

**Illustrated alphabet books as aesthetic and literary
“devices”: an approach to their poetics**
**Los abecedarios ilustrados como “artefactos” estéticos y
literarios: aproximación a su poética**

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Received:
28/04/2015

Accepted:
03/09/2015

ISSN: 1885-446 X
ISSNe: 2254-9099

Keywords

Alphabet books; history of Children's Literature; postmodern Children's Literature; reception processes.

Palabras clave

Abecedarios ilustrados; historia de la literatura infantil; literatura infantil postmoderna; procesos de recepción.

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Abstract

The aim of this work is to develop a poetics of contemporary alphabet-books and an analysis of the reception processes that are proposed to the modern reader. A diachronic approach that examines the development of the forms and functions of these books is adopted. From its primary didactic function as a resource to help children to learn how to read, the illustrated alphabet-books have led, mainly from the nineteenth century, to very diversified and innovative approaches that incorporate many literary and aesthetic resources, as well as an original amalgam of traditional and contemporary genres. Some alphabet-books published in recent decades are a paradigmatic example of the presence of the main features of postmodern fiction in children's literature. The analysis is illustrated with a representative sample of alphabet-books published both in Spain and abroad, from the origins of the genre to this day, with special attention to those edited in Spain.

Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es elaborar una poética de los abecedarios contemporáneos, así como un análisis de los procesos de recepción que se le proponen al lector actual. Se ha adoptado un enfoque diacrónico que estudia la evolución de las formas y funciones de estos libros. Desde su función didáctica originaria como recurso para ayudar a los niños a aprender a leer, los abecedarios ilustrados han ido derivando, fundamentalmente desde el siglo XIX, hacia unos planteamientos innovadores muy diversificados que incorporan numerosos recursos literarios y estéticos, así como una original amalgama de géneros tradicionales y contemporáneos. En las últimas décadas se han publicado abecedarios que constituyen un ejemplo paradigmático de la presencia en la literatura infantil de los principales rasgos de la ficción postmoderna. El análisis se ilustra con una muestra representativa de abecedarios publicados tanto en España como en otros países, desde los orígenes del género hasta nuestros días, con una atención especial a los editados en España.

Sanjuán, M. (2015). Illustrated alphabet books as aesthetic and literary “devices”: an approach to their poetics. *Ocnos*, 14, 42-64. doi: 10.18239/ocnos_2015.14.04

Introduction

In spite of the interest they raise from a literary point of view or maybe due to their apparent condition of textbooks, there is little monographic study of illustrated alphabet books as a literary genre for children in Spain. Nevertheless, since the beginning of the 21st century an increasing interest for them can be found, to a great extent due to the blooming of alphabet books published during this period. Another factor is the increasing interest in many titles published recently, mainly because they are closely related picture books and to the fact that they experiment with language and all kinds of visual codes and formats.

Neither Bravo-Villasante (1972) nor Garralón (2001) referred to alphabet books in their respective history books on children's literature, although Bravo-Villasante wrote a well documented prologue to the facsimile edition of *Abecedario iconográfico* (1994), published by Saturnino Calleja, in which reference is made to other old alphabet books, not only in Spain. Cerrillo (2009) wrote another interesting study on an old alphabet book, *Alfabeto ingenioso recreativo* by Alverá (1849), included as an annex to the facsimile edition published by the CEPLI (Centre of Studies Promoting Children's Readings and Literature, as per its Spanish acronym). García Padrino (1992) does not refer to alphabet books as a genre in his exhaustive study on children's books published in Spain between the end of the 19th century and the end of the 20th century, but he comments in some detail (p. 384) the book *26 cuentos infantiles en orden alfabético*, by Antoniorrobles (1930). A slightly canning alphabetic classification is referred to in this book, since the author limited himself to select certain stories that had already been published and to classify them by the initial letter of words picked up from the title or the story (A for Adventure, C for Confident, H for Hat, K for King, S for Scape, T for Toys, etc.). There are no explicit references to illustrated alphabet books published in Spain in his historical review of children's illustration in Spain from the last third of the 19th Century to the

present (García Padrino, 2004). Durán (2009a) refers to Kate Greenaway's popular alphabet book (*A Apple Pie*, 1866) as an "emblematic precedent of children's album" (p. 205), given the formal narrative unity between text, picture, colour and typography. For his part, Colomer (2010) refers to Greenaway's alphabet book as a representation of the Victorian concept of "childhood associated to nostalgia due to an old, idealised happiness" (p. 131); he also refers to Marion Bataille's pop-up alphabet (*ABC3D*, 2008, republished by Kókinos as *ABCD*) as an example of the new types of books in children's and young people's literature nowadays, and more specifically as an Interactive book, half way between a book and a toy, of great artistic complexity (p. 175).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, an increasing number of original alphabet books in Spanish or translations of works published in other countries have given rise to certain references in specialist journals and to analyses of individual specific titles, mainly because they are interesting as illustrated books or picture books. Some of the aforesaid studies are referred to not exhaustively hereinafter.

After a brief description of the genre by Durán (1989), no case studies were published until the publication of a paper by this author (Durán, 2009b), included in a dossier of the journal *BLOC* (2009, no. 3), which was completed with a series of detailed references of some titles recently published by different specialists in children's literature or art in Spain and other European countries. Among the references dedicated to specific alphabet books, the one that outstands the most is the study that *Educación y Biblioteca* (2007, no. 162) dedicates to *The new alphabet book* of K. P. Moritz (1794; republished in 2005 and 2011), translated and republished by Bárbara Fiore, with illustrations by W. Erlbruch and collaborations by Puerta and Christensen and an interesting analysis of translation differences by Andreu and Vitó, the translators of the edition in Spanish. This alphabet book is also referred to by Vicente in the journal *Lazarillo* (2006, no. 15). Editions in

Spanish of the alphabet books by E. Gorey, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* (1963) and *The Utter Zoo*, published in Spain by Libros del Zorro Rojo, are exhaustively analysed by Carranza in *Imaginaria* (2007, no. 221 and 2012, no. 314, respectively). This edition of *The Utter Zoo* is also referred to in the journal *Babar* (2011), as well as two other works by Gorey published by the same publishing house (*The doubtful guest* and *The Wuggly Ump*). References to other titles recently published in Spanish are also found in *Babar* (2012), such as *ABC Bugs*, by D. Nesquens (2012), with illustrations by J. Muñiz, or *Alphabet* (2014), by R. Kaufman and R. Franco (illustrations by D. Bianki), referred to by Ventura (2015).

We do not have enough information about the existence of historical reviews or case studies in other European countries, except for the study on 765 French illustrated alphabet books from the 19th century done by Le Men (1984. ref. to by Higonnet, 1991), in which she links the features of these books with theories about literacy and the role images play in learning. In the introduction of her exhaustive study on European children's literature (1959; trans. 1968, p. 7), Hürlimann refers to "the *alphabet books* that are fantastically illustrated" among the examples of what is missing or barely dealt within her book.

