

FICTION IN
REVIEW



C A L E B S M I T H

Midway through Ben Marcus's *The Flame Alphabet*, the narrator observes that he is having trouble reading. "Decipherment of words on a page was too difficult. When I managed it, I was not sure what had happened, who'd been killed by whom. It was becoming clear to me that reading would be something I would avoid. The very thought of it sent a wave of fear through my chest." Readers who have made it this far into the novel can probably imagine just how he feels. *The Flame Alphabet* is a terrifying work, a vivid nightmare about a world where language has become toxic and every human contact poisons life. As I worked my way through its chapters, there seemed to be a steady, harsh buzzing sound in the back of my head. Even when I put my copy away for the night, it troubled my sleep. Yet there is a strange beauty about this bad dream of a book. Its cruel dissection of everything that's false or corrosive in our ways of using language is performed with a prose of glinting sharpness. The argument be-

The Flame Alphabet, by Ben Marcus (Knopf, 304 pp., \$25.99)

hind the novel, as I understand it, is not the usual comforting platitude that a flawed language is all we have, the imperfect but precious medium of the love that sustains us. For this narrator, in this diseased world, a carefully honed and polished language becomes the only implement of self-preservation.

How to summarize this bizarre story without making it seem ridiculous? Samuel lives with his wife, Claire, and their teenaged daughter, Esther, in suburban New York State. They are middle-class people who watch the evening news, take picnics in a nearby park, and throw birthday parties at their house. They love each other, and they try to get along. Gradually it is revealed that Samuel and Claire belong to a semisecret sect known as Forest Jews. At the appointed time each week, they walk to a small hut hidden in the woods, where they listen to sermons by way of an underground transmission. They don't talk about the hut with anyone else. They aren't supposed to discuss the distant rabbis' messages, even with each other. But Samuel and Claire are no cultists, really. Their style of worship is the extreme of religious minimalism, stripped of all ritual: the mere reception and contemplation of language, in virtual solitude.

And then the quiet cycle of these ordinary people's lives is disturbed by a plague. The simple, scary premise of *The Flame Alphabet* is that language becomes a pathogen. To listen to another's speech is to expose oneself to a slow but sure corrosion. At first it's only the voices of children that seem to do the damage. Samuel and Claire are withered by Esther's words. Their guts ache. They're tired all the time. Their flesh is desiccated, pocked, and wounded. "If we looked closely, a spatter of red marks spread across our backs. Map fragments, like an unfinished tattoo. Not freckles or moles. Possibly the welters from a bite, some rodent eating us while we slept." Daily tasks become painful labors, and the adults drag themselves through sad acts of caretaking. The husband spoons broth into his dying wife's lips. He washes her decaying skin with a damp, warm cloth. "A yolk stain at the corner of her mouth resisted my rough scrubbing, until I realized that it was no stain, but jaundice blooming under her skin." Along the way, Samuel and Claire begin not only to fear the company of their own child but also to turn against each other, resenting the dimin-

ished gestures of affection and the improvised relief strategies – the “smallwork,” as Samuel calls it – to which their lives have been reduced.

What makes these passages especially dark is Samuel’s unwillingness to regard the time before “the speech fever” with nostalgia. He indulges in no consolatory daydreams of a life where talk is open and true, where love is selfless. Instead, the novel uses the conceit of a language toxicity to probe the warped and atrophied aspects of everyday communication. Once Samuel begins to experience his daughter’s words as weapons, however carelessly or even innocently wielded against him, he recognizes that his conversations with her have been low-intensity conflicts all along. He remembers welcoming her home, asking her about her day, and being mocked for the banality of his questions. He remembers doing what he could to defend the modest ceremonies of family life. “Sweetie, talking to you isn’t just about gathering information,” he had said, lamely. “Doesn’t it feel better to say things to people?” And he remembers her answer – a righteous and devastating piece of adolescent self-pity. “Feel better? It feels like shit. It feels entirely like the worst kind of shit.” The notion of a poison carried by children’s voices, withering the bodies and souls of their parents, is only an extreme version of this perfectly normal, perfectly awful drama of domestic estrangement.

The novel’s dream logic renders mundane life monstrous, in other words, to clarify and analyze certain aspects of its character. The same kind of pattern can be seen in Samuel’s marriage to Claire. The language plague, inflicting a slow death on them both, leads the husband to extraordinary gestures of care, but there is a violence, a will to command and control her, even in these. At times he seems almost to be keeping her alive against her will. Eventually he insists that their only chance to survive is to abandon Esther, and Claire becomes the arbiter of *blame*, one of the keywords of *The Flame Alphabet*. “When she looked at me,” Samuel confesses, “I felt the high disgrace of being known for what I am.”

