

Ellsworth's Extraordinary Electric Ears: And Other Amazing Alphabet Anecdotes



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Tired of plain vanilla ABC books? Apple, ball, cat... Here's a witty charmer that you'll like as much--if not more--as your kids do. Valorie Fisher's Ellsworth's Extraordinary Electric Ears features a single, perfectly arranged diorama in homage to every letter. Plastic figurines, paper cutouts, tiny clay sculptures, and artfully repurposed everyday objects (see Holly's "humble handbag home") populate each cheery scene, all filled to bursting with items beginning with the designated letter. (On the "C" page, there are at least 20 different things beginning with the letter "C".) Even better than the silly tableaux are the breathless alliterations accompanying each scene. Just try to read them without adding aural italics and exclamation points galore: "Nigel's nifty newspaper neckties were nothing but a naughty nuisance," "Vacationing in the valley of a violent volcano was very invigorating for Violet," and "Zelda's zigzagged zebra was the zippiest at the zoo" are among the best.

The book is beautifully suited both to very young kids who are in full noun-acquisition mode as well as to older children who've become adept at matching images and

words beginning with specific letters. For example, the "L" page features several items a toddler could pick out--lion, ladder, lemons--without fully understanding that these things are grouped together because they start with the same letter. There are also less readily named items in the picture: a llama, a laundry basket, and a locomotive. And then there's the book's grownup appeal: "Pepita's pink paper parasols were particularly popular with pirates." Check out all the swarthy, half-dressed pirate figurines clutching paper drink umbrellas and see how long it takes you to start planning a theme party around your favorite letter of the alphabet. (Ages 2 to 6) --Jennifer Lindsay --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

PreSchool-Grade 4-Here's an alphabet book that calls to mind Walter Wick's "I Spy" pictures crossed with characters from William Joyce's A Day with Wilbur Robinson (HarperCollins, 1990). Wonderfully retro-looking plastic toys are arranged and photographed in unlikely madcap tableaux in which nearly every object begins with the same letter. A compact caption appears below each full-page picture. In the eponymous scene about Ellsworth ("E"), a plastic man in a suit-complete with raincoat and briefcase-sprouts small light bulbs from his ears as elephants and an emu look on. It's a zany approach for pre-readers, who will recognize the initial sounds of most of the toy creatures and objects, as well as for older children, who will enjoy the imaginative juxtaposition of items. A list by letter at the back of the book will help readers identify picture parts they missed or aren't sure about. The full-page, full-color illustrations are fairly simply composed with only the foreground in focus, as if to capture a frame of a film or a scene in motion. Alphabet purists may quibble about misleading figures with different initial letters in some pictures (the pigs on the "F" page, the jar of cookies in the kangaroo's kitchen on the "K" page), but most children will recognize them as necessary parts of the wacky short tales depicted. Overall, an unusual and delightful book.

Kathie Meizner, Montgomery County Public Libraries, Chevy Chase, MD

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PreS-Gr. 2. In this inventive alphabet book, Ellsworth has extraordinary electric ears, Holly is hugely happy in her humble handbag home, and Alistair the alligator has an alarming appetite for acrobats. Fisher matches her imaginative text with fresh, funny artwork that captures the action in a very unusual way. Using doll house-style figurines, found items, toys from her childhood, and created pieces, Fisher constructs colorful scenes that will be wild, witty fun for both children and adults, each at their own level. "Betty believed in a big but balanced breakfast" is illustrated by a picture showing a black bear wearing a pink tutu and balancing a banana, a beet, and other items on her nose. Like the I Spy books, this will provide hours of fun, and children may be tempted to stage their own outrageous scenarios with things found around the house. Ilene Cooper

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