

# ONE-LETTER WORDS: A DICTIONARY

A. ROSS ECKLER

Morristown, New Jersey

*The most pervasive yet serious reference material on the Web* (MacClure)

*Interesting and possibly useful* (Pelegrino)

*Fun for bored lit geeks* (Martinova)

Authored by Craig Conley and published in 2005 by HarperCollins, this 232-page book claims that one thousand one-letter words exist. Since there are only 26 letters, this is mathematically impossible; Conley instead presents one thousand different *meanings* of one-letter words, often with literary citations. X is the letter having the largest number of different meanings (76), followed by O (63) and T (59); W has the fewest (18), followed by J and P (24) and M, N and Q (27). Conley makes the somewhat startling claim that one-letter X is used more often than any letter, but he includes such uses as the signature of an illiterate, a spot on a map where pirate treasure is buried, tic-tac-toe entries, marks on a ballot, multiple-choice test responses, multiplication signs, sign-here x's on a contract, and even kisses at the end of a letter!

A considerable number of meanings (half of all those given for W) accompany every letter:

A written representation of the letter

A device, such as a printer's type, for reproducing the letter

Something arbitrarily designated X (e.g. a person, place or other thing)

The Nth in a series

Something having the shape of an X

Someone called X

Any spoken sound represented by the letter X

The Nth letter of the alphabet

The Nth section in a piece of music

For the letter O, nine of the meanings consist of exclamations of pain, surprise, longing, annoyance, gladness, wonder, fear, earnestness and reassurance, and a tenth depicts "introducing a wish". Counts are built up by enumerating vitamins, single-letter chemical elements, blood types, star types, report card grades, musical scales, and Roman numerals. A word can be characterized by its first letter, as in Wodehouse's "Reasonable old Bertram, always trying to throw oil on the troubled w's". Conley does not hesitate to include hyphenated examples (G-string, A-frame, H-bomb, T-bone, etc.) and single letters separated from the rest of the word by an apostrophe (I'm, can't, let's). However, he fails to include T-shirt as an entry although it is found as part of the definition for A-shirt and T-dress!

Under E, Perce's E-less novel *La Disparation* is noted but not its predecessor, Wright's *Gadsby*.

Conley comments on the frequent association of a letter with the adjective *scarlet*, giving examples of it (or pink, or red) for each letter of the alphabet. No doubt this association originated with Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Most of the scarlet citations have negative connotations: C for Communist, D for Dance, J for Judicial, L for Liberal, M for Murderess, and so on, but on the other hand a red-letter day (no specific letter given) has positive connotations.