

search for with my 40-something white-collar band mates as we send noise out over our neighborhood every Saturday afternoon, hoping no one calls the cops.

Words, Words, Words

From cellulite to sonnets, Kafka to Keillor, uvula to vulva, Roy Blount Jr., proves himself a wordsmith for the ages.

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ALPHABET JUICE

By Roy Blount Jr. (Sarah Crichton Books, 364 pp., \$25)

One day when I was four years old and my sister just three, I saw her pick up the biggest book in the house and begin to read aloud.

“Mama, come quick!” I shouted. “Jeannie’s reading the dictionary!”

My mother hurried into the living room as my sister pointed to two tiny pictures on a page filled with dense, incomprehensible words and began to recite: “Once there was a bear who went for a walk in the woods, where he met a bee. ‘Hello,’ he said to the bee, ‘I want some honey.’”

Mom merely laughed. Much later, when I was able to read well enough to understand exactly how I’d been had that day, I was sorely disappointed. (To be fair, I surely deserved to have my little sister to pull one over on me, as this was about the same time I talked her into climbing the drainpipe to the roof, putting a bean up her nose, etc. But I digress.) For years after, I clung to the notion that dictionary really did hide *stories*, if only someone knew how to go about finding them.

Turns out, someone did. Luckily for those who care about words, that someone was Roy Blount Jr., who happens to be one of the wittiest writers alive (not to mention a charmingly Southern graduate of Vanderbilt). Blount has, at long last, finished the job my sister started, in a book that is part etymology, part social commentary and mostly all dictionary (with stories) — at least in the sense that it is a compendium of words (with some phrases and names thrown in) arranged in alphabetical order (as opposed to muomegical order, which, Blount cautions, is what we would be stuck with had *mu* and *omega* happened to be the first two Greek letters, rather than *alpha* and *beta*).

The intellectual playfulness of the book is best summed by its subtitle, perhaps one of the longest to be published in English since the 18th Century: *Alphabet Juice: The Energies, Gists, and Spirits of Letters, Words, and Combinations Thereof: Their Roots, Bones, Innards, Piths, Pips, and Secret Parts, Tinctures, Tonics and Essences; With Examples of Their Usage Foul*

and Savory. The 18th Century echoes are not entirely accidental, for even though Blount discusses *mic* and *e-mail* and words like *teh* that have evolved from texting accidents, his heart seems to be in such entries as *phlegm*, *nitpicking*, *ornery* and *cantankerous*. The section on the abbreviation *Jr.*, for example, goes to some lengths to explain why Blount never puts a comma in front of it. It's as if the fussy, fidgety Dr. Johnson — author of a great dictionary — and the urbane, licentious Boswell — author of a great biography — were squeezed into a single person, with the result that their wittiest barroom banter becomes all mixed up in the dictionary. When reading *Alphabet Juice*, one never knows whether one is looking up a word or a punch line.

Although reading may be too strong a word. “If you read this book the way I would read it and the way I’ve written it,” Blount writes in his preface, “you will wear it out, thumbing back and forth, without ever being sure you’ve read it all.” This sort of thumbing is encouraged by most entries referencing others elsewhere in the book. The length of entries varies greatly. *Minimalism*, for example, reads in its entirety, “A little of it goes a long way,” while the entry on the letter *D* takes up nearly three pages, and the one on the verb *tump* goes on for five. But on average, entries tend to run a little less than half a page, which means that most readers will go through four or five per session with the book, in that most readers are likely to wind up placing the book in the same room I put it, a room by virtue of which, in the term coined by a memorable book related episode of *Seinfeld*, it will become “flagged.”

To put it less delicately (more Blountly?), *Alphabet Juice* may be the greatest bathroom reading material ever published. The entries are invariably funny, always surprising, and may be consumed in no particular order, with days or weeks or years between readings. They vary from esoteric and scholarly to the chatty and personal (Blount tells one story, for example, under the heading, *Wilt: A Tall Tale*, about a heated exchange he once mediated, while working as a staff writer for *Sports Illustrated*, between basketball legend Wilt Chamberlain and an editor as well as a switchboard operator at the magazine, concerning the relative usage and merits of the articles *a* and *the*. In 1985, when I was in graduate school, I heard Blount tell a version of this story as a visiting lecturer, and a few years later, while freelancing for *SI* myself, I happened to meet one of the principals, who confirmed that it occurred more or less in the unlikely manner Blount described.)

Alphabet Juice is, in short, the story the dictionary has always wanted to tell, and reading it is way more fun than putting beans up your nose. Just ask my sister.

Biographical Sketch

For several years, Michael Ray Taylor has been a frequent reviewer and literary writer for the books section of the Nashville Scene, a weekly newspaper. However, in 2009, the Scene, following a disturbing trend at many other leading newspapers, eliminated its book section entirely.