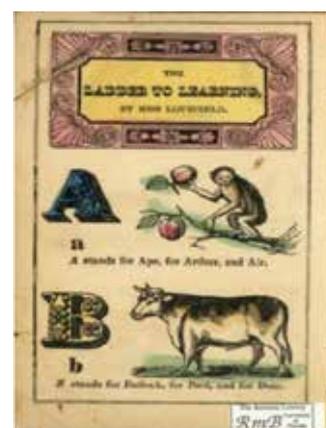
In North America, there seems to be a particular interest for the analysis of the aesthetic and literary features of this genre, as the papers by Taylor (1978), Chaney (1993) or Coats (2000) show. Bodmer's article (1989), analysing the alphabet books of Dr. Seuss, E. Gorey or M. Sendak¹ as examples of postmodern literature, or the exhaustive study by Le Moal (2012) on other four postmodern alphabet books published in the United States since 2000,² highlight the creative and cultural originality as well as the complex reception processes proposed to readers by some contemporary alphabet books.

Alphabet books are not analysed herein as a didactic resource but as literary and aesthetic "devices". The ultimate objective, by performing an analysis of a representative sample of

those alphabet books published in Spain in the last decades, is determining the poetics of contemporary illustrated alphabet books and trying to unveil the reception process proposed to nowadays' readers. In order to assess to which extent these contemporary alphabet books have broken the limits of the original model, we will first analyse how illustrated alphabet books were originally.

Traditional alphabet books. Forms and functions

Alphabet books are illustrated books whose essential function is teaching children about the letters and their association to the relevant sounds. They have coexisted with other formats such as notice boards, signboards, prints etc. from the outset. In order to strengthen the graphic and phonetic entity of each letter and make their memorisation easier, almost all the alphabets have followed a basic pattern: the letter that stands out is associated to a picture, generally objects or animals whose name start with that letter, and to a word, sentence or rhymed verse in which it appears repeatedly (Durán, 1989; 2009b). An example of this is given in an alphabet book published in the United States in 1852 (picture 1).



Picture 1. Miss Lovechild (1852). *The Ladder to Learning*.

In simpler alphabet books, there is a clear parallel between pictures and words (a name, generally), although texts admit different

combinations (name + adjective, name + verb) or even complex sentences or rhymed verses (Taylor, 1978) as the children's reading skills increase (picture 2).



Picture 2. Mrs Colman (1850). *Lu Lu Alphabet*.

From the point of view of the literacy process, Le Moal (2012) identifies four functions that are inherent to traditional alphabet books: internalisation (helping to internalise the alphabet), representation (helping to recognise the letters' typography), order (attempt to display an arbitrary structure in a meaningful way) and denomination (causing that the child figures out the name that corresponds to the visual image and establishes a parallel with the verbal part).

Alphabet books are probably the oldest illustrated children's books. According to *The New British Encyclopaedia* (1990, 15th ed., entry: "Alphabet rhyme"), the oldest alphabet books kept are from the 17th century and were published both in Europe and the American colonies. The approach to the introduction to reading marked a significant step forward against the absurd concept of notebooks in the 16th and 17th century Benjamin (1930) refers to, which made children read phonetic monstrosities such as *chichleuchlauchra*, *zauzezizau* or *spisplospruspla*, supposedly because, by doing so, could not cheat or figure out instead of reading. As ironically pointed out by Benjamin, "the idea of learning to read is, to a great extent, learning to figure out what the most diligent pedagogues of that time would never dream" (1930; trans. 1989, pages 125-126).

We can hardly find any references to alphabet books published in Spain before the middle of the 20th century, although we have found some facsimile editions.

Therefore, the *Alfabeto ingenioso recreativo* by A. Alverá (Madrid, 1849; rep 2009) includes words that start with the name of each letter, accompanied by their relevant definition or picture (picture 3). Some of them, such as "*besugero*" ("Person who sells or transports seabreams"), "*efemérides*" ("Book where the facts of each day are written down"), or "*cherinola*" ("Board of cooks or thieves") could not be more distant from children's vocabulary.



Picture 3. Alverá (1849). *Alfabeto ingenioso recreativo*.

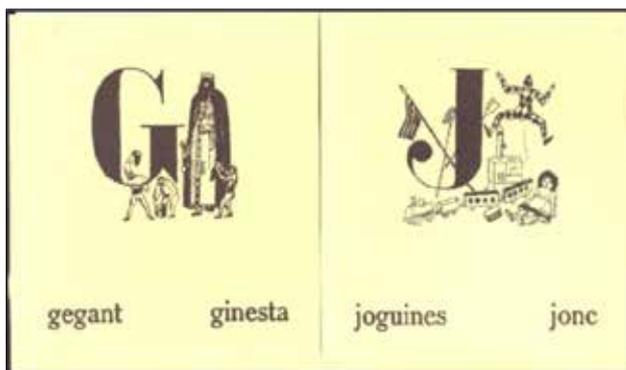
At the beginning of the 20th century, Saturnino Calleja published an alphabet signboard, with a very expressive title: *Instruir deleitando* (teaching through delight). *Abecedario iconográfico* (republished by Olañeta in a facsimile edition but under book format in 1994). The relation between words and pictures is supported by different proceedings. In many cases, pictures try to reproduce the letters' shape (*h* is a chair seen from one side, *p* is a child who is hiding a ball under his t-shirt, etc.). Likewise, as stated by Bravo-Villasante (1994), the will to make learning pleasant to children includes, in the case of most letters, a question that makes the child participate by repeating the sound of the letter in his/her answer. That way, in reference to letter *a*, which is represented by a little puppy, it says: "This letter is called **a**. It is a puppy that opens its mouth to bite, going a, a,

a! How does the puppy do to bite?" The text-picture relation is relatively complex in the case of certain letters, because the picture resembles the way they are written and also illustrates a narrative episode that gives rise to an onomatopoeic sound that matches the letter: "This letter is called **i**. It is a doll who broke its head and cries going i, i, i!" (picture 4).



Picture 4. Calleja (1994). *Instruir deleitando. Abecedario iconográfico*. Ed. facsímil.

The *Abecedari català per a nens* by X. Nogués was published in 1920, but it still has the basic structure of one uppercase letter per page, accompanied by two words starting with that letter in lower case and the relevant picture (picture 5).



Picture 5. Nogués (1920). *Abecedari català per a nens*.

This Basic structure still appears in some contemporary alphabet books. Taylor (1978, p. 173) refers to that of the English illustrator Helen Oxenbury as an example, *Helen Oxenbury's ABC of Things* (1971), in which each page presents several names with no apparent link among them (cake, candles, cat, cow,

crow), which are given some unity by means of a picture of a narrative nature.

Although alphabet books were created to make literacy easier, this genre soon began to explore more attractive paths. In the 18th century, there was already a double innovation line of a contrary nature: whilst some alphabet books underline their literacy function as they teach reference contents (thematic alphabet books), others smooth their didactic function through puns, elaborated illustrations, typographical games or unexpected formats.

The didactic nature of thematic alphabet books was initially dedicated to religious or moral contents.³ Innovation arises from the eager of pedagogues to close and arrange the universe to offer it to the child in an encyclopaedic way. Comenius, in his *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (1658), started this idea of representing the universe in small engravings. This little book, aimed at the working classes, showed the different phenomena of nature and human life in an organised way, the issues thereof becoming increasingly complex in line with the progress of the little reader (Hürlimann, 1959; trans. 1968, p. 59). Its popularity soon led to the proliferation of illustrated alphabet books organised thematically.

