



Milosz's ABC's

Czesław Miłosz

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The ABC book is a Polish genre, a literary form loosely composed of short, alphabetically arranged entries. In this "splendid" volume (Edward Hirsch, *The New York Times Book Review*), Czesław Miłosz's telling eye for detail and sharp judgements create unforgettable portraits as he combines sketches of characters from his earlier prose works and poems with references to real historical figures. Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Edward Hopper, and Arthur Koestler are among those who come under his scrutiny, along with the poets Charles Baudelaire and Robert Frost and the Polish writers Witold Gombrowicz and Zbigniew Herbert. This overview extends beyond profiles of real and imagined people to places that have had particular meaning in Miłosz's own personal geography. His focus ranges from Szetejnie, where he was born, and Berkeley, where he has lived for almost four decades, to places he has visited, such as Bend, Oregon, and Sierraville, California. Fluidly intermingled with these entries are his reflections on broader themes such as "City", "Misfortune", "Love", and "Knowledge".

Witty, erudite, eloquent, and outspoken, Miłosz's ABC's is at once a fascinating self-portrait and a unique reflection on twentieth-century politics, poetry, and prose.

Milosz's ABC's Details

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Author : Czesław Miłosz

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From Reader Review Milosz's ABC's for online ebook

Caroline says

"It is therefore moral - at a structural level." - from Roger Ebert's review of the Gaspar Noe movie 'Irreversible,' which tells its unbelievably violent story backwards. Milosz's version is to tell a messy life alphabetically, not chronologically.

Bobparr says

Davvero di scarso appeal per chi non e' interessato alla poesia e letteratura polacca - come me - o a chi ha scarsa curiosità per figure probabilmente di spicco 50 anni fa in una certa parte del mondo, ma che sono oramai scomparse da qualsiasi memoria.

Ecco, quello che mi si attacca, pagina dopo pagina, e' la totale e assoluta vacuità dell'essere e la sua disattenta disintegrazione nei mille e minuscoli meccanismi della Storia. Poi ogni tanto qualche bella pagina universale, ma poche.

Abbandonato alla P.

Thomas says

The alphabetical musings of Czeslaw Milosz are far from a randomly selected dictionary of themes. Milosz's ABCs are a calculated collection, an autobiography in an interesting format. Through his thoughts and the people who have crossed his life, Milosz tells the story of war time Poland, in particular the intellectual and urban landscape of Wilno, his love of which shines through his writing, of his time in Paris and his life in America. He offers glimpses of his past, of the strange world of Polish aristocracy to which he is connected to, but mainly this is the portrait of a writer and a scatter of his influences, as well as a contemplation of Polish literature and its place in the wider world. It is at times self-centred and academically arrogant, but Milosz is always eloquent and engaging.

The picture that emerges is one of a changing literary landscape that could not emerge from the wars that swept across Europe unchanged and unscathed. Milosz discusses his education and the influence of Paris and the French language on his work and on the development of language outside the centres of power. He is very sure of his opinion yet his opinions are often sheltered by canonical views and, while he speaks many truths, he bows down very conservatively to a historical precedence and superiority of the languages of literature, stressing that it is (was) impossible for Polish to reach the realms and versatility of expression that a more "developed" language such as French is able to. Interestingly he also strongly champions writing in his own tongue and looks at the tensions among academics and writers on this theme. He speaks very highly of his own influence in developing Polish and raising it up. Debates on the origins, nature and life of languages are fascinating - in alphabetical snippets it's impossible to go into too much depth.

The cast of rebels, artists, teachers, relatives, academics, poets, painters and school friends that populate his ABCs make interesting individual reading but are often difficult to remember or separate. More interesting is the feeling at Milosz is paying homage to all those influences on his life, leaving no stone unturned in the network of interlocking lives. As a reading experience, however, it does become tiresome at times. By the

second half more variation is to be found in the musings on important writers and other famous figures. In often returns to the greats of early American literature, the Whitmans for example, and his admiration for these literary pioneers is clear to see. Again he turns to French and the literature of the European cannon to examine the use and the flexibility of language, connecting it to the historic events that changed the shape of Europe.

