

# Biography Resource Center

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## Mark Rodney Dunn

1956-

**Also known as:** Mark Rodney Dunn

**Birth:** July 12, 1956 in Memphis, Tennessee, United States

**Nationality:** American

**Source:** *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Entry updated: 01/03/2007

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## "Sidelights"

Mark Dunn is a playwright and novelist whose works incorporate experiments in form and language. He is probably best known for *Ella Minnow Pea: A Progressively Lipogrammatic Epistolary Fable*, an experimental novel in which an island's inhabitants strive to fashion a panagram even as their alphabet is continually reduced by government decree. "I don't know where the idea for *Ella Minnow Pea* came from," Dunn wrote on the *Goldberg McDuffie Communications* Web site. "As a kid I would often play a game with friends and siblings in which we would 'outlaw' a letter of the alphabet and attempt to converse without it." He added, "I've always been fascinated by lipogrammatic writing."

In *Ella Minnow Pea*, a band of defiant islanders is determined to fashion a panagram--a phrase featuring all the letters of the alphabet--shorter than Nevin Nollop's famous sentence, "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog." But the writers are restricted, by the island's ruling council, to using only those letters remaining from an inscription featured on a crumbling statue of Nollop, who had lived on the island in the previous century. Compelled to use an increasingly limited alphabet, the islanders resort to ever more unlikely phrases, and as the entire novel unfolds as correspondence generated by the islanders, Dunn is compelled to deal with the same dwindling alphabet that he has imposed on his characters. *Mostly Fiction* reviewer Judi Clark called *Ella Minnow Pea* "a very original and clever novel" and "great fun for wordsmiths." In addition, the same critic lauded Dunn for his "artful use of language and keen wit" and concluded by contending that *Ella Minnow Pea* "is destined to become a classic." A critic in *Kirkus Reviews* deemed it "a mostly lighthearted tweaking of literary sensibilities."

Dunn's other writings include such plays as *Belles*, a work that consists mainly of phone conversations; *Octet*, a "concert" that combines dialogue and instrumental music; and *Frank's Life*, which Dunn summarized on the *Goldberg McDuffie Communications* Web site as "the tale of a man who discovers his whole life has been a television show with him as unwitting star." Similarities between *Frank's Life* and the later film *The Truman Show* prompted Dunn to sue Paramount Pictures for copyright infringement. "There are 108 similarities listed in the complaint," Dunn told *Back Stage*. "I cannot see--with all these similarities--that the script [for *The Truman Show*] was coincidence or independently developed." Dunn and Paramount eventually settled out of court, whereupon Dunn resumed his career as a writer. "I was dandled by the media, deposed by a

battery of corporation attorneys," he wrote on the *Goldberg McDuffie*, site "and finally delighted to settle the suit out of court ... and get back to my writing."

That writing included a new novel, *Ibid: A Life: A Novel in Footnotes*, and two nonfiction works, *United States Counties*, a reference work coauthored with his wife, Mary Dunn, and *Zounds!: A Browser's Dictionary of Interjections*.

Dunn's third novel, *Ibid*, posits a biography of a three-legged circus performer named Jonathan Blashette. The original biography, however, has been--according to the book's central conceit--destroyed in his editor's bath. All that remains is the end matter, the sources and notes accompanying the manuscript. Thus, from these remaining pieces of marginalia the biography of Blashette is recreated. The footnotes take the reader on a tour of Blashette's life from the 1880s to the 1960s. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer was unimpressed with this post-modern approach to novel writing, finding such truncated reading akin to "being served a dinner consisting entirely of turkey necks." The same reviewer concluded, "The book reads as if Dunn had a brilliant time writing it, but readers may find the going tougher." However, a *Kirkus Reviews* critic had a far different assessment of *Ibid*, noting that it was "refreshingly non-epic, reveling in odd comic details," as well as "humorous [and] quick like the wind."

Dunn turned his hand to nonfiction with *United States Counties*, which includes short entries on all the U.S. counties, with information regarding name origin, population, industries, geographical facts, size, and history. A *Booklist* contributor found this "an interesting, somewhat-flawed, but, in the end, useful title." The same reviewer pointed to certain factual errors as well as omissions (no bibliography is supplied), but concluded that *United States Counties* "succeeds because it collects a large amount of information into one convenient spot."

## PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born July 12, 1956, in Memphis, TN; son of Bobby Wayne (an artist) and Miriam (an artist) Dunn; married Mary Weekley (an interior designer), May 29, 1982. **Education:** Memphis State University, B.A., 1978; postgraduate study, University of Texas, 1980-81. **Avocational Interests:** Volunteer with Habitat for Humanity. **Memberships:** Dramatists Guild. **Addresses:** Home: P.O. Box 40, Old Chelsea Station, New York, NY 10011.

## AWARDS

Margo Jones Playwriting Award, 1986-87, for *Belles*; Nesburn Prize, 1997; Julie Harris Playwriting Award, Beverly Hills Theatre Guild, for *Armistice Day*; Hudson River Classics Playwriting Award, 1996, for *I Hate to Go and Leave This Pretty Sight*; Playhouse on the Square Playwriting Competition, 1998, for *North Fork*; fiction winner, Borders Original Voices Competition, 2001, for *Ella Minnow Pea*.

## CAREER

Writer. Thirteenth Street Repertory Co., New York, NY, playwright-in-residence, 1988-97; New Jersey Repertory Co., Long Branch, NJ, playwright-in-residence, 1998--; Community League, Williamsport, PA, playwright-in-residence, 1999--. Duane United Methodist Church, New York, NY, trustee, 1992-95; cofounder, People United for Libraries in Africa, 2002--.

## WRITINGS:

### NOVELS

- *Ella Minnow Pea: A Progressively Lipogrammatic Epistolary Fable*, MacAdam/Cage (San Francisco, CA), 2001.
- *Welcome to Higby*, MacAdam/Cage (San Francisco, CA), 2002.
- *Ibid: A Life: A Novel in Footnotes*, MacAdam/Cage (San Francisco, CA), 2004.

### PLAYS

- *Belles* (two-act), Samuel French (New York, NY), 1990.
- *Minus some Buttons* (two-act), Samuel French (New York, NY), 1991.
- *Sandpies and Scissorlegs* (two-act), Samuel French (New York, NY), 1992.
- *Frank's Life*, Dramatic Publishing (Woodstock, IL), 1992.
- *Five Tellers Dancing in the Rain* (two-act), Samuel French (New York, NY), 1994.
- *Judge and Jury* (two-act), Samuel French (New York, NY), 1994.
- *Elvis and Eleanor*, Palmetto Play Service (Pendleton, SC), 1996.
- *Gendermat* (one-act), Samuel French (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Cabin Fever: A Texas Tragicomedy*, Samuel French (New York, NY), 2000.
- *The Deer and the Antelope Play*, Dramatists Play Service (New York, NY), 2001.

Also the author of the plays *TJ; or, The Publick and Private Intrigues of Thomas Jefferson and His Illustrious Circle*, *Oh Revoir*, *Mirabeau*, *Volley Boys*, *Armistice Day*, *Judy Garland Slept Here*, and *Octet*.

## OTHER

- (With Mary Dunn) *United States Counties* (encyclopedia), McFarland & Co. (Jefferson, NC), 2003.
- *Zounds!: A Browser's Dictionary of Interjections*, with cartoon commentary by Sergio Aragones, St. Martin's Griffin (New York, NY), 2005.

## WORKS IN PROGRESS

A novel about Theodore Roosevelt.

## FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

## PERIODICALS

- *Back Stage*, June 26, 1998, Murdoch McBride, "Playwright Dunn, Bucking System, Sues 'Truman,'" p. 3.
- *Booklist*, February 15, 2004, review of *United States Counties*, p. 1094.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, August 15, 2001, review of *Ella Minnow Pea: A Progressively Lipogrammatic Epistolary Fable*, p. 1146; February 15, 2004, review of *Ibid: A Life: A Novel in Footnotes*, p. 145.
- *Publishers Weekly*, July 23, 2001, John F. Baker, "PB Sale for Playful Word Novel," p. 14; February 23, 2004, review of *Ibid*, p. 49.