ABC Buch (1790), by the German enlightened philosopher and pedagogue Karl Philipp Moritz, was one significant milestone of that eager to structure the knowledge available in a rational way to offer it educationally to children. Besides teaching to read, Moritz was determined to inculcate children with the fundamental pillars of logical thinking (analysis, classification, comparison)⁴, using the alphabetical order to that end as a "key that opens the world's gates".⁵ By following the 26 letters of the alphabet, issues evolve from concrete topics to issues as complex as life, death, the passage of time or inequality. This work had a noble objective:

Enlightened Moritz took his work very seriously. Humour and comedy, grotesque and paradox were totally alien to him. Nothing in his works is aimed at making the reader laugh [...]. Moritz's book gives up

on inventing games through alliterations [...] or any other form of light linguistic fun (Hollmer, 2011, schedule without page number).

Many thematic alphabet books were published throughout the 19th century, both on issues related to the immediate environment of children (objects of their everyday lives, animals, nature) and on other issues that are not so close to them with encyclopaedic purposes⁶.

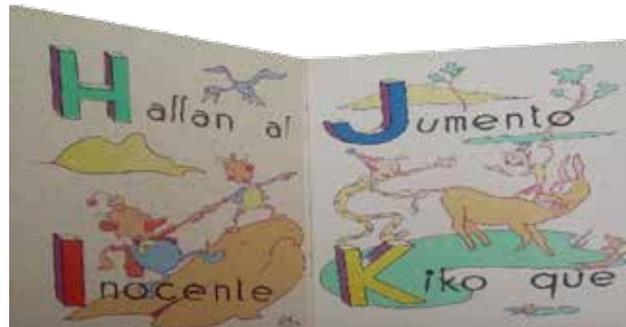
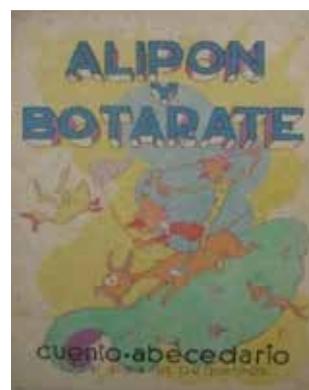
Parallel to the emergence of these instructive alphabet books, others strengthening the literary, diverting and aesthetic nature of books of introduction to reading were published. In England, the tradition of nursery rhymes, with their alliterations, rhythmical games and crazy ideas plunged into these alphabet books of an entertaining nature, as an advance of the nonsense of E. Lear or L. Carroll. These puns did not only make introduction to reading fun, but were primary mnemonic procedures too. In *Our friends*, published in London in 1895, the first verse goes: "Apples round / and apples red / 'Give me one / please', Algy said; / But all that Annie / had to say / Was 'Go and have / a game of play'".

At the end of the 19th century, Lear himself wrote several illustrated alphabet books ("Nonsense alphabets", in *Nonsense songs*, 1871) with rhythmic, absurd texts, one of which ("A was once an Apple-pie, / Pidy / Widy / Tidy / Pidy / Nice insidy / Apple-pie!") is a parody of the popular *The Apple Pie ABC*, an alphabet of the 17th century ("A was an Apple pie. / B bit it / C cut it / D dealt it / E eat it / F fought it [...]").

Whereas alphabet books were seen as a series of independent pages (one or two pages per letter), the possibility of a certain narrative continuum emerges. Short narrative stories thus appear, by stringing sentences or poems starting with different letters more or less humorously. This proceeding was present -in a very simple form- in *The Apple Pie ABC*.

Alipón y Botarate. Cuento abecedario ideal para los pequeñines was a very curious Spanish example of this resource from the 20th century already. It was published in Barcelona around

1950. The two characters of the book's title live a nimble adventure with two words of semantic content per page, to which connectors and other words having grammatical content are added. The difficulty to find words starting with certain scarcely frequent letters that also suit the narrative story is solved very cleverly by using proper names: "Alipón y Botarate / Con sus Chicos / Del Estío / Felices Gozan. / Hallan al Inocente / Jumento Kiko que / Les Lleva al / Mar y Nadan [...]" (picture 6).



Picture 6. *Alipón y Botarate. Cuento ideal para los pequeñines* (1950?).

Back to the 19th century, parallel to the evolution of texts, different possibilities to move beyond the strict scheme letter-word-picture were explored. The new copper engraving techniques were a major impetus to children's books printed in colour and also provided them with more quality. This way, alphabet books illustrated by great artists of that time such as Kate Greenaway, Walter Crane or George Cruikshank were published alongside with other simpler illustrated alphabet books published in black and white.

In 1886, Greenaway published *A Apple Pie*, another review of the alphabet book of the 17th century, where each letter is "embodied" in one boy or girl starring the action. The different picture cards and sentences successively outline the story of the apple pie (picture 7).



Picture 7. Greenaway (1886). *A Apple Pie*.

The absurd ABC (1874), by Walter Crane, has a very different nature because each rhymed verse is a short story lacking any didactic purpose in favour of humour and crazy ideas:

A for the APPLE Or Alphabet pie, Which all get a slice of. Come taste it & try.	C for the CAT That played on the fiddle, When cows jumped higher than 'Heigh Diddle Diddle!'
--	---

B is the BABY Who gave Mr Bunting Full many a long day's Rabbit skin hunting.	D for the DAME With her pig at the stile, 'Tis said they got over, But not yet a while.
--	--

Both rhymed texts and letters, with a very large typography, are inserted very originally in the pictures, with a text-picture layout that is very similar to that of some current illustrated texts (picture 8).



Picture 8. Crane (1874). *The absurd ABC*

A comic alphabet (1836), by George Cruikshank - a famous English cartoonist of that time-, also explores the funny aspects of this genre. Each letter is associated to a word that is actually an excuse for some ironic cartoons, with cultural or political content that is really striking in children's books. The usual relation between words and pictures of traditional alphabet books is thus subverted, because in them pictures only illustrate the words picked up from children's vocabulary to give examples of the letters. The book's format is also striking because it is made up of 24 pages printed on paper strips folded as an accordion. It is therefore innovative in multiple ways because of its format, vocabulary and the ironical relation between words and pictures (picture 9).



Picture 9. Cruikshank (1836). *A comic alphabet*

With the same diverting and aesthetic approach, another source of innovation for 19th century alphabet books is the exploration of the typographical features of letters. It "builds" them by using funny characters in unbelievable positions, as in *ABC Trim*. *Alphabet enchanté*, by Louis Ratisbonne, published in 1861 in France (picture 10) or *Funny Alphabet*, by Edward P. Cogger, published in New York (date not stated) (picture 11).



Picture 10. Ratisbonne (1861). *ABC Trim. Alphabet enchanté*.



A was an Actor,
'Tis clear to your view.



B was three Boys,
Forming letters for you



C was a clown,
Who clever was found.

Picture 11. Cogger (s.f.), *Funny Alphabet*.

The diverting aspect of alphabet books progressively gained ground throughout the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, without forgetting their main didactic function, both as texts and pictures are concerned, with resources ranging from phonetic games, exaggeration, humour and caricatures. Benjamin (1931), when commenting on a German alphabet book of that time, was in

favour of decreasing the didactic load in order to provide literacy with a diverting nature, and wonders if it would be fair to insert crazy ideas or mistakes in texts. The answer is that exaggerated pranks with letters are a good way to draw the children's attention, in a way that is better connected to children's literature:

[...] the Struwwelpeter is also exaggerated, as well as Max and Moritz and Gulliver. Robinson's loneliness and what Alice in Wonderland sees is also exaggerated. Why would letters and numbers not be renowned in the eyes of children by playing exaggerated pranks? There will be a time where their demands become quite strict (Benjamin, 1931; trans. 1989, pp. 137-138).

