Book Review: Flanders, J. (2020). *A Place for Everything. The Curious History of Alphabetical Order.* New York: Basic Books

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Have you ever wondered what Table of Contents, Times Tables (for multiplication), and the Periodic Table have in common? Or how knowledge of alphabetical order spread out of Egypt into the Greek world, the Roman Empire, and eventually the rest of the world? How about organizing principles from subject categories to a widely accepted concept of today: the alphabetical order? Judith Flanders's *A Place for Everything. The Curious History of Alphabetical Order* will answer all these questions (plus lots of other similar inquiries) and will take the reader on an enchanting journey of discovery that might clarify the multiple concepts of storing, registering, and filing information.

The story of the alphabet, an organizing tool that developed over the centuries, is the starting point of this fascinating history. "This magical tool, the alphabet, bestows the ability to create order out of centuries of thought, of knowledge, of literature, scientific discovery, and history. Sorting, and classification, allow us to locate the information we need, and to disseminate it in turn. Without sorting, all the knowledge in the world would lie in great un-sifted stacks of books, themselves unfindable, unread, and unknown." (intro p. xxv)

A Place for Everything is organized in ten chapters, preceded by a list of illustrations, a page of acknowledgements and a preface, and followed by an elaborate timeline, extensive bibliography, copious notes, and extremely detailed index. The book starts with a quotation that will provide the reader with some surprising but much needed food for thought:

> The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity …. We
> fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful.   (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical
> Investigations*, § 129)

Chapter 1 entitled *A is for Antiquity* delves into the first forms of writing from the beginning to the classical world. From images painted on rock to pictographs emerging from Middle East to Australia and to many parts of the Americas, the author traces Sumerian cuneiform "moving from around 3500 BCE from pictographic to ideographic representations, from the depiction of objects to that of abstract notions." (p. 1) As stated in the book, our ancestors who wanted to learn to write Sumerian cuneiform had to remember approximately three hundred basic symbols, plus another thousand less frequently used ones. By around 2000 BCE, seven hundred standard hieroglyphic signs were already used in Egypt, which, in Flanders' view, evolved into four types of writing: hieroglyphics; hieratic, or sacred script; and two cursive scripts. (p. 4)

According to Judith Flanders, the need to communicate was the driving force in the early writing forms. Referring to Peter Daniels' *Gramatology*, in Daniels and Bright's *The World's Writing Systems*, the author argues that writing may have been invented (separately and independently) by the Chinese, the Sumerians/Egyptians, and then the Mayans in Mesoamerica, whose ideograms became logograms, "which represented entire words, used in conjunction with glyphs representing single syllables. These were incised, carved, and painted: into stone, wood, onto walls, and, more portably, onto both pottery and

bark paper." (p. 7) Only certain people were able to learn these systems, and that led cultures in those days to look for an easier way to communicate: the alphabet, because that meant memorizing twenty or thirty symbols instead of thousands. "The linguistic group that included the Canaanites, the early Hebrews, the Phoenicians, and the Aramaeans used a form of North Semitic script, which only had twenty-two letters and was an *abjad*, an alphabet consisting entirely of consonants, with no vowels." (p. 9)

The poet and scholar Callimachus (c. 310-240 BCE) is thought to be the originator of a catalog entitled *Pinakes,* or *Tables*, the world's first library catalog. "The word 'tables' was used for many types of precis or synopses of information, arranged in a variety of ways, well into the eighteenth century, and sometimes even later. Today many of these synopses are given more specialized terms, including table of contents, times tables (for multiplication), the periodic table, as well as the more generic 'table' to cover summaries of statistical material drawn up into columns." (p. 16)

The alphabet spread quickly from Egypt to the Greek islands and then to the Roman Empire. On the other side of the globe, China was already using a non-alphabetic writing system with organizing principles well in advance of the West's. *Erya* (c. 200 BCE), which some people called the first Chinese Dictionary, "was divided topically, by subject, with linked words grouped together within each category, although the connections are not necessarily ones we recognize today: roads and bridges were considered to originate from the court of the emperor, and thus they appear under the heading 'Interpreting the Court'; warfare too was the province of the ruler, who was divinely ordained, and thus it fell into the section dedicated to 'Interpreting the Heavens.'" (p. 23)