## ONLINE

- *Dramatic Publishing Web site*, <http://www.dramaticpublishing.com/> (October 23, 2006), "Mark Dunn."
- *Goldberg McDuffie Communications Web site*, <http://goldbergmcduffie.com/> (December 2, 2001), "Mark Dunn on Mark Dunn."
- *Mostly Fiction*, <http://mostlyfiction.com/> (October 19, 2001), Judi Clark, review of *Ella Minnow Pea*.\*

## SOURCE CITATION

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## Publishers Weekly

**PW Interview: Mark Dunn**

BY DERMOT MCEVOY -- 11/6/2002

### From Elvis to *Higby*

The Quick Brown Fox Jumps Over the Lazy Dog. That, folks, is a pangram, a phrase, sentence or verse composed of all the letters of the alphabet—and the genius of a thesis behind Mark Dunn's highly praised *Ella Minnow Pea*. The novel was published by MacAdams/ Cage to rave reviews in the fall of 2001 and was followed this October by *Welcome to Higby*, while the trade paperback of *Ella Minnow Pea* made its debut from Anchor Books.



The South has given us many great writers—Flannery O'Connor, Faulkner, Welty and McCullers come to mind immediately—and Dunn with his mighty reviews and soft Tennessee drawl, certainly looks to be the latest in a distinguished line. "There's that real-strong storytelling element that I absorbed while I was there," says Dunn over lunch at a Greenwich Village restaurant not far from his home. "That's what I know. I guess since I been in the North, I can be a little more comfortable writing stories set here, writing characters based here, but not totally comfortable with it yet. I was blessed by growing up a block from Graceland so there's a real-strong Elvis element in my life. I have a couple of Elvis stories to tell.

"Yeah," says Dunn with delight as he begins to describe his true-life Elvis encounter, "I spent a night with him. Believe it or not, I have a twin brother Clay and on our 18th birthday—and this is totally coincidental—we worked at a movie theatre in Memphis as ushers. Elvis liked to rent out movie theatres and bring his friends and his family and just crash there for the whole night, within a protected environment. That particular night he had rented out the theater and someone needed to be there to serve him popcorn, so I spent the whole night there."

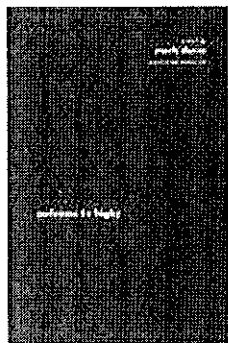
PW is forced to ask the obvious: Lots of butter? Dunn laughs. "I can't remember if he liked a lot of butter or not. Elvis hung out there till dawn with his small entourage and we just palled around with him." For Elvis's fans, Dunn is happy to report that the King was a regular guy. "This was in '74. It was actually before the enormous weight gain and before the drug problems, so we sort of saw the last of the great stable Elvis before he went on the slide."

Of course Dunn couldn't resist fodder as rich as this. He's written a play about that night called *Elvis and Eleanor*, where the other character is an actor playing none other than Eleanor Roosevelt. In fact, playwriting came to Dunn long before his novels were published. "I was writing plays from a real early age," Dunn recalls. Born in 1956, he went to the University of Memphis, then called Memphis State University, and majored in film. "At the same time, I was trying my hand at other formats. I actually wrote my first novel in the early '80s, one of the early failed efforts. So I was stretching my muscles in a lot of different ways. It's just that playwriting kind of came to work for me because I started getting productions." Dunn has had his plays staged in over 150 productions around the country. "It's very, very difficult to make a living as a playwright," he warns. "I've had nine plays published, and they're all being licensed to amateur theatre groups around the country, and even still you can't make a living."

The difference in playwriting and novel writing? "Play writing comes real easy for me," Dunn says, "because I enjoy writing dialogue. I've also learned how to use all the tools of telling stories within the constrictions that you have in a theatre. Writing novels is more of a challenge because I'm a lot more skilled at writing dialogue than I am on description. I'm getting better at description, but as one who becomes familiar with my novels, one can tell that they are strongly dialogue driven works because that's what comes to me a lot easier."