In Part 1 of the novel, these family scenes are the main concern. In Part 2, the parents make their escape, and the novel turns its attention to society at large, especially the language of public life. What began as a menace associated with children’s voices seems to

have become generalized – any communication, in speech or writing, is a hazard, and the authorities mobilize to deal with an emergency that no one really understands. Now *The Flame Alphabet* brings out the moth-eaten props of sensational disaster plots: evacuation orders, checkpoints, human quarantines that recall concentration camps. Men in masks orchestrate a medicalized police state. “The goggles worn by my handlers were curious: the light was not bright enough to call for them. I realized then that they did not wear goggles to shield their eyes from the sun, but rather to keep themselves from being seen.” The radio goes silent, the television blank. Little by little, the text is scrubbed from the world.

One piece of the media infrastructure, by the way, is missing from this world. There is no Internet. No one has to smash the computer monitors or sever the wires; they seem never to have been put in place, even before the language plague. It’s a curious absence, especially since *The Flame Alphabet* is so interested in technology. It occurs to me that the subterranean network of cables that links the huts of the Forest Jews can be understood as a version of the Internet. Might the Internet have been left out, or distorted beyond recognition, because it is the book’s real antagonist? The digital era’s false promises of intimacy and social “connectivity” might be precisely what Marcus is unearthing here, subjecting them to a vicious scrutiny. The printed text, an outmoded communications technology, takes its revenge.

Because Marcus published (in 2005) a well-known polemic against Jonathan Franzen, defending the obscure and marginal literature known as “experimental writing” against Franzen’s market-oriented appeal, some reviewers of *The Flame Alphabet* have approached it as a novel that attempts to reconcile the antagonistic categories of the experimental and the popular. Here, they observe, Marcus carries on the investigation into the medium of language that he began in his first book, *The Age of Wire and String* (1998), but he also tries his hand at a lively plot and concerns himself with the nuances of intimate relationships. If Marcus is working with a popular form in *The Flame Alphabet*, though, it has little in common with Franzen’s grim, somewhat satirical realism. This is a genre novel – a plague story about a society whose worst

features are revealed and spectacularly magnified through the lens of a contrived epidemic. Marcus is not really trying to make peace with a middlebrow public. He is going lower, playing with the materials of airport paperbacks and video games.

As for experimental writing, the concept takes on a disturbingly literal significance in *The Flame Alphabet*'s doomsday scenario. Samuel is installed in a laboratory, where his assignment is to invent a language that does no harm. Day after day he works with different alphabets and codes. "I decided to go all the way back to the first scripts. I had to rule out cuneiform, hieroglyphs, wedge writing." He tries out colored paper, fashions symbols out of string. He attempts to draw letters in the air. Samples are presented to test subjects, and from behind a window Samuel watches with disgust as his experiments fail, doing violence to the readers he calls "language martyrs." The "flame alphabet" of the title, we learn along the way, is something like the opposite of the safe code that he is attempting to invent — "the word of God, written in fire, obliterating to behold. The so-called Torah." Recalling this old idea and, perhaps, wishing to preserve something sacred from its misuse by the mad scientists who are running things, Samuel does not try the Hebrew alphabet on the language martyrs. He is saving that for something else.

About the provisional remedy to the language fever which is eventually devised at the research facility, let me say only that it links, in an ambiguous but horrifying way, the book's concerns with Jewish traditions, the relationships between adults and children, and a corrupt, exploitative authority that disguises itself as a healing science. "I had to start working harder to imagine the worst," Samuel admonishes himself, at one point, and you might think that the author has set himself the same task in plotting *The Flame Alphabet*. But that isn't the only task. There is also the smallwork of composing the novel's sentences. These sentences bear some repulsive messages. At times they make you want to look away. They are not elegant. They are not charming. Instead, they are scrupulously, relentlessly precise. Marcus's narrator, in his relationship to words, is part scientist, part mystic. He is experimental in the sense that writing, for him, is a way of thinking through serious problems internal to his medium. He devotes long

passages to reflecting about how language can fail. He understands how it can be abused. Beyond the sensational plague story and the quest for a cure, though, the real power of *The Flame Alphabet* is in its painstakingly honed prose – the mind’s own antibody in a world of toxic language.