

## THE ALPHABETIC BOOK CLUB / *Ron Nyren*

ONE NOVEMBER AFTERNOON, my father closed the stationery store half an hour early to prepare for the arrival of the Alphabetic Book Club. He thought our front lawn needed to be raked first, even though I insisted it would be too dark for Mr. Barr and Mr. Jellicoe to notice by the time they arrived. Because I had spent the afternoon straightening up the stockroom, raking seemed like more of the same, as if leaves were only another kind of paper. I wondered if we would have to separate walnut leaves from oak and maple leaves and pile them all in different corners of the yard.

My father could be very meticulous. At the store, the black ball-point pens were not allowed to touch the red ones. The large manila envelopes had to lie with their open ends away from the aisles, as if to discourage customers from reaching in to feel the inside. The packs of red, yellow, green and blue index cards had to be arranged to follow the spectrum.

And yet my father's mild temperament did not permit him to give instructions. He hoped his two clerks—and I, though at thirteen I only helped out after school—would notice on our own how he did things and follow his example.

For instance, when I saw him raking in long stripes, each one beginning at the house and ending at the road, I did the same.

"Did you look at the book for this month?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"I couldn't make heads or tails of this one. Mr. Barr will understand it, I guess. I'm afraid I'm not much of a reader."

As if to make up for this, he raked determinedly at a cluster of walnuts half buried in the lawn. Twilight was falling, and the air felt unusually warm, as it had been all day. The smell of leaves made me want to lie down in them and go to sleep. A passing car switched on its headlights, casting a dim shadow of my father onto the wall of forsythias along the side of our yard.

When he had first joined the Alphabetic Book Club, I had read each of his group's selections, often finishing it before he did. But they never chose very creative books—books that involved complicated negotiations between humans and space aliens, for example—and so I soon lost interest. In any case, I always had plenty to read on my own. Often I walked around the house with a paperback open before me, my feet

finding their way up the stairs and down the hall by memory. As soon as I put one book down, I picked up another. I spent more hours imagining I was someone else than I spent imagining I was myself, and it made me a poor conversationalist and bad at sports.

We had both started raking in the center of the lawn, and presently we reached opposite ends. From where I stood by the driveway, I saw two kids from school, Gary Norman and Morris Brecker, coming down the street. They were smoking and talking. As they reached the edge of our yard, Gary yanked off a thin forsythia branch. He slashed the air with it, whipping a gypsy moth in half in midflight. Morris laughed.

My father nodded to them, but they paid no attention.

Morris and I had been friends since the first grade. We had staged wars in my basement, using action figures and a race of flat, furry creatures I had devised by gluing plastic eyes onto little slices of carpet remnant. But that summer, after his thirteenth birthday, Morris had changed. His voice lowered an octave below mine, and his face went long and horsey. First he said the fluorescent lights in the basement gave him a headache, and then he said we were too old to play with toys, and then he said he wouldn't mind, if I would also play football or basketball with him once in a while. Those kinds of games were death to the imagination, I argued.

Soon he stopped coming over. At the bus stop he seemed not to know me, his eyes half lidded when the other boys tossed worms in my hair or ridiculed the book bag my mother had sewn for me.

Now, when the two of them passed, Morris gave me a short glance.

"Hi," I said tentatively.

He nodded without expression.

Gary gave a mocking wave. "Don't rake too hard," he said. "It might be death to your imagination." He whipped the forsythia branch in my direction to see me flinch, and laughed. As they continued down the street, Gary gave a backward glance, whispering to Morris and pointing at our house. I gripped my rake.

Then my mother called us in for dinner. She would be off soon to teach her evening ceramics class, so we just had ham sandwiches, neatly sliced on the diagonal. "I bought lemon cookies for when your guests arrive," she said. She always referred to Mr. Barr and Mr. Jellicoe as his guests. She generally arranged to be out of the house during meetings. Though she was glad my father was reading, she found the approach of the Alphabetic Book Club exasperatingly peculiar. For years she had tried to encourage him to pursue a college degree by taking night classes, but somehow he had never gotten around to registering.