Chapter 2 *(B is for Benedictines)* focuses on the events that followed the fall of the Western Roman Empire (476 CE), when libraries were the places where books and documents had to be registered and catalogued. The millennium of monastic learning began with St. Benedict (480-543/7), who established that reading as a spiritual occupation required that each brother was to "receive a book apiece from the library, and read it straight through." (p. 28) In one of their libraries, books were listed by category: divinity, grammar, history, geography, sermons, and service books. Another name comes up in the discussion: that of Isidore, Archbishop of Seville (c. 560-636). In *Etymologiae*, he "divided his work into twenty books, the first five following the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, the seven liberal arts of classical education. The *trivium*, or threefold path, taught the basics, grammar, rhetoric, and logic; the *quadrivium*, or fourfold way, covered mathematics, geometry, music, and astronomy." (p. 31)

Along the same lines, the author of this book suggests other names worth mentioning: Aelfric (c. 950-c. 1010), with his *Nomina multarum rerum anglice*, or *The Names of Many Things in English*, in which "he divided those many English things into eighteen categories, beginning with God, followed by the heavens, angels, the sun and moon, the earth and the sea; then men, women, parts of the body, family relationship, professions, trades, diseases, seasons, and times of day; then colors, animals (themselves divided whether they lived on land or sea, walked or flew), plants, household goods, weapons, cities, metals, and gems; and concluding with a roundup of general terms, divided into abstract and concrete." (p. 37) For equal measure and of similar value, we should mention Papias the Lombard, who in 1053 produced his *Elementarium doctrinae rudimentum*, or *Teaching the Basic Elements,* and who may be considered the first Western lexicographer. His ordering system is explained in his preface: "Anyone who wishes to find anything quickly must also notice that this whole book is composed according to the alphabet not only in the first letters of the parts but also in the second, third, and sometimes even in the further determinative arrangement of the letters." (p. 38)

Chapter 3, *C is for Categories*, switches to clerical and government offices who needed to create their own organizational systems. What we now call subject index may have been, in Judith Flanders' opinion, the idea of a Benedictine Cardinal Deusdedit (d. before 1100), a cannon lawyer, "who compiled a list of some eight hundred headings." In the same context of surviving documents, "most papal records were sorted and stored in bound ledgers compiled in chronological order, often with a *capitulum,* an early version of a table of contents, at the front, listing all the items in order of appearance." (p. 46)

Sicily became the center of innovation when, in 1240, the first European chancellery was established, with a staff dedicated to oversee its administration. This was made possible because of the appearance of a new writing material from the Islamic world: paper, which had been exported from China around 750. "Paper transformed everything – not least, organizing systems. Paper was less expensive than parchment, and so it could be used for rough drafts, for calculations, and for ordering diverse content, as well as to record completed processes." (p. 51)

The Arab scholarly world became widely known via their mosque libraries and the Fatimid caliph al-Aziz (955-996) was famous for his eighteen thousand theological manuscripts. "The School of Wisdom, a library and center for manuscript-copying as well as teaching, founded in Basra under Harun al-Rashid (r. 786-809) and enlarged by his son al-Mamun (r. 813-833), was until the thirteenth century a meeting point for Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars, where works were translated from Greek as well as Persian." (p. 60) Encyclopedias were highly valued by the Arab scholars and a title must be recorded as one of the first biographical dictionaries: *Kitab Al-Tabaqat Al-Kabir*. or *The Book of the Main Classes*, by Ibn Sa'd (d. c. 845).

