

The Alphabet

Ron Silliman

University of Alabama Press (Sep 28, 2008)

\$85.00 (952pp)

978-0-8173-1618-1

The first sentence of Silliman's forty-years-in-the-making opus, "If the function of writing is to 'express the world,'" is unfinished to a strict grammarian. But Silliman goes on to do just that, and the world he expresses (and pricks, probes, inverts, analyzes, and aphorizes) is America in the raw and polished, of his own times and beyond...and unfinished. "Write first / and ask questions after, / exact trace / of anxiety / does not 'make the man.'" Silliman inverts even this instruction, often writing the answer, leaving the reader to ask the question. Poetry and prose alternate, and the words in bold print in the latter sometimes suggest a hidden message. He is endlessly inventive: subtle segues hide what present as dissociative leaps from one topic to another: "Mathematics is finished language (I heard Finnish)" ... "High tea before haiku."

The reader is plunged into an ethnography of captured moments that capture us:

"Woman on the treadmill at the gym wears dark glasses and a Walkman, hermetically sealed, striding toward a future that never arrives." "Hermetically sealed" is powerfully observed in a society whose desperate plea (and endeavor) is "Only connect."

Silliman is a poet-philosopher of the possible in language and imagination: just see it; just dream it! He writes it and exhorts us: "Engage the page."

Brief terminal notes provide useful information on the differing circumstances and methods of creation of the twenty-six sections.

PETER SKINNER (January 9, 2009)

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