In the first semester of his senior year of high school, he had inexplicably received a D in his American history class. He had been getting B's and C's in the class, so perhaps it was a clerical error on the report card. But he was too shy to look into it. Instead he dropped out of school. He knew his family couldn't afford to send him to college anyway. His father and two uncles had recently left their jobs at the local machine shop to start a hardware store, and they needed him to help keep things running.

For as long as I could remember he had been saying that someday he intended to take up reading. But when he came to pick me up at bookstores or the library, he tended to hover in front of the shelves, studying the spines, glancing at book jackets, stroking paper between his fingers to feel the quality.

"I wouldn't know where to begin," he'd say and choose nothing.

I was disappointed, but at least it left him free to help lug my armfuls of books home.

Then one Saturday I convinced my father to drive me to the used-book store in the next town. This was my favorite place, with piles of science fiction paperbacks, spines creased from passing through so many hands. The proprietor resembled a professor, in a Halloween-costume sort of way. His mane of silver-brown hair touched his collar; he wore tweed vests; and he often dozed behind the counter, hand on his pipe, as if to prevent someone from stealing it.

That afternoon I noticed a sign-up sheet for book discussion groups on the wall. It read, "The Alphabetic Book Club." To join, you selected a single letter of the alphabet and resolved to read books by authors whose last name began with that letter. Once a month, you met with others who had made the same selection. "Brings the vast array of literature to a manageable level," the flier claimed, "without limiting subject matter." Readers with a lot of spare time might choose *S* or *B*, letters offering access to more authors. Those with less time could choose *Q* or *Z* and still have the sense that they were making progress in their chosen area of literature.

I went out to get my father, who was reading a newspaper in the car. When I brought him into the store, he ducked slightly at the sight of shelves crammed with books all the way up to the ceiling.

"The Alphabetic Book Club," he said. "It's an interesting idea."

He studied the flier.

"I suppose it would help to have other people to talk about a book with. But then, which letter would I choose?"

I hesitated to suggest anything. My father would lock himself into his choice, just as he ate the same breakfast every morning: two slices of wheat toast spread with butter and lightly sprinkled with salt.

Actually, the lines on the sign-up sheet were almost entirely blank. "Someone wrote his name under X," my father noted, "but I assume that's a joke, since he didn't put his phone number." At the bottom of the page someone had scrawled the name "Howard" with a phone number and the message, "Willing to work with any reasonable letter."

"How about J?" I suggested.

J was my favorite letter of the alphabet. Secretly, I had always wished my parents had named me Jason, rather than Vaughn. I hated the way Gary Norman would drag his fat lower lip along his teeth, exaggerating the V of my name. Every time he said it, I knew he was about to thwack the back of my head with his hand. Jason, on the other hand, reminded me of Jason and the Argonauts, and their brave quest for the Golden Fleece.

My face must have given away my enthusiasm because when my father looked at me, he didn't even ponder whether there were enough J authors to keep a book group going. He wrote his name on the list.

A few minutes after my mother left for her ceramics class, Mr. Barr arrived. Though I was in the den practicing piano with the door closed, I could still hear his reedy voice.

"See you raked all your leaves out front. Someone set fire to mine last night. Had to get the hose out of the cellar."

He coughed.

Self-conscious, I tried to play my piece with great emotion. It was a Czerny finger exercise, however, and I stumbled over the tricky passages. When I finished, Mr. Barr stuck his head in.

"Hello, Beethoven," he said. "Good work."

He brought his cigarette smell into the room as he stood behind me. I was embarrassed to have him see the piece I was playing. I had marked it all over with red ink. One measure always gave me tremendous difficulty, and I had circled it twenty times and written, WATCH OUT!!! above it in red ink.

"Well, keep going," he said.

He held out his hands and showed me two fingers with tips missing.