The beginning of Chapter 4, *D is for Distinctiones* draws the reader's attention to Peter Lombard's *Sentences, w*hich was the precursor of the modern reference book, and which made it possible for keywords to be appended because it helped "to find quite easily what is sought, according to a new method, alphabetical order." (p. 74) Arabic numerals had started to appear in manuscripts, but were not yet used to number the pages. "Without numbered pages, or standard texts, only two sorts of index were possible: those drawn up for specific copy of a manuscript, or those that created a system whereby a single index could be used for all manuscript copies of any one work." (p. 75)

The intellectual journey of discovery continues with Alexander of Hales (c. 1185-1245), who created the system of subcategories (I, II, III, etc., then A, B, C, etc., followed by 1, 2, 3, etc. and perhaps a, b, c, etc.) His commentary on Lombard's *Sentences* led to text standardization at the university in Paris, followed by another step forward in linking the words in a text with an index entry: "each column of text was given a letter of the alphabet, say from A to D. Then, using the new Arabic numerals, every fifth line of text was numbered." (p. 77)

Florilegia (collections of literary texts, or anthologies) were followed in time by *distinctiones*, or subject indexes, older forms of literature like *florilegia*. By the fourteenth century, *distinctiones* and *florilegia* were joined by *compendia*, "which drew material from both of these sources, as well as from encyclopedias." (p. 82) All these novelties made it possible for secular material to be available and accessible to everybody. Hugh of Pisa, who died around 1210, felt that "reading ought to have an end result, a measurable outcome that was public, not simply private improvement of enjoyment." (p. 83) In time, all these new organizational tools helped governments re-arrange their archives so documents were easier to be found and accessed. (p. 88)

With the advent of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, being able to search through a book for s specific piece of information had become commonplace. Chapter 5, *E is for Expansion*, lists places where books were held in collections, some of which belonged to monasteries and universities, while others were kept by private individuals. University libraries like Sorbonne and Oxford held their books in primary collections – for students and teachers to consult – and smaller collections of works that could be borrowed. By the fifteenth century, alphabetical order and the library lists were used to indicate the location of a book. (p. 98) Sometimes explanations were necessary to facilitate the use of these new arrivals. "In 1547, William Salesbury's *Welsh-English Dictionary* carried an introduction to explain that a 'Wordbook or Dictionary' was a collection of words 'in which if you carefully notice, order and arrangement are kept; for the words are not mixed helter skelter in it, as they might happen to tumble in my mind at first thought." (p. 100)

The exhaustive research presented in Chapter 6, *F is for Firsts*, takes us to the invention of the printing press and the library catalogs - two of the huge steps in the quantum leap of what we call the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries. They were already preceded by similar firsts in China, where "the Han emperors had had the *Analects* of Confucius and the *Five Classics* carved onto stone steles, from which were produced rubbings of individual sections or texts. By the ninth century, copies were being printed from engraved woodblocks, a method well suited to capturing the detail of calligraphic brushstrokes." (p. 105) In Europe, the Italian Niccolo Perroti may have been the first to include numbering on every page of his reference work entitled *Cornu Copiae*, or *The Horn of Plenty* (1499).

All through the book, footnotes written in this fascinating retrospective add a special touch with a plethora of information for the avid or the curious reader. One typical example should suffice:

> Book formats were, and still are, based on the signature – that folded sheet that is the basis for printed books. The largest format is called a *folio,* indicating that historically it was a full sheet, or folio, folded just once. The next size down, *quarto*, indicates the sheet was folded to make a four-page signature, while an *octavo* was printed to create a signature of eight pages, and was thus half the size of a quarto, and a quarter the size of folio. (p. 118)

Another footnote brings the name of Aldus Manutius, who in 1500-1501 produced an italic typeface, "a cursive that mimicked handwriting, making it more compact than standard roman typefaces and therefore useful for small volumes […] The idea of using *italics* to distinguish elements of a text […] developed only gradually over the next century, as did later use for emphasis, that typographic nudge in the ribs." (p. 119)

Next, we segue to the sixteenth century and the *French Revolution, Bureaucracy and the office*. Chapter 7, *G is for Government*, takes us to the ready availability of paper, which basically transformed the exchange of information and was used as a bridge between cultures. One of the marvels of the sixteenth century, in Judith Flanders' view, was the writing table, an updated version of the wax tablets. Practical and easy to manufacture, writing tables were used in the Low Countries by the 1520s. Much impressed with this novelty, Samuel Pepys (1663-1703) described seeing "some sheets of paper varnished on one side, which lies very white and smooth … and I am apt to believe will be an invention that will take in the world." (p. 133)

