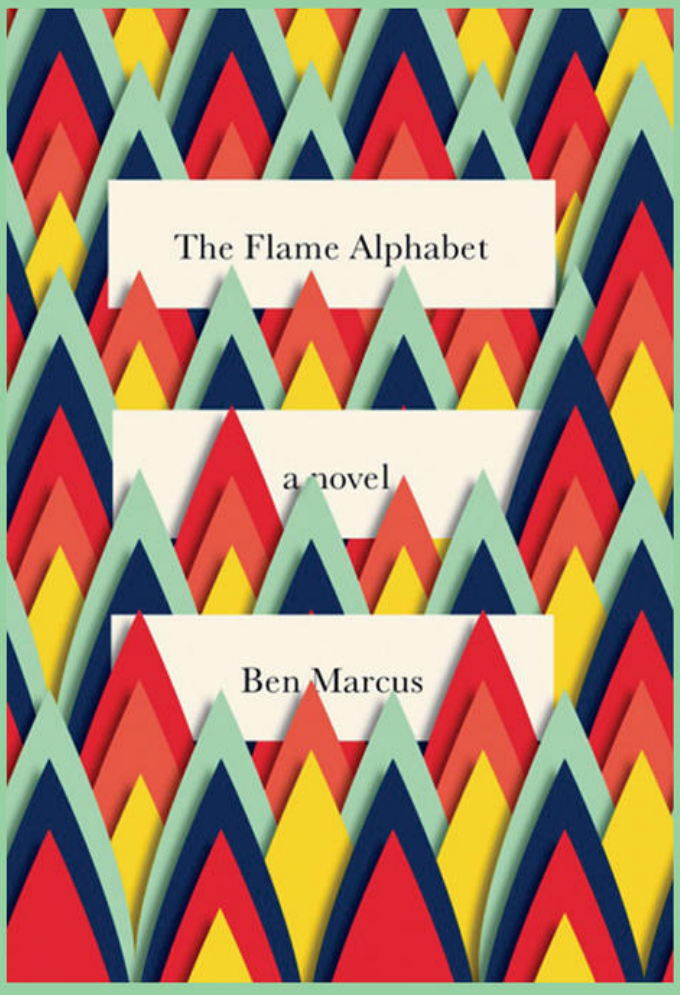
Books

Book Review: "The Flame Alphabet"

By Ben Marcus (Knopf)

By
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When the biblical Esther, a lovely orphan who becomes the queen of Persia, learns of a plot to exterminate every Jew in the kingdom, she faces a conundrum: inform the king and risk death for speaking when not spoken to, or stay quiet and risk death in the pending slaughter, since she — unbeknownst to the king — is herself a Jew. Esther decides to speak, revealing to her husband both the scheme and her true identity. The king is so moved by Esther's boldness that he forgives her breach of protocol, and ultimately he allows the Jews to save themselves.

The Flame Alphabet's Esther shares her namesake's flair for candor. A hostile teenager, she loathes her parents' banal how-was-school-today conversation — what her dad, Sam, who narrates the novel, calls "all the functional vocal prompts one bleated in order to stabilize the basic encounters." If Esther says something, you can bet she means it. But in the apocalyptic setting that the author Ben Marcus has created for her, when she speaks, her words kill rather than save.

Here, from the mouths of babes comes a mysterious, seemingly viral force, carried by speech, that infects the adults who hear it — their tongues harden, their orifices seep, their skins loosen. In the face of this plague that science can't name, bodies across the world go slack, electronic transmissions go silent, and packs of damn creepy kids rove dark streets, carelessly — or maybe maliciously — talking.

Marcus, an associate professor of creative writing at Columbia who defended experimental fiction against its critics, the most prominent among them Jonathan Franzen, in a widely discussed *Harper's* essay in 2005, gives his second novel a much more conventional arc than he gave *Notable American Women* (2002). But *The Flame Alphabet* continues his tradition of drawing profundity from unapologetically unsentimental contexts. This tale, rooted in philosophy and rife with agony, is a Zen retreat in hell.

Children are part of that hell, and the author never treats them as precious. But for Sam and his wife Claire, their pretty only child is dangerously precious; they value her far more than they value themselves. While many parents, sickened beyond recognition by their children's speech, abandon them in order to survive, Sam and Claire refuse to let Esther go. Instead, while Claire laments her failing ability to care for the girl, Sam tries to reason his way through the incomprehensible crisis. He devises a method for mapping his neighborhood's residual sound and, later, obsessively chases a cure through experiments in both medicine and written language. Meanwhile, in a society where speech has been turned off, Sam and Claire

steal away with a group of fellow Jews (Jewish children are the first carriers of the contagion) to receive radio messages from a rabbi they know only by voice. In their earthen “hole that is hot with language,” they are advised to take responsibility for what is happening.

“*I* did this to you,” the rabbi encourages them to say to their neighbors. “Not my child. *I did it*.” Yes, sad Sam and ashamed Claire created Esther, the source of their suffering. They cling to her, and she resents them for it. When the epidemic escalates to include adult carriers, and speech becomes physically detrimental even between husband and wife, Sam clings to Claire, too.

“You realize that you’re hurting her, right?” says a man who calls himself Murphy. “You probably think you have her best interests in mind, but believe me you don’t know what they are.” But Sam holds on to the belief, the narrative, that he can fix things.

Stories are dangerous, Murphy warns. “Because they happened long before we were born,” he sneers at Sam, “we somehow decide they are extraordinarily important and we shut our brains down, we turn into imbeciles, we let the past start thinking for us. *That’s sickness*.” Adapting, it seems, will require letting go of narratives — ideas, even — and becoming whatever exists without them. Mental energy is precisely the wrong treatment for a problem rooted in thinking; it’s no coincidence that smart people are the first ones to see their faces shrink and pucker.

When the underground radio signals cease, Sam is left with himself, and millennia of hackneyed human notions are suddenly silent. “I was alone out there, and any channel of insight would have to be one I manufactured myself.” This struggle against cliché, which recalls Ben Lerner’s 2011 fictional portrait of a young writer, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, permeates the story and the narrator’s telling of it, and this question of expression is as fascinating as the plot.

Along the way, discomfiting imagery — a child tapping menacingly on a car window, urine the consistency of pudding, salt crammed into mouths in accordance with an ancient remedy — keeps one from lingering too long on any given page. Some of the most disturbing scenes occur after Sam’s hypotheses land him a research gig in the laboratory complex of some mysterious authority. Amid horrors, he must wonder: for whom am I working? For whom is language working? Sam’s tale is one of a man who tries and hopes, but his tone is defeatist and sarcastic. (Marcus has reported

laughter at some readings, but *The Flame Alphabet* is most definitely not a comedy.) Sam acknowledges his scientific failures, sometimes shifting into the second person to address the unknown reader. Fine, he asserts for much of the novel, I don't need to communicate; I only need my family to be reunited. "My shame would be safely contained inside what was left of me. Barring some miracle, I'd never be able to tell this story. It could die with me." But he did tell that story, of course, through hundreds of pages of prose — the one irony that seems to escape this self-aware character.

Whether he speaks or doesn't speak, in some way he dies. It's scriptural Esther's conundrum: does one stay quiet against impulse, or to follow that impulse without regret?

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