"I used to tickle the ivories too, until I lost these in the lathe. That put an end to my concert career."

He laughed, then coughed again. Now in his seventies, he had worked for forty years in a machine shop in Meriden. His wife had died the year before, and his children had moved out of state. He had read all of Dickens, and no author he'd come across since had appealed to him as much, though he said he had high hopes for James. He went to the

same church we did, and although he had not seen the sign-up list in the bookstore, he had become interested when my father told him about the club.

Slowly I resumed playing. Tomorrow was my piano lesson with Mrs. Hagy, and I feared her wrath. But the third and fourth finger of my right hand felt strangely numb, as if they'd been chopped too, and I halted.

"Finnegan, begin again," Mr. Barr said.

Then, to my relief, he turned to my father.

"Looking forward to seeing how Howard explains his choice for us this month. And I thought *I* was the 'lit'ry' one in the group."

My father had handed me *Finnegans Wake* after dinner. At first when I leafed through it I thought it a joke, and then I said maybe it had been inspired by Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky." It gave me a strange thrill that someone had been obsessed enough to go on for more than six hundred pages in this vein, though I wasn't sure I would want to read it. It didn't resemble the group's previous books. In the past, Mr. Jellicoe had chosen spy novels by Clement Juster. Mr. Barr had brought in Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and Henry James's *Daisy Miller*. My father had selected Sylvia Jenson's *The King Tutankhamen Exhibit* and E. Jale's *Raised-Bed Gardening*.

Mr. Jellicoe arrived, and after greeting my father, he too came into the piano room. I resumed picking at Czerny.

"Sorry I'm late, sorry I'm late. Took a long time tonight to balance the cash registers. New girl on the checkout lines, very sweet, wonderful girl, but dropped six twenties in the wastebasket by accident. We found them eventually."

Howard Jellicoe managed a discount department store in Waterbury. He had broad shoulders, and his eyes, behind thick glasses, were perpetually wide, as if he were afraid he might miss something important at the corners of his vision. He'd been embarrassed to find he was the only one in the group whose last name also began with *J*.

"I thought that's how everyone would decide," he'd said. "Seemed easier that way."

Now that he was here, I waited for them to begin their meeting, but they lingered, making small talk in the piano room, despite my pathetic wrong notes. Usually they dove right into their discussion, talking about what they liked for fifteen or twenty minutes. Then they had coffee and my father opened a package of cookies. But tonight they seemed nervous.

At last they moved into the living room. They didn't shut the piano room door all the way, as I'd hoped they would. Perhaps hearing my broken music made them feel better.

Whenever I paused, I heard snatches of their conversation. Mr. Barr read passages in a majestic voice, picking his way through the syllables as authoritatively as he could. "The fall (baba badalgharaghtakami naronnkonnbronntonnerrontuon-thunntrovarrhounawnskawn-noohooordenenthurnuk! of a once wallstrait oldparr is retaled early in bed and later on life down through all christian minstrelsy."

Silence.

"Do you suppose that 'bababa . . .' could be Gaelic?" asked my father.

"It comes right after the word 'fall,'" said Mr. Barr. "So it's the sound of someone falling down the stairs."

"I haven't gotten very far with the book, I'm afraid," said Mr. Jellicoe.

"Or how's this: 'Now it is notoriously known how on that surprisingly bludgeony Unity Sunday when the grand germogall allstar bout was harrily the rage between our weltingtoms extraordinary and our pettythicks the marshalaisy—'"

"Unity Sunday . . . I suppose that could be an Irish holiday?" asked my father.

"Weltingtoms are Wellington boots, that's clear," said Mr. Barr. "So pettythicks must be petticoats."

"When you read it aloud, it does make a little more sense," said my father.

"But what's a germogall?" asked Mr. Jellicoe. "And how could it be the rage between boots and petticoats? If I'd only looked through the book before I chose it . . ."

"Yes, why *did* you choose it, if I may ask?" asked Mr. Barr.