As presented in this book, old style wax tables and the new writing tables continued to be used in the centuries that followed. Account books had initially been kept in chronological order by merchants and traders to record business transactions. However, with an increase in commerce across borders, there was a need for a new system that would separate suppliers from customers, and even track with ease a single client, shipment of purchase. 'The solution was double-entry bookkeeping, a method whereby each transaction is entered at least twice, as a credit or a debit, in separate columns which must, at the end of the day, reconcile." (p. 134)

During the sixteenth century, the pervasive quality of the alphabetical system penetrated the reference works for those practicing law. In 1557, the printer William Rastell set out his *Collection of All the Statutes* in alphabetical order. The same can be said about the first law dictionary published in England in 1572; the *Expositiones terminorum legum Anglorum*, or *The Exposition of English Legal Terms* in second-letter alphabetical order. Furthermore, the first edition of the Vatican's *Index librorum prohibitorum*, or *Index of Prohibited Books*, which appeared in 1559, "was divided into three sections: authors who were entirely forbidden; individual works that were forbidden, although other works by the same authors might be acceptable; and anonymous banned works. The lists were compiled in alphabetical order, by author for the first and second parts, and by title for the third." (p. 156)

At the beginning of Chapter 8, *H is for History*, the historian switched her attention to "libraries, research, and extracting in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries." Before tackling those two centuries, Flanders brings us C. S. Lewis, the mid-twentieth century writer and theologian, who is quoted to help the reader understand the medieval minds:

> [M]ediaeval man was not a dreamer …. He was an organizer, a codifier, a builder of systems. He wanted a "place for everything and everything in its place." Distinction, definition, and tabulation were his delight …. There was nothing mediaeval people liked better, or did better, than sorting out and tidying up. Of all our modern inventions, I suspect they would most have admired the card index. (C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, Cambridge University Press, 1964, p. 10)

Going back in time, Judith Flanders finds Conrad Gesner, who, in 1548, in his *Pandectae* laid out "a method by which anyone may compile an index": "Whatever one wishes to refer to in an index is written down on sheet of paper of good quality, on one side only …" In the 1720s, a Swede visiting the library of the Pères de l'Oratoire is impressed when he sees there were "no catalogs, but only *bundles of paper slips*" […] each "representing one letter of the alphabet." (p. 169)

The researcher then turns to idea of cataloguing, or, in other words, a card catalog, which revived the interest in the alphabet. For a while, slips were used to arrange everything by subject order, but in the 1760s, paper slips re-emerged but with a focus on alphabetical order. To clarify the matter at hand, this explanation is provided as a footnote:

> It is worth reminding ourselves that the word "catalog," which to modern ears implies sorting as part of its essence, did not necessarily mean the same in the eighteenth century. […] the "Catalogue Aria" in Mozart and his librettist Da Ponte's opera *Don Giovanni* was a recapitulation of the Don's requests: 640 Italian women, 231 German, 100 French, 91 Turkish, and 1003 Spanish, a precis that follows neither alphabetical, nor geographical, nor numerical order. (p. 171)

When the history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries continues, Judith Flanders finds Samuel Hartlib (c. 1600-1662), who came up with what we now call a newsletter. He copied out and translated "learned correspondence and pamphlets on a variety of subjects – the sciences, engineering, trade, travel – and circulating the result to friends and admirers as well as to the general public." This is how we read about the discovery of a "book-Invention" by Thomas Harrison, who envisioned an ark, "The Ark of Studies: or, a repository, by means of which it is proposed that all the things one has read, heard, or thought can be more speedily arranged, and more readily used." (p. 176) We are now in the context of sorting furniture ventures and one name comes to the foreground: Johann Jakob Moser (1701-1785), a jurist who shared his idea: "I have many small open boxes, a little over a foot long, [and] four fingers high," each divided by "cardboard strips a finger and a half wide and a little higher than the half sheets" where he kept his favorite reading selections. (p. 179)