In short, at the beginning of the 20th century alphabet books developed different functions -whether individually or through different combinations- to which some specific structure formats are associated:

- Primary didactic function: introducing children to reading. The basic structure presents -in each page or in a double page- one letter that is typographically highlighted, one word or sentence that starts with it (picked up from children's vocabulary) and a picture alongside the written text.
- Secondary didactic function: teaching religious or moral contents or getting to know about more or less broad thematic spheres. Encyclopaedic or thematic alphabet books are the most typical formats, where the vocabulary selected has a semantic continuum.
- Aesthetic and diverting function of language: it is associated to the rhythmic and phonetic game of examples associated to children and to more or less absurd stories that are linked.
- Aesthetic function of pictures: it is related both to its quality and diversity and to its format and the wide range of interrelations between texts and pictures.
- Diverting function in the very typographical composition of letters. In this sense, alphabet books with anthropomorphic letters are noteworthy.

- Diverting function of children's books as objects: striking page layout and innovative formats (tiny books, landscape format, and accordion-shaped books).

Modern alphabet books

The primary function of alphabet books as reading teaching tools were endangered by the emergence of new theories on reading. Free of their original function, all formal and functional components of traditional alphabet books were subject to review throughout the 20th century, giving rise to modern alphabet books, more or less innovative but still observing the basic conventions of the genre, and postmodern alphabet books, parodying the original formats and functions (Bodmer, 1989; Coats, 2000; Le Moal, 2012). It is difficult to set a dividing line between modern and postmodern alphabet books because almost all contemporary alphabet books include metafictional components alerting the reader about the reading process itself. The main difference is that postmodern alphabet books have parodic messages under a conventional format.

In the case of modern alphabet books, their didactic function decreases as their diverting and aesthetic aspects increase, whether due to the increasing importance of pictures, enabling to consider many books as picture books (Le Moal, 2012), to the almost unlimited creativity of poetic or fiction puns or to the existence of innovative typographical or format resources turning these books into toys or even works of art. This does not mean that alphabet books to support reading teaching are no longer published, but a balance between their didactic function and their aesthetic and diverting aspect is searched.⁷ The main innovation lines in modern alphabet books are analysed below, with examples of titles published in Spain.

The first innovation line affects thematic alphabet books. Almost all of them use the alphabet just as a structure to organise a thematic corpus and therefore the innovative aspects affect other components of discourse,

such as unusual issues, the complex relation between texts and pictures or the increasing complexity of texts (whether poetic or narrative). The difficulty of the reading processes required suggests that, in most cases, they are books aimed at readers who can read already, even young people or grown-ups.

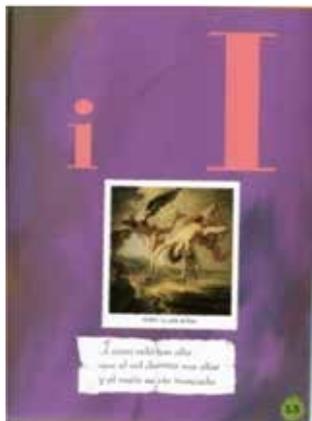
Therefore, *27 palabricas. Primer abecedario aragonés para zagales y talludos* (2010), with texts by A. Castro and pictures of 27 artists from Aragon, is a thematic alphabet book that apparently matches the traditional structure: letters with highlighted typography, words starting with that same letter (with other small texts added sometimes) and pictures on double pages related to the main word. Nevertheless, pictures are not static or simple, but they always include some ironic narrative component requiring active participation by the reader who, as stated in the title, can be either young or adult (picture 12).



Picture 12. Castro (2010). *27 palabricas. Primer abecedario aragonés para zagales y talludos*.

Abecedario de Arte (Un paseo por el Museo Thyssen) (2007), by C. Reviejo, and *Abecedario ilustrado con muchos cuadros del Prado* (2012), by C. Abada and A. Aroca are two alphabet books with very similar topics and structure. In both of them, each letter matches the reproduction of a painting, and one or more keywords can be extracted from its more or less figurative content. A short poetic text can be extracted from these words, which sometimes explain or help to interpret the painting, and sometimes are the story or expression of complementary sensations. The observation game is accentuated by searching the keywords in the painting. A complex relation between poetic texts and

artistic pictures is therefore established, as in picture books (picture 13).



Picture 13. Abada y Aroca (2012). *Abecedario ilustrado con muchos cuadros del Prado*.

The second innovation line is aimed at creating poetic texts with *avant-garde* games and formal constrictions of different natures. Puns, which are already present in children’s folklore and in traditional alphabet books, are revitalised with poetic *avant-gardes* from the first half of the 20th century. These puns thoroughly spread across Spanish children’s literature thanks to the contributions by García Lorca, Alberti or Gómez de la Serna, among others. The interest for phonetic or typographical symbolism of letters is added to the *avant-garde* games, as Rimbaud did in “Vowels” (*Iluminaciones*, 1886). The great number of *greguerías* dedicated to letters by Gómez de la Serna is a great example of such interest:

La ü con diéresis: dos íes siamesas.

La T es el martillo del abecedario.

La L parece largar un puntapié a la letra que lleva al lado.

La W es la M haciendo la plancha.

La ü con diéresis es como la letra malabarista del abecedario.

La i es el dedo meñique del alfabeto.

La S es el anzuelo del abecedario (Gómez de la Serna, 1910-1960; reed. 1968).

Alberti approached the symbolism of the alphabet with a folder of 50 serigraphs (two per

letter, one in colour and another one in black and white) written in 1969 and published in Italy in 1972 with the title of the poem of the heading, *Il lirismo dell’Alfabeto* (picture 14).



Picture 14. Alberti (1972). *Il lirismo dell’Alfabeto*. Serigrafía del poema (repr. 2000).

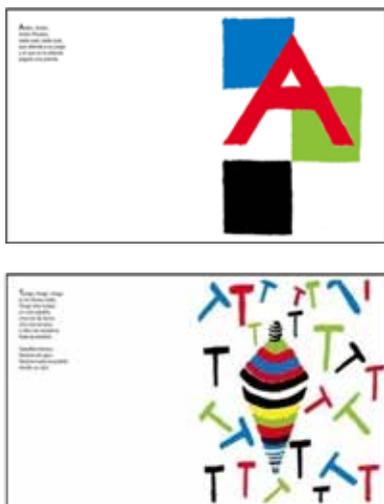
Each letter summons one Italian word (those serigraphs in colour) or more (those in black and white) around it; the initials match the letter in question: A for Amore, B for Bottiglia, C for Catena, etc. (picture 15).



Picture 15. Alberti (1972). *Il lirismo dell’Alfabeto*. Serigrafías de las letras B y C (repr. 2000).