Before Mr. Jellicoe could answer, a loud *thunk* came from the roof. I stopped in the middle of the piece I was playing. Another *thunk*.

"What the devil?" said Mr. Barr.

I ran into the living room. The three of them had lifted their heads up in alarm, though their shoulders were still hunched over their books. Two more *thunks* came.

"Walnuts falling," Mr. Barr said. "Also, squirrels can sometimes—"

A sharp one struck the roof, cutting him off.

"Someone's throwing rocks," Mr. Jellicoe said.

I gripped the back of the sofa. In school our science teacher had been describing what life must have been like for early man, and I imagined huddling in a cave during lightning storms, trying not to breathe while mammoths crunched past.

My father turned off the lamps in the room, stepped hesitantly to the front door and peered through its small window.

"It's those two boys."

He turned to me with his eyebrows raised; he had the same alarmed and puzzled expression he wore when an irate customer came in, claiming our staples had broken his stapler.

"They hate me," I told him.

He nodded thoughtfully. I had never mentioned the torments I suffered at the bus stop and never explained why Morris didn't come by anymore. More rocks struck the roof, and one banged the shutter by the front window.

"I'm going out," my father said. "You all wait here."

But Mr. Jellicoe and Mr. Barr put down their books as if he'd invited them. I followed them out to the porch. My father picked up his walking stick, a thick branch he'd found in the woods. Mr. Jellicoe took his swan-handled umbrella, which he always brought to our house no matter how nice the weather, and Mr. Barr picked up the tongs from beneath our potbellied stove. I watched them go out. They moved a little like sleepwalkers, neither bold and angry nor frightened and shy—just as if they had to.

One of them will die, I thought.

Alone in the house, I returned to the piano room and played Czerny over and over.

In fifteen minutes I heard the porch door squeak open. I ran to see if they were all right. They came up the porch steps with their weapons, their faces grim and relieved. My father put his stick back in its usual place behind the wicker chair.

"We found them in the Breckers' back yard," he said.

"What did you say? What did you do?"

I studied them but saw no bruises. They looked tired.

"I said, stop. I said, imagine if someone threw stones at your house, what if they broke a window or knocked down some shingles? What if they dented the aluminum siding? It's a lot of trouble to repair these things."

Mr. Jellicoe unsnapped the tie around his umbrella and smoothed the folds of fabric. Mr. Barr slid the tongs back under the potbellied stove. "This is a good long pair," he said. "We could use one like this at our house."

"I said they should throw rocks at trees in the woods if they had to throw rocks," my father continued. "Or they could play darts, or baseball." He frowned. "There's bocce, there's bowling, there are lots of kinds of throwing one can do that aren't harmful."

I wanted him to continue his list forever, ticking off the civil alternatives to hurling stones at us.

For a while the three men rested in the living room, drinking iced tea. Then the phone rang. It was Gary Norman's mother. We could hear her yelling.

"No," he said at last. "Yes, of course. They were throwing rocks at my house. Of course we had sticks with us. They might have been dangerous, drunk or on drugs. Of course I shook my stick at him. Ma'am, I think you need to calm down."

He hung up.

"She asked me who I thought I was," he said.

He wiped his forehead, and when he drew his hand away he looked at it in surprise, and reached for a tissue from the box under the phone.

"Shall we go back to the book?" he asked.

"Not tonight," said Mr. Barr. "I believe, however, that Howard was about to explain how he chose this book for our delectation."

Mr. Jellicoe sighed. "A few days before our last meeting, I went to the bookstore to find a book for us, and I couldn't decide. I thought, you know, spy novels are all very well and good, but what about something important, something we really *should* read. Like your Henry James."

He nodded to Mr. Barr.