In fact, one of his plays had a momentous effect on his ability to sit home and write novels. "Basically what I did," recalls Dunn, "was sue Paramount and three different producers of *The Truman Show* for stealing a play of mine called *Frank's Life*, which was done here in the Village in the early '90s and was favorably reviewed by the *New York Post*. It got more attention than your usual off-off Broadway play, and it did well. It was like this little cult play. We were selling out every night because everyone loved this whole *Twilight Zone* aspect to it. Through an agent, I was

asked to send copies of the script, and it wound up in a couple of studios out in Hollywood. When *The Truman Show* came out, I got an attorney who handles copyright infringement and sued Paramount, and after a year we settled out of court. The amount of the settlement—while I'm not allowed to tell you what it was—allowed me to leave my day job at the New York Public Library and to write full-time, which was a nice sort of silver lining to this whole thing."



As one can glean from *Frank's Life*, one of the big influences on Dunn's work was Rod Serling of *Twilight Zone* fame. "I like the whole area of fantasy. A lot of writers don't really understand all the nuances to fantasy—it's not just about science fiction, it's about creating a whole different world in which things are not what they appear to be and there's all kinds of plot twists and O. Henry kind of endings. I like that whole world and I've always been real comfortable in that kind of world. Serling's always been one of my favorite writers. I have very vivid memories of watching the *Twilight Zone* as a small child. In fact, I remember 'The Eye of the Beholder' episode and being frightened into running out of the room watching that show."

Dunn is one of those rare breed of novelists who managed to get their work published without the help of an agent. "It's a sad story with a happy ending," says Dunn, "because with first novels it's very, very hard to separate yourself from the crowd and get publishers to pay attention to what you're doing. And I had a devil of a time with this book. I think I sent this book out maybe three different rounds. First, of course, you try and hit the big houses. And without an agent, that's impossible because they hardly even read query letters from people who are not represented. Then I kind of moved down to the next level. I sent it to a small publishing house in Florida and the woman wrote me back and said the novel has a lot of problems and, by the way, just because you're a good playwright doesn't mean you're a good novelist. One thing that eventually happened was that MacAdam/Cage got started up. When they made their first appearance in *Writer's Marketplace* I jumped at it. This is the happy ending to the story. After over two years of struggling to get *Ella Minnow Pea* at least read, much less picked up, I got a response from Pat Walsh—who is now my editor—to my original query letter with an invitation to send the full manuscript. Within two weeks I had an offer to publish. I felt this is incredible!"

*Ella Minnow Pea* is a novel built on a pangram. "It's about a fictional island in which the islanders have decided that language is all important," says Dunn, "and they elevated it to the point of nearly deifying the fictitious author of the famous pangram *The Quick Brown Fox Jumps Over the Lazy Dog*. They erect a monument to him and when letters from this pangram, which are up on the monument on tiles, begin to fall, the high elders of the island decide that this is Mr. Nevin Nollop speaking from the grave, directing his people not to use those letters of the alphabet. So as the book progresses those letters disappear from the story. And I can't use them either because I'm writing in an epistolary format which requires not telling in the third person, so I'm forced to speak in the voices of my characters, in their letters, to each other. It was very difficult. It was an incredible challenge, but it was fun."

*Ella Minnow Pea* has been called a "progressively lipogrammatic epistolary fable." The book, although light-hearted at times, confronts serious questions about fascism, tyranny, resistance, and the ambition of zealots. "I was trying to say," explains Dunn, "that when you lose certain rights, you lose certain intangibles in addition to those rights. You don't just lose freedom of expression, you're inconvenienced in lots of other ways too. As the story progresses people start losing their houses. All of a sudden the access to food becomes a problem and you start to lose all those basic parts of our existence because our ability to communicate with each other has been undermined. We can speak of freedom in the abstract, but when we start to really apply it in a tangible way, you realize how horrendous it is. I also wanted to address the whole idea of religious zealots and what they can do to sometimes damage our very existence if they are allowed free reign over our lives."