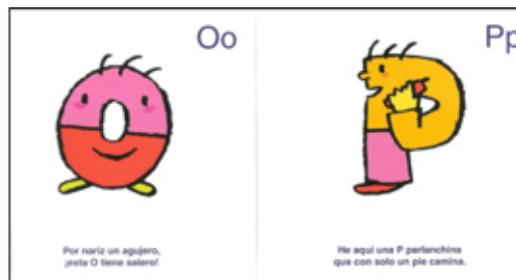
The interest for the typography's symbolism or the character of letters is present in many contemporary illustrated alphabet books, which combine different aesthetic traditions (literary, pictorial, typographical or even architectural). The study by Díaz-Plaja and Homar (2012) on typographical poetry, notably Joan Brossa's poetry, shows the influence this kind of visual poetry has had on alphabet books.

A good example is the alphabet book for children that Sonia Delaunay created in 1947, although it was not published until 1969 in an Italian edition. It was made up of 27 *gouaches* where the painter played with the typography of letters and associated each letter to one children's song. The Spanish version (2011) maintained the original pictures but texts, compiled by A. Marcos, were selected from Spanish children's songbooks (picture 16).



Picture 16. Delaunay (1969). *Alfabeto*. Edición castellana (2011).

In line with traditional alphabet books, in which letters were anthropomorphised, M. A. Pacheco y J. Serrano devised an *Abefeario* (2011) that creates letters using ugly characters. The accompanying text (one rhyming couplet) refers to the character or action attributed to each letter in the pictures. A metafictional game, with self-referential texts, is thus created (picture 17).



Picture 17. Pacheco y Serrano (2011). *Abefeario*.

El bosque de mi abecedario (2003), with texts by P. Villar and Pictures by M. Calatayud, is not strictly an alphabet book but a compilation of poems on language itself, some of which refer to the character of letters:

VOCALES

La **a** flota en el agua
que acuna el mar.
La **e** vive en los sueños,
en la espuma y la pared.
La **i** tiene una isla
donde vive feliz.
La **o** se moja en el río,
se oculta bajo la flor.
Y la **u** duerme en la ducha,
el humo y el avestruz.

One step beyond in this *avant-garde* game with language are literary creation tricks based on different types of formal constrictions in the way established by the OuLiPo group (created in 1960), such as lipograms (writing leaving out one or more letters), palindromes (texts which read the same backward or forward), the abecedary (the initials of successive words follow the alphabetical order), etc.⁸ In some contemporary alphabet books for children, this patters related to the use of letters predetermine the way texts are constructed in a more or less extreme way.

Therefore, in the *Diccionario estrafalario* (1997) by Gloria Fuertes, each letter is presented by a poem full of words starting with or containing the letter in question:

A es para la **Aurora**.
Aurora la niña **Aurora**

hace un postre en una hora.
Aurorita abizcochada,
absorta y acalorada,
acaramela el pastel.
¿Gusta usted?

A similar resource is used by R. Díaz in *El abecedario de Julieta* (2002), but with a riskier lexical selection, aimed at older children:

LA EÑE
Es una letra muy ñoña
aunque te llame a los niños,
aunque te haga carantoñas
o te hable de los pestiños.
Te deja en paños menores,
te hace añicos, te da caña,
te riñe y aunque la añores
no olvides, va con legañas. [...]

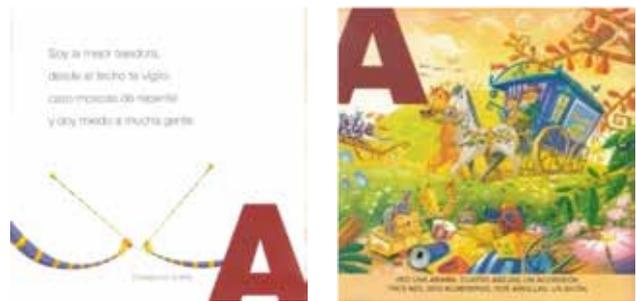
Totally *oulipian* examples are *Niños raros* (2011), by R. Vacas and T. Hijo; *Abecedárbol* (2009), by C. Juste and J. Almalé; *AbeCeBichos* (2012), by D. Nesquens and J. Muñiz; and *AbeCeCirco* (2014), by D. Nesquens and A. Gamón. All the texts of the last three examples are tautograms (all the words start with the same letter).

In *Niños raros*, each letter of the alphabet qualifies a “weird child” (“Niño Alga”, “Niño Búho”, “Niño Cacto”, etc.), who appears characterised that way in double-page pictures. Each text is written following an explicit formal pattern throughout the entire alphabet, a tautogram is deployed, one poem containing *caboto* verses, one *ovillejo* verse, one poem with stressed on the third-to-last syllable words, rhymes with numbers, one *cuaderna vía* poem, one echoed sonnet, one poem full of words with dieresis, one abecedary, etc. See the beginning of the tautogram with the A for “Niño Alga” below:

Andaba Abelardo anoche –algo aburrido–
acariciando anémonas.
Aguardaba ansioso al amanecer amarillo
aproximándose al agua azul acuarela.

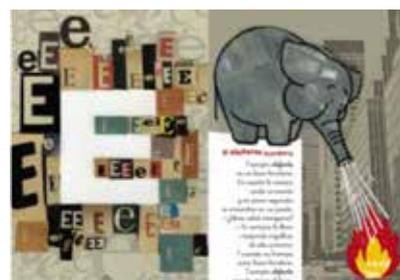
Acabó apaciguado al arrullo adormecedor,
absorto ante algunas aves
acostumbradas al apacible aire:
abejarucos, águilas, arrendajos, avefrías,
ánades, abubillas. [...]

The diverting component is present in most modern alphabet books using literary and aesthetic resources that are more or less conventional. In *Aprende el abecedario con adivinanzas* (2007), by O. Xirinachs and R. Besora (pictures by J. M. Moreno), each letter is presented by a riddle whose solution, on the next page, is a word starting with that letter and included -together with other words sharing the same initial- in a rhyming couplet that lead to search the objects to which the highlighted words refer to in the picture, like a visual riddle (picture 18).



Picture 18. Xirinachs y Besora (2007). *Aprende el abecedario con adivinanzas*.

AbeZoo (2005), with texts by C. Reviejo and pictures by J. Aramburu, associates one animal and one poem with simple meter to each letter, like children’s folklore, while pictures play with the typography of letters (picture 19).



Picture 19. Reviejo y Aramburu (2005). *AbeZoo*.

The third innovation line of modern alphabet books creates a new subgenre inside the archigenre: that of alphabet books made up of several series of prose tales. In these fiction alphabet books, each letter (or keyword) leads to a more or less long story, with a common thematic content. These alphabet books are therefore hybridised with a relatively new genre called *cuentos integrados* (integrated tales) by Zavala (2005, p. 15), a series of tales having a thematic or stylistic uniformity.

The *Abecedario fantástico* by U. Wölfel (1981; trans. and rep. 2010) and *La sequía. Abecedario ilustrado* by C. Grassa and D. Fermín (2007) are examples of this. Tales are integrated in a narrative framework that refers to the alphabet's structure. They are not minifictions but they do not move away from the narrative conventions of tales either. They are not intended to create metafictional reading processes or parodies of the concept of alphabet. For this reason, we consider them modern -not postmodern- alphabet books.

The fourth innovation line is that of alphabet books with a complex text-picture relation. This relation is complementary, ironic many times, far from the subordinated function of pictures, aimed at illustrating words selected due to their phonetics and orthography. The referential function and the support to the reading process prevailed in that word-picture equivalence. On the contrary, almost all contemporary illustrated alphabet books can be considered as metafictional picture books (Le Moal, 2012), because the interaction between texts and pictures intends to make readers conscious of the act of reading. The metafictional nature that Arizpe and Styles (2003) attribute as an inherent feature of picture books is thus strengthened. Three titles published in Spain are analysed as an example below.