"And so I asked the clerk who was the greatest of all the authors whose last names began with *J*. Thought he might know—he was a tall young man, black beard. He led me over to the Classics section, and said, *Mr. James Joyce*, and then just stood there breathing through his nose. I was afraid to ask him which book of Mr. Joyce's to choose, so I just took this one down, and he said, 'Excellent choice,' and rang it up. 'Excellent choice,' he said. I meant to read a little before recommending it to the group, but then one thing got in the way of another, you know how it does—"

"Vaughn will read it someday and tell us what it means," my father said. "He's the true reader."

There was silence for a moment while we all stood there in the kitchen. They looked at me, and I studied the floor, both to hide my smile and because my father's gaze, when he had complimented me in this vein, was more complex than I could handle. It was not a road my father had asked me to go down, this bookish road I traveled, but neither had he hinted that I should stay. I would go on to college and write about *Finnegans Wake*, and perhaps become a professor, although I wasn't sure about that—I had only a hazy notion about what the position entailed, and the sleepy proprietor of the bookstore looked like one who had gone to seed, or been stripped of his diploma for some infraction. In any case, I would escape this country where I clearly did not belong, where people threw rocks at other people's houses like cavemen.



"I've got some black-raspberry ice cream in the freezer," my father said.

We scooped ourselves heaping bowls and brought them into the den. I finished mine first, and played "Für Elise" for everyone at a reckless pace. I was happy because I knew that Gary Norman had made a serious tactical error: he had run to his mother. Tomorrow I would expose him to the others at the bus stop. I played "The Maple Leaf Rag" from memory. Although finger exercises stymied me, when it came to expressiveness, Mrs. Hagy said I had some talent. I played the "Rag" slowly at first, as if it were a weepy ballad, and then quickly as if on a demented player piano, and then I changed its rhythm to a boogie-woogie, while my father and the others laughed and talked.

In fact what happened the next day was that Gary swept my legs out from under me before I could open my mouth. I staggered to my feet, and he shoved me off the sidewalk and sat on me, grinding my face into the grass. Morris leaned against the stop-sign pole, smoking and watching, his expression both sad and rapt. Fortunately the bus arrived soon. The driver, a large woman with wispy hair, helped me up and wiped my face with some spit and the tail of her flannel shirt. When I climbed onto the bus all I saw were the heads of other kids, jiggling with laughter. The bus driver asked me to tell her who the culprit was, and she would make them sit up front. This proposal, in its complete inadequacy, opened up a space inside me that I hadn't been aware of. This place was a sort of command center, from which I looked out through the windows of my eyes and calmly considered my options. The option that looked best was uncontrolled rage. I launched myself with a yell at the seat where Gary and Morris sat together. With one fist I grazed Morris's ear, and with the other I grabbed Gary's collar.

Before I could go further, the bus driver hauled me away. She forced me to sit in the seat nearest her, right by the door. I was trembling. I could still feel the lobe of Morris's ear flabbily cushioning his skull beneath my knuckles. And I believed that I had at least managed to scratch Gary's collarbone with the fingernail of my pinkie as I seized his shirt. I imagined punching them again and again, one fist for each of them, while Morris looked surprised and impressed and Gary tried to spit in my face. If there had been a seat back in front of me, I would have sunk my teeth into it from an excess of violent energy.

But that night when the Alphabetic Book Club had finished its last meeting—when I raced through "The Maple Leaf Rag" with every rhythm I knew, when Mr. Barr glanced through my stack of music books in search of pieces he'd learned in his youth, when Mr. Jellicoe described for my father the cordless lawn trimmer he'd just bought—on that

night, I felt only an elation of the highest order. I made the "Rag" a tango, and then an Irish jig.

Then my mother came home from teaching her ceramics class. Her sleeves were tinged with white dust, her arms were full of bags of materials. She set these on the piano.

"That's enough, Vaughn," she said. "It's late, and the neighbors want to sleep."



**Ron Nyren**, a former Wallace Stegner Fellow, has published stories in the *Missouri Review*, the *Paris Review*, the *North American Review*, *Glimmer Train Stories* and elsewhere. He is currently writing a novel set in the early 1900s.