So the manuscript that Dunn had to beg publishers to even read, went on to become a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers title, a Top Ten Book Sense Pick and the recipient of a Borders Original Voices Award. Thus began Dunn's love affair with American booksellers. "I think one of the reasons that booksellers and I have gotten along so well," says Dunn, "is because I tend to give them things that they've never seen before. For example, *Ella Minnow Pea* is a book that really doesn't have anything to compare it to. I think that the people who get excited about that book like the fact that they can say to a customer who walks in the door 'you've never seen a book like this before; you've never read a book like this. I think it'll be a fun read for you.' A lot of the independent booksellers have nice relationships with their customers; they're on a first-name basis. And because of that they know which customers like which books, and I think that really helps a lot in terms of putting this particular book in people's hands."

Publication of *Welcome to Higby* was certainly made easier after *Ella Minnow Pea* pioneered the way. Dunn estimates that *Higby*, written before *Ella Minnow Pea*, was rejected by over 100 publishers in its various forms. MacAdams/Cage wanted to know if there were any other gems sitting in Dunn's desk drawer. "I have this Southern novel," he told his publisher, "that I've been working off-and-on for about eight or nine years." Several months later MacAdams/Cage snatched up *Welcome to Higby* also. *Welcome to Higby* takes place in the small hamlet of Higby, Miss., over a Labor Day weekend and features a band of off-beat characters that Dunn has lovingly embraced. In fact, Dunn has called *Higby* "a novel without a villain...a book about love."

"I wanted to tell a story about characters," Dunn continues, "who don't really include a prototypical antagonist. I find a real goodness in these people, an inherent goodness in each of the characters who struggle with their love lives and with their faith. Because they are struggling so much on their own it didn't seem really important to me to impose some prototypical villain."

And the difference between the two books? "I want to say *Higby's* more traditionally written," says Dunn, "although there are some areas in which I have a lot of fun with narrative and format. It's got five different storylines and this huge cast of characters that sort of weave in and out of each other's lives over this three day period. I think the scope of it, or the scale of it, is a little ambitious in that respect. But I think the fact that it is a straight-forward story that's told chronologically in 75 chapters, it does lend itself to a more traditionally kind of looking novel."

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**Author Essay**

## Lipogrammatic Challenges

By Mark Dunn

Mark Dunn has a knack for exploring tough ways to tell a story, both in his plays and now in his novel, *Ella Minnow Pea*. The events of the story take place on a fictional island where a memorial honors the man who invented the pangram "The Quick Brown Fox Jumps Over the Lazy Dog." As the letters fall off the memorial, the islanders also excise them from their vocabulary. Their word pool gets smaller and smaller until it seems almost definite that communication as we know it will end for the islanders.

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I started writing around the age of 8: short stories heavily influenced by Jules Verne and *Twilight Zone* and anything in which the planet is imperiled by forces of total annihilation. My characters would inevitably find themselves in the final moments of these stories fleeing fast-moving lava flows or brain-bereft zombies who sometimes bore strong resemblance to people who didn't understand me.

When I was 13 I wrote a play strikingly similar to *King Solomon's Mines* and staged it in a playground sand box.

An early attempt at theatre in the round.

I grew up. Wrote more plays. A couple of unoptioned screenplays that have settled into a long tenancy on a bookshelf in my office. A couple of file cabinet novels.

I liked the large canvas offered by the novel format. Even in my full-length plays my characters had to shut up after two hours, because people needed to get home and pay the babysitter. I relished the luxury of developing a story without the restrictions imposed by a shorter format. At the same time, there was something about restrictions and the challenges inherent in them that always fueled my interest in the project at hand. I cultivated the imposed challenges, deliberately turning my narrative upside down, inside out, honing new storytelling tools in the process. *Belles* is a play that unfolds almost solely through telephone conversations. *The Last Days of J.P. Five* is a novel about four months in the life of a justice court in Texas, told almost exclusively through court pleadings, memos, and journal entries.