The Moravian scholar and collector Jan Comenius (1592-1670) was known in those times for his children's picture book, *Orbis sensualium pictus*, or *The Visible World in Pictures*, which was not exactly the first illustrated book for children, but which promoted a new method of teaching children: "a melding together of alphabetical order and commonplace-book systems." He separated the text into subject categories – Temperance, Providence, and so on; he also "linked each phoneme – the sound that each letter of the alphabet represents – to the real world, using, for example, the noises that animals make. An English translation begins, "The Crow cryeth *a, a*, The Lamb blaiteth *be be*, the grasshopper chirpeth *ci ci*, the Whooppoo saith *du du*." (p. 180)

Before the end of the same century, a method of sorting commonplace books was conceived by John Locke (1632-1704). From the early days of his student life, Locke started to collect notebooks on subjects like natural philosophy, medicine, "moral knowledge," but the quantity of the information had become a problem. He consequently designed his own system, which was published in an essay entitled "A New Method of Making Common-Place Books," and which was essentially a "simple table that he drew in the front of his notebooks, listing the letters of the alphabet vertically, then subdividing each letter by the five vowels." (p. 182)

Two names are representative of Chapter 9, *I Is for Index Cards*: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), and George Washington (1732-1799). Goethe, the German Renaissance man, who worked with notes on a variety of subjects, kept them on loose pages, and stored them in what he called "capsules,' or "sacks," or "paper pouches," which may be considered predecessors of our large manila folders. According to Judith Flanders, George Washington was also a careful organizer. For example, his "military ledgers were organized on bookkeeping principles, with memorandum books for hastily jotted-down expenses, and ledgers where incomings and outgoings were balanced more carefully. (p. 201)

Libraries had likewise to keep up with the huge volume of material. Melville Dewey (1851-1931) is credited with the American library system. "He divided the world, and therefore the library, into ten classes, giving philosophy precedence, followed by theology, social sciences, philology, natural sciences, 'useful arts' (technology, or applied sciences), fine arts, literature and history (which included geography), plus a catch-all 'generalities,' or miscellaneous class for everything else." (p. 217)

Chapter 10, *Y is for Y2K*, sums up the extensive survey of the alphabetical order, which in Judith Flanders' view, appeared "to be immortal." The subtitle *From the Phone Book to Hypertext in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries*, will summarize the two major developments related to the topic. The first one is the telephone book, which followed other reference books. "Street guides, and later post office directories, precursors to phone books, had appeared in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in many cities. These publications listed the names, occupations, and addresses of residents and businesses, arranged in alphabetical order or, occasionally, in street order that was itself organized alphabetically within districts. "(p. 223) The first known printed list of phone subscribers appeared around 1880 in Britain, but the early phone

books used a variety of systems: "some were arranged in the order subscribers had joined the exchange, or by the date they had purchased their telephone. Others grouped entries by trade or profession." (p. 225) During the twentieth century people were able to look up phone numbers in the Yellow Pages (sorted by trade and profession) or the White Pages, for residential service.

The computer revolution surprised everybody with a novel idea that brought alphabetic and analphabetic cultures together in the second major development: the *hypertext*, meaning "beyond text." The word itself, *hypertext*, was coined in the 1960s to accommodate the idea of going back or beyond the text. Readers may find it necessary in some cases to check the definition of a word, or an encyclopedia for extra information. "Electronic texts accommodate these external sources, and the end material, onscreen; click the superscript note number on the page to check the source of a quotation; click a link to take you to a dictionary definition, or to an illustration of the material on a different website." (p. 232)

"Isidore of Seville understood this: writing was created, he said, 'in order to remember things. For lest [things] fly into oblivion, they are bound in letters.' "(p. 235) In other words, readers will find this journey of intellectual discovery leading to the obvious conclusion that, between the first and the last letter of the alphabet, our knowledge has been stored so it can be easily retrieved and passed on to the next generations. Let's hope that this first history of alphabetization will thrill the readers, but also gain its well-deserved reputation as a work of authority and a treasury for researchers and history enthusiasts alike.

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