There is great sadness in all these forgotten names. Many are dead, enough died in the war or in camps. There is a respectful sense that Milosz is rescuing these ghosts of his past, putting them down for posterity. It turns him into a very sympathetic and sensitive narator and balances out his linguistic superiority. And inbetween there are entries that transcend language and visit a time or place; a scene in Italy, the trees of the US west coast, the rivers of eastern Poland. The beauty of this talented writer shines most brightly in those snapshots, most clearly turning his ABCs into a nostalgic and beautiful slide show of memories, times, places and people that made a life a happy and fulfilled one. 5

Kate says

what a lovely (and temporary) little remedy for my clumsy knowledge of things

Sophie says

Only half-reading this, so I hesitate to put it on here. An interesting format -- but the contents of each entry are not so interesting so far...were the reviews on the cover misleading? I can't tell.

Alex says

I recommend reading through parts of this book several times--Milosz's entries are deep and compelling.

Jim says

As one approaches one's own end, I would imagine that the thought of people and places and things that once were and are no more becomes an obsession. Nobel Prize winner Czeslaw Milosz exorcises these thoughts by having recourse to a Polish genre: an encyclopedic survey of the elements of a life, with short entries, many ending with the sad thought that the author is not sure when, or where, or how a once close friend met his or her end in the charnel house that was Eastern Europe in the thirties and forties.

I have always loved Milosz: For me he is Polish literature, though he would probably smile sadly and say that, no, he was an inhabitant of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. His world disappeared somewhere in the jagged interstices between Germany, Poland, and Russia.

To read more, see my blog on Milosz, whom I selected as Writer of the Month in July 2009. Would that Milosz were still alive to smile wryly at my presumption!

Anatolij says

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Eric says

"He didn't die in the war, though. He served in the air force and came home as a highly qualified electrician."

"In Beauvoir, everything was adoption of the next intellectual fashion. A nasty hag."

"The story of this couple would make a moving film script, which no one will write."

The first thing I liked about this book was Milosz's tart and abrupt summations of the lives he mentions.

Full of émigré themes, émigré melancholies: a roll-call of friends, colleagues and acquaintances who disappeared into Hitler's or Stalin's camps, who were driven to odd corners of the earth in search of refuge, who committed suicide or went mad or died lonely in squalor, who hewed closer to Milosz or repudiated him according to any of the minute political distinctions that rive émigré colonies. Additionally, there are California vistas, fascinating anecdotes of the relations of émigré Poles and the Polish-American community, and stories of 1930's Polish literary circles that make me want to read further (Wat's "My Century"?).

Maurizio Manco says

"Una mostruosa progenie di scimmie che deformano i volti in ridicole smorfie, copulano, strepitano, si ammazzano a vicenda. Dopo l'enorme numero di morti inflitte da uomini ad altri uomini nel corso del Novecento, com'è possibile tesserne un elogio? Le loro azioni non concordano né con l'immagine di un'innocente scolaresca, né con la capacità di scalare le più alte vette dello spirito. Ma la contraddizione è forse parte inscindibile della condizione umana, e questo basta perché ne scaturisca qualcosa di prodigioso." (p. 190)

Peter says

This is a great companion to *Roadside Dogs*. He looks back into his life and ponders the truth of what happened how it could have been. It's a profound book, deals with the personal side of the WW wars and Communism, the 60's etc...

Megan says

I loved his writing, but my enjoyment of this book was limited by a lack of knowledge and appreciation of Polish culture and history. Not that that should stop anyone from reading his work, because the book was still witty, insightful, and thoughtful. And a nice shape, also.

Beverly says

Another take on the Abecedaire style, this time in essay form (see *Dictionary of the Khazars* - possibly my favorite book ever). It's easy to get lost in this sometimes, as I have absolutely no knowledge of 20th century Polish Intellectualism. The language is gorgeous (three cheers to the translator!), however, and I often find myself rereading passages to savor the words again.

A slow read.

Gust says

3,5 stars