Years ago, I found a curious series of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" poems, each omitting a different letter of the alphabet. While employed in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division of the New York Public Library I got my hands on a copy of



the very rare *Gadsby*, an American novel written entirely without use of the letter "e." I became fascinated with lipogrammatic writing and began to wonder why no one had taken the concept to the logical next step: a novel written through a progressive jettisoning of the letters of the alphabet. One new letter excised with each new chapter.

I know now why it's never been done before.

For one thing, it isn't easy.

In fact, *Ella Minnow Pea* posed the greatest challenge of my writing career. I joke that it used parts of my brain that I never knew I had.

Another reason for the progressively lipogrammatic novel's absence from the quirky corners of American and English literature is the fact that, no doubt, no one could find a way to justify use of the device within the context of the story.

I found my context on the island of Nollop—a mythical place, but one reflecting the historical, yet still evident humanity-debilitating hallmarks of religious extremism in service to a dangerously misguided concept: that to effectively worship one's God one must seek to diminish the worth and freedom of those who don't necessarily share one's faith and views. Turning religious faith into a weapon of destruction—be the intended targets Buddhist statuary or Jewish gravestones, or in the case of this novel, the very freedom to communicate. As letters of the alphabet fall from the hallowed cenotaph, Nollopians must make life-altering choices. Cobble together new forms of communication. Pose the inevitable question: To speak or not to speak? To fight and defy, or flee the fast-flowing lava-like swell of a theocratic regime gone berserk? And what happens to those who have been so robbed? In terms of my story, what are the compensations that one must make as one's very instruments of communication are being dismantled slowly and methodically and quite diabolically? And how to maintain the dignity of one's humanity against such odds?

The obvious challenge to me as author: How do I construct a story when, in playing by my characters' rules, I must discard the very tools that I have grown to rely upon as a writer? Has any writer ever been so masochistic?

In the end, I think my 8-year-old former self would be happy to see a return to the concept of global annihilation, although in a scaled-down, microcosmic form. As well as the presence of a nice smattering of zombies. (Although extensive mention of them in the novel becomes problematic with the loss of the letter Z.)

I'm telling you, this is one strange book.

But I wouldn't have it any other way.

Just ask that 8-year-old.

Please note that these ratings solely represent the complete review's biased interpretation and subjective opinion of the actual reviews and do not claim to accurately reflect or represent the views of the reviewers. Similarly the illustrative quotes chosen here are merely those the complete review subjectively believes represent the tenor and judgment of the review as a whole. We acknowledge (and remind and warn you) that they may, in fact, be entirely unrepresentative of the actual reviews by any other measure.

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## The *complete review's* Review:

*Ella Minnow Pea* is a charming and clever fable of unlikely design, full of anything but idle wordplay.

One can't get around the wordplay -- it's central to the novel -- but it seems almost a shame to focus on it, because the book is so much more than merely a clever game. Still, mention must be made, explanations proffered.

The original subtitle for the book (for the hardcover edition) was: *A Progressively Lipogrammatic Epistolary Fable*. This has been simplified (fairly cleverly, and almost adequately) for the paperback edition to: *A Novel in Letters*. *Ella Minnow Pea* is a tale related entirely in the letters the characters send to one another (hence: an epistolary novel). It is a challenging form, but Dunn manages to convey the action very well in this manner -- and, indeed, the book could hardly be told as effectively without these letters.

This is because, in fact, it is told without *other* letters: that's the lipogrammatic aspect of the novel. A lipogram is -- as helpfully defined at the beginning of the book -- "a written work composed of words selected so as to avoid the use of one or more letters of the alphabet". (It's a favourite game of the Oulipo-gang -- see our reviews of their books for some other examples.) As time passes in the novel, less and less letters of the alphabet are at the disposal of the characters, and so letter-writing (and any communication) becomes ever more complicated.

All this sounds far more complex and ridiculous than what readers might want to put up with. Oh, but it's well, well worth your while.

*Ella Minnow Pea* is set in Nollop, a small island off America's southern Atlantic coast. It is named after Nevin Nollop, revered for his discovery of the pangram: "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog." A pangram is a sentence or verse that uses all the letters of the alphabet -- preferably with as few duplications as possible. This one is considered so remarkable because of its brevity, using all 26 letters of the alphabet in a 35-character sentence.

