WORDS’ WORTH: A REVIEW OF ALPHABET JUICE

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A new book about language is always cause for rejoicing, especially when it celebrates both the serious and the humorous aspects of words.

Published a few months ago, Alphabet Juice (Sarah Crichton Books/Farrar, Straus and Giroux), by Roy Blount Jr., revels in the joys of the written and spoken word. The title is, I gather, a play on “alphabet soup.” But it’s also a tribute to the excitement that words can generate. Explains the Introduction: “Juice as in au jus, juju, power, liquor, electricity.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the text is in alphabetical order. Readers will discover short (mostly) entries on ain’t, beg the question, cliché, double negative, Goldwynisms, headlinese, kvetch, limerick, portmanteau word, semicolon, subjunctive, unbeknownst . . . and scores of other topics.

Blount delves into the ancient roots of words, points out unexpected connections among seemingly dissimilar words, and explains the origins of slang expressions such as phooey and pizzazz. He debunks popular “folk etymologies” that attempt to account for certain words, but which are in fact fabrications or urban legends.

Best known as a humorist, Blount is the author of 20 previous books. His serious interest in language is confirmed by his membership in the American Heritage Dictionary’s Usage Panel, which adjudicates thorny language disputes. But Alphabet Juice is witty and conversational, and festooned with puns, wordplay, light verse, and clever coinages (e.g., antepenultimatum: two warnings from the final one!).

Here are some excerpts that display the book’s range of subjects and the author’s distinctive style:

• babble/babel: “It’s hard to believe that these two words, whose meanings are so close, have no etymological connection. But they don’t, say the scholars: babble is from baby talk and babel from the Bible.”

• English: “English is an outrageous tangle of those [Greco-Latin] derivations and other multifarious linguistic influences, from Yiddish to Shoshone, which has grown up around a gnarly core of chewy, clangorous yawps derived from ancestors who painted themselves blue to frighten their enemies.”

• intelligible: “We say something is unintelligible or barely intelligible, but we never say, ‘That argument of yours sure is intelligible.’”

• mic: “I hate to see mike, short for microphone, rendered as mic, which is how it tends to be spelled these days. . . . Mic, dammit, should be pronounced mick. . . . The colloquial abbreviation of a word is not limited to letters taken from that word. If it were, we wouldn’t be able to shorten refrigerator to fridge.”

• wrought: “. . . not the past tense of wreak, as is often assumed, but of work, in the sense of making something, forming something, bringing something about. . . . Archaic though the word wrought is, it has stayed alive. . . .”
One of Blount’s favorite themes is that certain words are imitative, reflective of their meanings, or that they “sensuously evoke the essence of the word”: blob, crackle, grunt, queasy, scrawl, throb, wince, zest, and many others. He calls such words “sonicky.”

I applaud the author’s prescriptivism. He firmly defends the traditional definitions of many words and doesn’t capitulate to their popular misuses, e.g., disinterested, hopefully, and literally. He also advocates, as I do, retaining the hyphen in e-mail.

Any quibbles? A few. Because the book is formatted like a dictionary or encyclopedia, some readers may be misled into assuming that it’s a comprehensive reference work. It’s not. The author chose to include items that struck his fancy, and excluded others. Thus, you’ll find helpful discussions of flack vs. flak, and the misuse of incredible, but you’re out of luck if you’re seeking clarifications for other troublesome words, such as comprise, enormity, or fortuitous.

My hunch is that Blount, over several years or decades, habitually tossed notes and clippings into a shoebox. Then, when the collection became large enough, he cobbled everything into a book. There’s nothing wrong with that. After all, it’s pretty much the technique I use to write my own articles for Word Ways! But for a complete guide to the English language or English usage, you’ll have to consult a volume other than Alphabet Juice.

It’s perhaps not surprising, then, that the book is something of a grab bag. The content sometimes tends toward the random, desultory, and idiosyncratic. Blount isn’t reluctant to free-associate or to digress into sports, movies, or an irrelevant anecdote from his childhood or adolescence. The entry on consonants somehow sparks a recollection of his father’s tool chest, and a discussion of spelling bees leads to . . . Madame de Pompadour? The entry for mnemonic might be expected to be about that subject, but is really about words that irritate the author because they begin with silent letters. He’s also prone to shameless name-dropping. These excursions are interesting, but their connection to language is often minimal or nonexistent. Even worse, some entries are no more than uninformative teases or jokes.

Although Blount can be erudite and savvy, he commits occasional errors of ignorance. He discusses anagrams and contronyms, yet omits those terms. He cites the problem of a writer “causing the reader to stop, double-hitch, blink, and reread,” without noting Bryan Garner’s perfect expression for that phenomenon: miscuing. He recounts an occasion when he thought of the ideal witty remark only after it was too late, but fails to call this familiar experience by its elegant name: l’esprit de l’escalier. (He also claims to have invented the punny comment in that incident: “With fronds like these, who needs anemones.” But I recall hearing it as a child, half a century ago.) And the book contains a lengthy discussion of the origins of O.K., yet Blount seems oblivious to Allen Walker Read’s definitive—indeed, almost legendary—investigation of that fascinating linguistic issue, published in the early 1960s.

Final gripes: Whenever a word or term in the text is an entry, it’s boldfaced to signal a cross-reference. Helpful? Yes. But when this practice is applied to every probably and of course, it borders on the ludicrous. Also, Alphabet Juice lacks an index and a table of contents. Apparently, when a book is formatted alphabetically, the publisher considers both to be dispensable. But without an index, the reader can’t easily find proper names or terms that aren’t major entries. A listing of topics up front isn’t redundant; it’s a valuable tool that gives the reader an overview of the book at a glance.

These reservations aside, Alphabet Juice is enlightening, entertaining, and amusing. And a big advantage in these times of information overload is that you need not read it cover to cover. Browsing and grazing in its pages will reward you well.

A shorter version of this review appeared in the writer’s column, “The Language Perfectionist,” which runs every Saturday in Early to Rise, a popular online newsletter. For links to current and past columns, see http://www.earlytorise.com/author/don-hauptman.