

Language

Aitch or Haitch? The letter that divides opinion

The alphabet is something not to be argued with: there are 26 letters in as fixed a sequence as the numbers 1-26; once learned in order and for the "sounds they make", you have the key to reading and the key to the way the world is classified. Or perhaps not.

Actually, in the course of writing a book about the history of the letters we use, Alphabetical, I discovered that the alphabet is far from neutral. Debates about power and class surround every letter, and H is the most contentious of all.

In Britain, H owes its name to the Normans, who brought their letter "hache" with them in 1066. Hache is the source of our word "hatchet": probably because a lower-case H looks a lot like an axe. It has certainly caused a lot of trouble over the years. In ancient Rome, they were snooty not about people who dropped their Hs but about those who picked up extra ones. Catullus wrote a nasty little poem about Arrius (H'arrius he called him), who littered his sentences with Hs because he wanted to sound more Greek. Almost two thousand years later we are still split, and pronouncing H two ways: "aitch", which is posh and "right"; and "haitch", which is not posh and thus "wrong". The two variants used to mark the religious divide in Northern Ireland - aitch was Protestant, haitch was Catholic, and getting it wrong could be a dangerous business.



In the mid 19th century, it was 'correct' to drop the H

Perhaps the letter H was doomed from the start: given that the sound we associate with H is so slight (a little outbreak), there has been debate since at least AD 500 whether it was a true letter or not. In England, the most up-to-date research suggests that some 13th-century dialects were h-dropping, but by the time elocution experts came along in the 18th century, they were pointing out what a crime it is. And then received wisdom shifted, again: by 1858, if I wanted to speak correctly, I should have said "erb", "ospital" and "umble".

The world is full of people laying down the law about the "correct" choice: is it "a hotel" or "an otel"; is it "a historian" or "an historian"? But there is no single correct version. You choose. Writing this book has been a

fascinating journey: the story of our alphabet turns out to be a complex tug of war between the people who want to own our language and the people who use it. I know which side I'm on.

Michael Rosen

i Alphabetical: How Every Letter Tells A Story by Michael Rosen is published on 7 November by John Murray, £16.99.



Pass notes

No 3,212
The EDL
Angels



Age: Various.

Appearance: White, with anger.

Aha! I saw what you did there. That's a Significant Comma, isn't it? Like the one that makes "eats, shoots and leaves" so hilariously different from "eats shoots and leaves"? It might be. Can we just get on with the description?

If we must. Also female. Usually found in the company of angry white men.

That sounds like an editorial meeting at the Daily Mail. No wonder they are cross. Actually, they blame their rage on some very specific sources: Muslims. And David Cameron.

You'd better explain half of that. You've heard the English Defence League?

The one founded by a former BNP member ... Correct.

... who has just left it because it was attracting too many "goose-stepping white pride morons" Correct again. "Angels" are what the EDL calls its female members.

Whoa, there! There are ladies in that bunch of bigots? We call them "women" in the Guardian. And, as its website insists, the EDL is "an inclusive movement dedicated to peacefully protesting against Islamic extremism". It even claims to have Jewish and LGBT divisions.

Is there a chance of these self-proclaimed celestial beings exerting some kind of civilising effect? Don't hold your breath. Although the YouTube video EDL Angels suggests they spend all their time gurning at cameras and making Churchillian V-signs, earlier this year two "angels" from Plymouth, Hayley Wells and Kelly Watterson, were convicted of taking part in a religiously aggravated attack on a Kurdish family. According to a witness, the drunken mob threw glass objects and shouted at one man to "go back to his own country".

Very uplifting. But what have the Angels got against Cameron? Apart from the obvious? He dared to insult the EDL in a speech in 2011. As well as demonstrating outside Downing Street, the league's "wives, mothers, aunts, grandmothers etc" responded by setting up an online petition claiming "EDL Angels are not sick". It got a grand total of 801 signatures. **That's not terribly impressive, is it?** Not really. **Don't say:** "They're women of conviction!" **Do say:** "They're women with convictions."



IN NUMBERS



300

Number of entrants to the World Beard and Moustache Championships, held in Germany on Saturday.

18

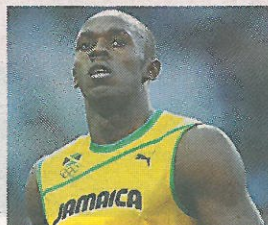
Number of categories in the competition, more than half of which were won by German beard-growers.

Source: the Local



Chicken runner

According to his new memoir, at the Beijing Olympics sprinter Usain Bolt ate 100 chicken McNuggets a day for 10 days. That's a total of 47,500 calories. No wonder he won.



Epic lute

The "Bandura" - a type of Ukrainian lute - helped maths teacher Paul Allen to victory in the national Scrabble championships, scoring him 86 points in the final match.

Dr whuh?

A pair of physicists have published a paper on TARDIS science. It turns out the inside "is Rindler spacetime, and the exterior is Minkowski spacetime". Duh.