In *El abecedario fantástico de Patam, el elefante* (2004), by M. Gisbert, texts arbitrarily combine words referred to objects starting with the letter in question, but it is only an excuse for the funny picture on the double page and

shows unbelievable actions by the main character ("Toca el ACORDEÓN encima del AVIÓN", "Llena la BAÑERA de BOTONES", etc.).

Al pie de la letra (2007), by M. Calatayud, is a silent illustrated alphabet book where each word is skilfully inserted in a picture without a narrative continuum. Each picture proposes two reading challenges to the reader simultaneously: unveiling the hidden letter, as a visual riddle, and constructing the narrative story suggested (picture 20).



Picture 20. Calatayud (2007). *Al pie de la letra*.

ALF ABETO (2012), by Puño (David Peña), is a silent alphabet book too. The letters are part of the pictures, but there is a narrative thread among them. The complexity of the layout is embodied in the last page, where the author reveals the curiosities and secrets therein, i.e., the intertextual references to contemporary culture (cinema, *graffiti*...) (picture 21).



Picture 21. Puño (2012). *ALF ABETO*.

The last innovation line, very present in modern alphabet books, is that related to

formats and books as aesthetic objects. Many alphabet books play with the potential offered by paper folding, die cutting, windows and tabs, etc.

In this sense, the bilingual alphabet book *AlphaPet*, by Shiho Ishikawa (2009), is noteworthy. With each die-cut letter, readers can create animals with that letter as an initial or highlighted letter just like a Japanese *origami* (picture 22).



Picture 22. Ishikawa (2009). *AnimAlfabeto/AlphaPet*.

On its part, Marion Bataille's *ABC3D* (2008; rep. by Kókinos as *ABCD*, 2008), takes full advantage of the potential offered by pop-up. In another example of what Díaz calls actual paper engineering, this work explores the volume and the animation and transformation mechanisms to the full, “clearly linking aesthetics to kinetism, contemporary architecture and graphic synthesis” (Díaz, 2009, p. 83) (picture 23).



Picture 23. Bataille (2008). *ABCD*.

In short, the features that characterise modern alphabet books are:

- Weakening of the primary function of alphabet books (literacy). As the didactic function decreases, the diverting and aesthetic functions gains ground, by reviewing and innovating in all formal and functional

components that characterise alphabet books, as well as a remarkable handful of genres and arts. It does not imply parody of the genre's conventions.

- Textual innovations, both in poetic alphabet books (formal constrictions in an OuLiPo way, *avant-garde* games, symbolism of letters) and in those made up of a series of short tales integrated in the alphabetical structure acting a narrative framework that provides certain thematic uniformity.
- As far as iconic or format elements are concerned, the hybridisation of the alphabet book and the picture book genres is noteworthy, which is associated to the breaking of the word-picture equivalence and even the existence of silent illustrated alphabet books”. Besides big formats, typical from picture books, new formats of a great aesthetic value are created and take advantage of the new publishing technologies, such as die-cutting, 3D books, etc. that generate interactive books of toy-books.
- The didactical function of alphabet books is maintained under the form of thematic alphabet books, although many of them are no longer linked to initial literacy but to recipients who can read, including young people or grown-ups.

Postmodern alphabet books

McHale (1987; quot. By Bodmer, 1989, p. 115) believes that the loss of confidence in what was traditionally believed to be the primary function of literature –i.e. providing readers with greater knowledge of life– is the essential feature of postmodern literature. According to Bodmer, the result thereof is an increase of experimenting on narrative forms, the breaking of the expectations of readers and probability, as well as of the certainty related both to storylines and characters. According to Bodmer, it is not clear whether or not this approach succeeds among children and for that reason postmodern approach has spread across children's literature slowly, although it has finally been dragged into by the same historical

and social forces that created postmodern literature in general.

Since the middle of the 20th century, many alphabet books have been written –in English especially– calling into question typological features of their genre and even of the nature of language itself (Coats, 2000). In contrast to the idea of alphabet books as structures presenting an arranged, controllable universe, these alphabet books show a chaotic world (Le Moal, 2012). This rigid genre could be especially prone to subversion, resulting in what Bodmer calls anti-alphabet books, which demonstrate the current lack of faith both in literature and didacticism:

From the 1950s, we have been flooded with many conventional alphabet books as well as a great number of anti-alphabet books, those which exploit the expectations of the genre and reflect the expanding of children's literature into other forms, formats and markets. These anti-alphabet books also reflect the anti-didactic mood of our time (Bodmer, 1989, p. 115).

Far from their original structure, which established a clear equivalence between spelling, words and pictures, Le Moal believes postmodern alphabet books required readers who are not “innocent” at all, because they call into question the nature of alphabet books as cultural devices or the automatism of the signifier-signified relation:

[...] metafictional alphabet books *do not* assume innocence on the part of the reader and instead, letters become performers in and of reality rather than simple pointers to something outside themselves (Le Moal, 2012, p. 28).

Her detailed study of four alphabet books published in the United States between 2001 and 2005⁹ shows how these works are parodies of the forms and functions of alphabet books through narrative mechanisms such as the personification of letters, which behave as real beings and rebel against the order imposed by the alphabet.

Coats (2000) also analyses many North American postmodern alphabet books, where letters are independent, free of their linguistic

function. This new destiny sometimes brings tragic events to them, as in *The Z was Zapped* (1987), by C. Van Allsburg: “The A was in an avalanche; The B was badly bitten; The C was cut to ribbons [...]; The Z was zapped”. According to Coats, it means that our symbolic universe is under threat (p. 95).

Bodmer's analysis (1989) of three contemporary titles in English¹⁰ adds the breaking of those limited related to the recipients as a postmodern subversive element. The complex techniques used to create fictions (parodies, intertextual references, metafiction, etc.) eliminate the boundaries between adult's and children's reading, but also show some ambiguity in the authors' intentions, who may be presenting a sarcastic rebellion against an idyllic view of childhood (p. 117). Two good examples of that are the surrealistic alphabet books by E. Gorey, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* (1963) or *The Utter Zoo* (1967). The first one shows a series of tragic fates experienced by children, whilst *The Utter Zoo* is a bestiary of fantastic animals, a parody of children's thematic alphabet books about animals.

In order to go further in the poetics of postmodern alphabet books, we analyse two titles published in Spain: *AbeCeBichos* (2012), with texts by D. Nesquens and pictures by J. Muñoz; and *Bombástica Naturalis* (2010), with texts and pictures by I. Barrenetxea (picture 24).



Picture 24. Portadas de *AbeCeBichos* y de *Bombástica Naturalis*.

Their nature of postmodern alphabet books is due to the ambiguity of the simultaneous

presence and breaking of conventional features of the genre, which is clearly parody and metafiction.

AbeCeBichos explicitly shows some conventions of the genre: the title suggests a thematic alphabet book of animals; each double page is dedicated to a letter typographically highlighted at the beginning of each text and also hides the morphology of each "creature"; the letters are in alphabetical order; the texts refer to animals whose name starts with the relevant letter and have that same letter repeated as in traditional alphabet books; those animals are represented, establishing the usual spelling-word-referent correspondence (picture 25).



