sachs seems to lose impetus, finding true points of interest harder to come by, thereby making the read less engrossing in the second half.

Jamie says

Thoroughly enjoyable. There is rhyme and reason to which letters are in the alphabet, how they got there, and how they changed their shape, order, and pronunciation over time. I was amazed by the nuances involved in vocalizing letter sounds, and how, despite having English as my mother tongue, I had never realized the many different ways those vowels and consonants are pronounced in everyday speech. While reading in a coffee shop I suspect I contributed to early departure of the person next to me as he apparently overheard the crazy man quietly vocalizing different sound combinations to hear, for the first time, the differences between voiced and unvoiced, or labials and dentals. There is something to be said for a book that makes you pause and contemplate the the deep history of what you casually speak or write, knowing the letter forms stretch back to 2000 BCE, and the spoken word roots themselves may go twice as far, into the

dim reaches of Indo-European language. A very interesting book and good history.
