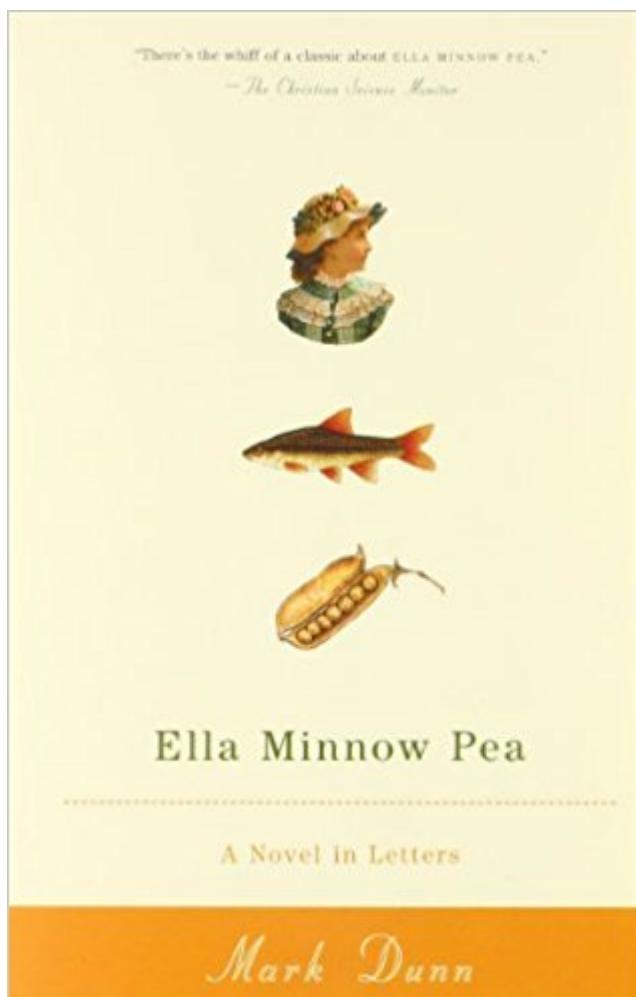


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Ella Minnow Pea: A Novel In Letters



Synopsis

Ella Minnow Pea is a girl living happily on the fictional island of Nollop off the coast of South Carolina. Nollop was named after Nevin Nollop, author of the immortal pangram,* "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog." Now Ella finds herself acting to save her friends, family, and fellow citizens from the encroaching totalitarianism of the island's Council, which has banned the use of certain letters of the alphabet as they fall from a memorial statue of Nevin Nollop. As the letters progressively drop from the statue they also disappear from the novel. The result is both a hilarious and moving story of one girl's fight for freedom of expression, as well as a linguistic tour de force sure to delight word lovers everywhere.*pangram: a sentence or phrase that includes all the letters of the alphabet

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Customer Reviews

'Ella Minnow Pea' is a delightfully diverting novel filled with wit and imagination. Its lovingly crafted structure is a real breath of fresh air -- one would be hard pressed to find another book like it out there. One must admire Mark Dunn not only for his lively imagination but for his awe-inspiring power over words. It is fun to see how he manages to continue telling his story while avoiding use of a growing number of letters in the alphabet. Never once does his prose sound forced or simple, even after he must resort to using his remaining letters to phonetically sound out his words. The plot (citizens on an island off the coast of the US rebel after their government begins restricting their use of the alphabet) could have easily been silly, cliched and like a poor man's 'Animal Farm' but instead forges out its own solid identity and endears itself to the reader through its inventiveness

and wit. One can't help but enjoy 'Ella Minnow Pea'. I read it in one afternoon and my only complaint is that it had to end.

This is a challenging experiment in word play written entirely in letter (epistle) format. Plot-wise, as the letters of the alphabet disappear from the monument, the citizens are ordered to stop using them -- in writing OR in speech. (The speech part fails me -- you don't use letters in speech unless you spell aloud. But for the sake of the story, it increases the frustrating need to communicate.) I would compare the plot to that of "The Emperor Has No Clothes" -- that is, what's real and what isn't, and who is willing to stand up and admit it? ELLA MINNOW PEA becomes an interesting look at what a fanatic oligarchy can do to a society if the people don't fight back. Because this was sold as a play on words, I thought it was going to be much more fun. But quite frankly it was pretty heavy plodding in the beginning. I do applaud the author for his attempt at word play, but I wish he'd been more consistent. For example, at one point, character Mittie decides she's going to make up for the loss of some letters by overusing the others ("Robbed of two letters, I now chooooose to overuuuuse the twenty-four which remaaaain"), but then she never does again. Had she kept that up, it would have been fun and something to set her apart. There was otherwise nothing distinguishing these "characters." I initially felt that the writing was terribly awkward -- why does the author make it sound as if the people had swallowed a thesaurus and spewed it forth in their unreal letters to each other? But a couple of days later, as the story was still swimming in my head, I realized, no -- the beginning establishes how much the people cherish the words. They play with them, eat, sleep, and practically bathe in them, making their loss even more painful. And if they did NOT have such a familiarity with the use of alternate words, they couldn't have continued communicating as long as they did. They had to leave their home, their country, because they couldn't give up their ability to communicate. An interesting read that keeps coming back to my mind. (Extra fun: the new names for the months, subtly shown at the top of each letter.)

I LOVED this book. I wasn't sure what to expect when I picked it up, and then I just couldn't put it down. I was reading passages to my husband and although he hates it when I do that, I couldn't resist. When I finished it, I went to the web page and ordered a copy for my son and my sister-in-law. I then put the book on my shelves that I have reserved for the books to read again. As a matter of fact, I have the paperback edition, I think I am going to need the hardback! This book should be put on reading lists at high schools and colleges, it is that good. The discussions it could start, the ideas and thoughts it could open to so many people...enough, just take my word for it, this

is a MUST read book. By the way, I found that I needed a dictionary for the book and towards the end, I found it was much easier to read the letters out loud (not to my husband, just for me). Reading the letters out loud helped me understand them, so keep that in mind. What a fun, important book!

Mark Dunn's *Ella Minnow Pea* has got a huge amount of admiring notice -- you need only look at the other reviews here! It's called "a novel in letters", which is a pun -- it is indeed composed of letters (epistles), but it is also concerned with letters (graphemes). The story is set on Nollop, a fictional island off the coast of South Carolina, supposedly named after Nevin Nollop, the man who composed the sentence "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog". When letters begin to drop off the statue of Nollop, the rulers of the island decide to outlaw the use of the fallen letters. *Ella Minnow Pea* (think LMNOP) is an 18 year old girl living on Nollop. She, along with her mother and father, and her cousin Tassie and Tassie's mother, become resistors to the rulers' draconian laws against using missing letters -- laws which become more of a concern as more letters fall. The conceit of the novel is that as letters fall off the sign, each chapter (or series of "epistles") also is written without the outlawed letters. Eventually, the only hope for the resistance is to find a sentence even shorter than "The quick brown fox ..." that uses all 26 letters. In the end I was somewhat disappointed. It's amusing enough, and resolved nicely enough, but I was simply and totally unconvinced by the villains. They seem cartoons to me, beyond any possible belief, and I just couldn't emotionally engage with the book. Also, the heroines, Ella and Tassie, never really came alive for me. In the final analysis, the book seems more clever than true.

It's wonderful. It's witty. The story is fascinating and the characters are delightful. I read this book several years ago, I am not exaggerating when I say that I really dream to find another of its ilk. If you love language, clever plays with the language, as well as great stories and fun characters, I think you will love this book.

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