Picture 25. Nesquens y Muñiz (2012). *AbeCeBichos*.

It is also a parody at the same time, concerning both its forms and structures and didactic function. The term creatures in the title announces the humorous tone thereof. All texts are composed as tautograms, sharing a similar grammar structure: substantive (name of an animal) + one or more adjectives before or after + action + complement ("Inquietas iguanas islandesas imaginan icebergs"; "Leones legañosos leen libros largos"). The semantic surrealism due to the arbitrariness of lexical combinations, together with the fact that some words are weird, referring to a universe of beings with whom children are not quite familiar ("Quisquillosos quebrantahuesos quieren queso"; "Ultrasónicas urracas ululan ufanas"), make the text lose its didactic efficiency to fulfill one of the main functions of alphabet books: denomination. Texts do not have any sense in a real context but they refer to a self-referential humorous universe.

Although letters are presented in alphabetical order, the rebellion against the conventional nature of language and the alphabet itself is highlighted in a striking end that serves as a metafictional epiphany, stressed by means of a format that is equally striking: a big fold-out page presenting all the creatures together in a final feast organised by two human characters that appear throughout the book (professors Nemo Calypso and Nautilus Cousteau). The letters, inserted in the relevant animals, are not in order but in random positions, with left/right inversions, as independent beings, free from their function in language (picture 26).



Picture 26. Nesquens y Muñiz (2012). *AbeCeBichos*.

On its part, *Bombástica Naturalis*, is at first sight a treatise on botany written in 1810, according to the "Prologue of the first edition", by the eminent Doctor, Botanist and Natural Philosopher Bombastus Dulcimer. The true author, Ibán Barrenetxea, is referred to in the cover as the current editor of the old treatise.

The nature of the alphabet books is not explicit neither in the title nor in the typography of each initial letter but it is part of the surprises this book contains for sharp readers. Names of plants in Latin are presented in alphabetical order together with their translation into Spanish and a technical description thereafter, sometimes including little anecdotes. Pictures of plants are not separated as in botany prints, but they are inserted in urban and rural environments with different characters and actions, where plants play a key role (picture 27)

In this case, the parodic features refer more to the educational and referential function of thematic alphabet books than to the literacy function. After the apparently realistic cover, which suits the conventions of an ancient botany treatise (the title thereof is in latin, the author



Picture 27. Barrenetexea (2010). *Bombástica Naturalis*.

has an archaic name and plants are illustrated according to the naturalist engravings of the 18th century), the Prologue informs about the nature of the plants that are to be discovered, created for the good of humanity in the future. The transcendental tone warns the reader of the unusual nature of this botany book:

Our understanding of the laws of nature and the noble art of Botany is such resulting in new techniques and devices enabling to create species and varieties; we can hardly dream of the unlimited possibilities thereof for the good of humanity.

As in real botany treatises, names in Latin maintain the authenticity of botanical classifications. The humorous Latin denominations of each plant combine truth and fiction partially, because the name compiles real botanic classes together with subclasses or varieties and refers to the crazy function of each plant (“*Acanthus columnata* [*Acanto columna*]”, “*Buxus labyrinthus* [*Bojlaberinto*]”, “*Cucurbita currus* [*Calabaza carruaje*]”, etc.). Texts are pure puns: the scientific description of each plant has the formality level of academic language but its content is surrealistic, according to the crazy uses of the plants invented. In line with fantasy bestiaries, this case could be considered an apocryphal book on herbalism. In order to highlight the parody of the prologue’s transcendental tone, pictures present smart characters, dressed in a fashionable, bourgeois way of the end of the 18th century or the beginning of the 19th century, but usually in ridiculous situations caused by the absurd uses of the plants.

In short, the metafictional and parodic nature related to the referential function of traditional alphabet books is obvious in the two works analysed, which present texts of self-referential content. According to Zavala (2005, p. 132), “metafictional writing calls into question the very idea that literature is a representation of reality [...]”. The act of reading has been dealt with in parodies, which proves it has a postmodern nature. The two forms of parody to which Zavala (2005, p. 133) refers appear in both works: stylistic and generic parody. The puns and phonetic games from alphabets books of introduction to reading are parodied in *ABeCeBichos*, while *Bombástica Naturalis* contains parodies of both the scientific jargon and the instructive tone of thematic alphabet books.

Another aspect that defines these two alphabet books as postmodern is the construction of series of minifictions, a new *tour de force* in the hybridisation of genres: both are made up of short texts that have many features identified as inherent to postmodern minifiction by some authors such as Koch (2001), Barrera (2002), Brasca (2002) and Zavala (2004; 2005). The development regarding other narrative alphabet books is the brevity of fictions: in *Bombástica Naturalis*, they always have less than 200 words, while they have no more than seven in *ABeCeBichos*; this fact enables these texts to be considered as minifictions or even as nanofictions, in the case of *ABeCeBichos* (Zavala, 2004, p. 346).

The literary value of minifiction lies in its power of suggestion. Expressive concentration is basically obtained through intertextuality games -usually ironic or parodic- and through genre hybridisation (Zavala, 2004). The author of minifictions acts as demiurge that creates illusion universes and imagines how they work (Brasca, 2002). Texts in *ABeCeBichos* -which are all tautograms- can be read as prose poems, full of rhythm and alliterations; likewise, its insertion in a higher narrative framework leads us to believe it is a picture story or an picture book under the global structure of an alphabet book. In *Bombástica Naturalis*, genre hybridisation

allows identifying simultaneously a botany treatise, a philosophy -or science fiction- book that reflects on the future of mankind and a series of anecdotes or short stories; all the foregoing is integrated in a higher narrative construction and under the global structure of an alphabet book. A lyrical universe inside the parody can be found at the same time, as well as some empathy to some of the oldest desires of humanity.

In both alphabet books, minifictions form a series that is integrated in a greater unit that gives sense thereto. This way, they are a variety of minifictions that Zavala calls *fractal*: narrative units that only have sense in relation to the series they belong to and which in time have the same generic, stylistic or thematic features than the rest of the texts (Zavala, 2005, p. 34). This belonging is strengthened through the closed, arranged structure of alphabet books. Certain narrative continuum is added among pages thanks to certain characters and details to all the foregoing in both cases, because they move from one picture to another, resulting in short secondary stories of an ironic nature. The minifiction series are a new way of reading, because texts can be read independently or in a fractal manner as part of an independent universe. Readers should consider the relationship between wholes and parts (Zavala, 2005, p. 65).

Concerning aesthetic strategies, the works analysed match those identified by Koch (2001) as characteristic of minifiction:

- Concern about the language: the power of suggestion of the puns used in those works leads to more than one interpretation (literal, ironic, parodic, lyric), although full enjoyment thereof depends on the reader's competency level.
- Desire to be universal: minifiction gets to concentrate meanings through universal dialogue with other books and cultures -as in this case/ and independent symbolic universes having their own laws are thus created.
- Sense of humour: games with the laws of reason -with language notably- are played.

Language games warn of the nature of language itself in the works analysed, through a game that is both metalinguistic and metafictional.

