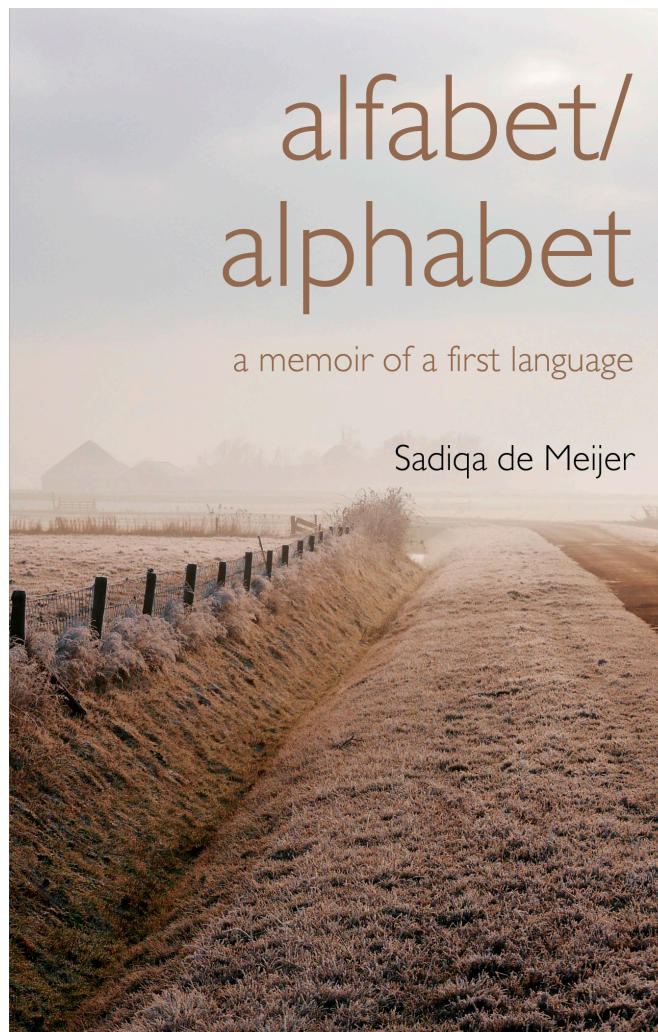


Review
Sadiqa de Meijer:
alfabet/ alphabet: a memoir of a first language
Windsor: Palimpsest Press, 2020. 158 p.
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Reviewed by Stephen Cain



In the author's note to Sadiqa de Meijer's *alfabet/ alphabet* she writes that she "was born in Amsterdam to a Dutch-Kenyan-Pakistani-Afghani family, and moved to Canada as a child" (157). In her two earlier books of poetry, *Leaving Howe Island* (2013) and *The Outer Wards* (2020), De Meijer explores aspects of this complex identity, while also examining her position as a settler in Canada in the former book, and her experience of maternity in the latter. It is with this new collection, however, subtitled "a memoir of a first language," that she most directly addresses her Dutch identity, claiming "Dutch is indeed my mother tongue./ My pulse music, my bone resonator, my umbilical ligature [...] My language of lullaby and nursery rhyme" (11).

While she does briefly consider some Punjabi she learned as a child, for the majority of the book De Meijer focuses on how the Dutch language has shaped not only her poetry and poetics, but how she understands the world and her life. Moreover, she is exacting in conveying what type of Dutch has formed her: "The language I speak is *Nederlands*, *NAY-der-lahnts*, in three descending pitches. Of the lowland; low or humble or meek [...] The utterances of my people who used to dwell on hillocks, lone islands in the floodplains of the sea [...] In storms, the rains and whitecaps lashed their walls. Was it any wonder that the words they made would sound like phlegm?" (29).

Structured as an abecedarium—with 26 chapters in alphabetical order—each essay is titled with a Dutch word and its English equivalent, for example: *natuur/ nature*, *tijd/ time*, or *liefde/ love*. This gesture alone is of interest, especially when readers notice that some words are shared between the languages, like *bitter/ bitter*, or when the book concludes with the word *zwijg*, which De Meijer convincingly argues is untranslatable into English.¹

One great surprise (and pleasure) of the book is that the titles of the essays often have only tangential relationships to their subjects. They are only occasionally direct meditations on "love" or "time." More often the reader needs to puzzle why a chapter called *yoghurt/ yogurt* is about reading to a child, or why a discussion of Friesland and its dialect is entitled *uier/ udder*.