- Rebelliousness and originality: the two alphabet books analysed have obvious elements of intellectual and spiritual anarchy, following the tradition of nonsense and the world turned upside down; an irreverent game with the prescriptions of educational alphabet books is simultaneously played. Originality basically consists on revitalising old ways of writing (abecedaries, botany treatises, bestiaries, etc.) under new formats.

Conclusion. The reader of modern and postmodern alphabet books

Probably due to the fact that it is a minor genre -even in the field of children's literature-, alphabet books have always had an enormous freedom of expression and have included a wide range of literary throughout history, -both cultured and popular-, philosophical, pedagogical, pictorial, typographical and binding movements resulting in a wonderful fusion, sometimes ahead of aesthetic proposals that took a long time to Spread across renowned literature. The rigid constraints inherent thereto, related to the letters' typography and alphabetical order, seem to trigger the search for daring forms of expression, committed both to tradition and experimentation, somewhere between didactic function and pure literary games. Likewise, just like any other literary genre, alphabet books reflect the changing social circumstances and cultural conceptions, of childhood notably.

What kind of implicit reader are these modern and postmodern alphabet books aimed at?

Far from their original didactic purposes, illustrated alphabet books are nowadays a literary archigenre of great vitality that explores new aesthetic grounds. Many modern alphabet books are no longer aimed at children only, but they are rather little works of art

for recipients, no matter their age. As it has been stated, in many cases, *avant-garde* poetic resources or complex narrative structures have been inserted in the text, requiring involved literary readers willing to perceive puns and intertextual games or different levels of interpretation, although the will to parody the structure and the function of alphabet books as a genre is not noticed yet. The didactic function of pictures, previously subordinated to making the reading process easier, resulted -in many works- in pictures playing a more important role and are aimed at striking or touching the reader, with resources such as visual riddles, letters that are hidden in the pictures, storytelling through pictures, intertextuality through visual contemporary codes such as the cinema, comics, graffiti, etc., sometimes with aesthetic styles that are not frequently used in children's literature, such as surrealism or cubism, and simultaneously experimenting with the layout of pictures on pages and formats. All these innovation lines are similar to those Colomer (2010, pp. 132-134) refers to as characteristic of the evolution of pictures in children's books from World War II. On the other hand, the complex interaction with texts in many of these books, as well as the carefully design of formats, make many aspects of this modern books resemble to modern picture books, "conceived as a unity, a whole integrating all its parts designed in a sequence of interrelations." (Taberner, 2005, p. 76). The use of other codes such as pop-up, manipulative interaction, etc., turns many of these books into toy-books or artistic objects. All the foregoing fully integrates these innovative alphabet books in nowadays' children's and young people's literature.

As for those alphabet books that are seen as postmodern, although they seem to be simple children's books, the comprehension of meta-fictional and ironical games, as well as their semantic ambiguity require recipients with high reading competencies who can perceive the contradictory perspectives presented in them.

Therefore, the two Spanish alphabet books analysed are aimed at implicit readers having

remarkable intertextual knowledge both regarding the conventions of the genre illustrated alphabet books and of other genres and literary and extraliterary references that serve as hypotexts (bestiaries, botany books, captain Nemo and Verne's divers, Calypso and Cousteau, etc.). The complexity of the different itineraries of reading is added thereto, which make fractal structure and the pictures thereof possible, with parallel secondary stories. While novel readers can easily enter and exit the world created by the author, each minifiction text is a little cosmos itself. In contrast with the common belief that this brief genre is related to nowadays quickness, Shua (2009) believes that books made up of minifictions cannot be read in one go but little by little, and require readers to be highly concentrated and able to put their knowledge at the disposal of reading. Koch (2001) believes that this literary tablets sometimes offer more ideas in very small space than in other pages full of words. In contrast, their level of literaturity is fragile and instable (Barrera, 2002), because they operate as cognitive triggers of the reader's semantic memory, if any. The pleasure of reading may then probably emerge more dramatically than with other texts only as a result of an active cooperation between the writer, the text and the reader. According to Brasca (2002, p. 32), minifiction is not for steady readers.

Such complexity leads us to think who the real recipients of these postmodern alphabet books are, a problem that can be applicable to all postmodern children's literature. It is a risky reading process, full of possibilities and symbols, undoubtedly an exciting challenge for those readers having advanced reading strategies and competencies. But can it be frustrating to innocent readers? Is this type of children's literature fostering reception processes that are excessively intellectualised or requiring intense mediation work?

Notes

1 Dr. Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra* (1955), *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* (1958), *Dr. Seuss's ABC* (1963); E. Gorey, *The*

Hapless Child (1961), *The Eclectic Abecedarium* (1962), *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* (1963); M. Sendak, *Alligators All Around* (1962).

2 M. Kailman, *What Pete Ate from A-Z* (2001); J. Agee, *Z Goes Home* (2003); S. Glaser and M. Glaser, *The Alphazeds* (2003); É. Delessert, *A Was an Apple Pie* (2005).

3 In an English alphabet book that from the 17th century that was very popular –the *New England Primer* (quo. by Bodmer, 1989, p. 115)– each letter corresponded to a puritan religious content, supported by texts from the Bible: “A : In Adam’s Fall / We Sinned all ; B (Bible): Thy Life to Mend / This Book Amend”; etc.

4 Moritz also published a tentative small practical *Logic for Children*, where he refers to the “great art of classification and sorting, comparison and differentiation the whole happiness of any rational human being is based on” (quo. by Christensen, 2007, p. 33).

5 This expression belongs to the main character of *Anton Reiser*, Moritz’s autobiographical novel published in four parts between 1785 and 1790. Quo. by Hollmer (2011).

6 The digital catalogue of the Baldwin Library of Historical Children’s Literature (University of Florida) offers many examples. Available on <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/>

7 Chaney (1993) analysed in detail the main structures and functions of contemporary alphabet books as a didactic resource for children of all ages.

8 We briefly mention the origin and activities of the group, following the study by A. Fernández Ferrer (1993). The *Oulipo* (acronym of “Ouvroir de littérature potentielle”, “Workshop of potential literature”) group was founded in 1960 by François Le Lionnais, a mathematician fascinated by literature, and by Raymond Queneau, interested in mathematics in turn. The original group, made up of its promoters and by J. Bens, C. Berge, J. Duchateau, J. Lescure and J. Queval, was subsequently joined by renowned artists such as G. Perec, M. Duchamp o I. Calvino, among others. In its first manifesto as a group, François Le Lionnais pointed out that literary works are created on the basis of an inspiration that is obliged to suit a series of formal “constraints” (*contraintes*) or composition rules. On the basis of this idea of *contrainte*, the members of the group search, on one hand, for forefathers of these proceedings and, on the other hand, for the discovery of unknown possibilities as research of some kind of experimental literature aimed at offering innovative literary forms. There are examples of any conceivable resource on the group’s official website, www.ouliipo.net. Perec offers a specific reflection on

alphabet books in his work *Think / Classify* (1985. Trans. 2008. Barcelona: Gedisa, pages 168-169).

9 J. Agee (2003), *Z Goes Home*; É. Delessert (2005), *A Was an Apple Pie*; S. Glaser y M. Glaser (2003), *The Alphazeds*; M. Kalman (2001), *What Pete Ate from A-Z*.

10 M. Sendak (1962), *Alligators All Around*; E. Gorey (1963), *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*; Dr. Seuss (1963), *Dr. Seuss’s ABC*.

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