As both a poetics and memoir, *alfabet/ alphabet* covers a lot of territory and many diverse subjects. There are wonderful invocations of immigrant family life, both tough and moving, as well as humorous examples of the defamiliarization of a European's move to Canada (milk comes in bags here! electrical outlets look like human faces!). And there is the perhaps expected growing awareness of the inconsistencies of the English language as De Meijer learns to speak it (why is "union" not pronounced "onion" she wonders). Elsewhere she recounts travels back to the Netherlands, and does not sugar-coat

¹ Approximations for a partial capture of the word's meaning in English are 'be silent,' 'shut up,' or 'withhold language.'

a possible “return to an idealized homeland” narrative, instead describing encounters with neo-Nazis and recalling childhood neighbours who called her and her mixed-race siblings *vuilnisbakkenras*, “the word for mongrel, which translates literally as garbage-can-race” (42).

The majority of the essays, however, do focus on language and poetry. De Meijer discusses Dutch poets who have influenced her—such as P. A. de Genestet, M. Vasalis, Leo Vroman, Ida Gerhardt, Herman de Coninck, and Martinus Nijhoff—and the phonology of the Dutch language and how it affects its poetry. There are also descriptive passages of the sounds of each letter in Dutch; for example, G is “the notorious *ghay* [which has] a guttural, scraping sound which exists in Arabic as well, but not in English. Imagine a porous k. In northern Dutch, the letter originates in the throat; the windpipe tightens in a brief gargle” (47). And there are examples of De Meijer’s own poetry, such as the delightful list-poem *chronisch/ chronic*, which is a description of “what Dutch sounds like to my English-speaking friends,” including “Throaty, phlegmy, a little bit spitty,” or “An English recording played backward,” and “Like socialism” (15-18).

As insightful as De Meijer’s observations are, it sometimes struck me, especially for a Canadian writer and in a book produced by a Canadian publisher, that she appeared to be digging around issues that other Canadian poets and critics have been examining for some time. For example, her discussions of the maternal and poetry has resonance with Daphne Marlatt, Susan Holbrook, and Nicole Brossard. When she discusses the connection between language and landscape, suggesting that the sound of *Nederlands* is a result of that people’s connection to the sea and the rainfall of western Netherlands, one may be reminded of Dennis Lee’s work on national inflections of language as drawn from the land in his essay “Cadence, country, silence.” When De Meijer describes her first moments of arriving in Canada as child, she writes, “*Waar ben ik* (where am I?) was the question that burned in me” (27), appearing to confirm Northrop Frye’s famous claim that the immigrant-writer’s first question is not “Who am I?” but “Where is here?” without directly acknowledging him. Most of all, I wished that there might have been some conversation with the work of Aritha van Herk whose lyrical essays are similar to De Meijer’s, especially the piece “Of dykes and boers and drowning” which also explores the influence of the Dutch language on Van Herk’s life and writing in Canada.

To be fair, however, De Meijer is a primarily a poet and not an academic, and shouldn’t be expected to address generations of poetic exploration in Canada. And she is indeed a fine poet, bringing her poetic ear to almost every essay in the collection, and always being attentive to sound, intonation, and rhythm. Her own translations of the Dutch poets she discusses are also first rate, and she explains her word choices and translation decisions in an engaging manner. At one point

she describes the poetry of Ida Gerhardt as being like a finely-designed wooden box for its precision and proficiency—a statement that could be equally applied to De Meijer’s own writing (as well as to the beautiful design of *alfabet/ alphabet* itself, courtesy of Ellie Hastings of Palimpsest Press).

As of this writing, *alfabet/ alphabet* has won the 2021 Governor General’s Literary Award for Nonfiction, so reviewing the book now feels a bit like coming late to a great party. Yet, in composing this I hope I have conveyed just how strong a collection *alfabet/ alphabet* is, and how deserving De Meijer is of the accolades she has received. She has already proven herself to be a talented poet, and she has now clearly established herself as powerful essayist and memoirist. *alfabet/ alphabet* is not just an extremely pleasurable read, but is also an important statement on the poetics of translation and provides a valuable service in introducing several modern Dutch poets to an English readership.

About the reviewer

Stephen Cain is an associate professor of English at York University where he teaches Canadian and avant-garde literature. He is the author of five collections of poetry—including *American Standard/ Canada Dry* (Coach House Books, 2005) and *False Friends* (Book*hug Press, 2017)—and is the editor of *bp: beginnings* (Book*hug Press, 2014), the collected early poetic sequences of bpNichol.