The islanders revere language. They are still "a nation of letter-writers", and make a great effort to express themselves well and clearly. (Their letters are thus a bit ... flowery, but still a pleasure to read.) They live in a sort of literary paradise, where the written word is highly regarded and mass media, TV, and schlock have not debased life.

Then disaster strikes. A memorial was erected to Nollop on the island - a statue, with his immortal sentence printed out in tiles on the pedestal. One day the tile with letter "Z" falls off. And the ruling five-man Council decide this is a message from Nollop himself, that henceforth he wants the islanders to do without the letter Zed.



It is outlawed. It can no longer be used in writing or in speech. Any writing which has a "Z" in it is to be destroyed. For those who violate the law and write or speak the dreaded letter there is a three-strikes-and-you're-out law: get caught three times and you're banished to America.

Immediately island life changes drastically, as the library is shut (there are no books that don't contain the offending letter). The citizens don't take it too seriously at first, voicing some outrage but generally accepting the new edict. And they adapt, sending Z-less letters now.

Things quickly escalate, as another tile drops off, then another, then another in ever quicker succession. Communication becomes ever-more complicated, transgressions (and banishments) take a huge toll. The language-idyll that was Nollop becomes a totalitarian nightmare almost overnight.

Only one thing can save the island: the Council acts as it does because it believes the falling tiles are the work of god-Nollop himself. His discovery of the great pangram is testament and proof of his linguistic genius and leadership -- but if another pangram, of equal length or shorter can be found then it would prove that he was not all-knowing and infallible. So Enterprise 32 is born, the search for a pangram that will better Nollop's.

Ella Minnow Pea (yes, L-M-N-O-P -- there's almost nothing in this book that isn't also a wordgame) is just one of the central characters, but among those who manages to hold out the longest, never giving up in her search to find the elusive pangram before time is up. It's a close race, and Dunn marvelously heightens the tension as the tiles drop like flies and language becomes ever-more limited.

Again: it might sound like this is all just wordplay, but it's not. Dunn has fashioned a real novel here -- wordplay just happens to be at the centre of it. The characters do come alive, even as the language is deadened, and their daily concerns are very nicely rendered. There's suspense here, and love, and a great deal of affection for language and people. And the book zips along quickly enough that the wordplay does not get tiresome.

*Ella Minnow Pea* is also a very effective allegory of totalitarianism. These limits on language may seem absurd and arbitrary, but the Council's basis for action is no more ridiculous than those given by Bible-thumpers, Islamic fundamentalists, or many elected officials in countries such as the United States or Great Britain (not to mention unelected officials in all your favourite totalitarian nations) for limiting the rights of individuals. The way power can easily be abused even in what appears to be a cultured, civilized nation is nicely demonstrated.

This is a simple, utterly engaging tale, a quick and always enjoyable read, a strikingly clever book, and more. It is a very ambitious novel, and it succeeds completely in everything it sets out to do. A remarkable achievement. We recommend it very strongly

(To teachers we suggest also that this is an ideal text for school-reading -- students can learn from both the method and the message (plus it's just plain good fun).)

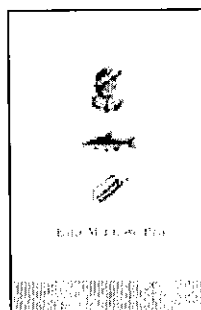
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representation  
of abstract ideas in  
principles, figures  
or events in  
narrative  
dramatic  
typical form

**Ella  
Minnow****Pea** A

Novel in

Letters

**Mark****Dunn****Category:** Fiction**Imprint:** Anchor**Format:** Trade Paperback**Pub Date:** September 2002**Price:** \$12.00**Can. Price:** \$18.00**ISBN:** 0-385-72243-5**Pages:** 224[ENLARGE VIEW](#).....  
**TEACHER'S GUIDE****NOTE TO TEACHERS**

Hailed by the *Christian Science Monitor* as "the first political satire of the 21st century"—and by the *Dallas Morning News* as "Orwell meets Scrabble"—*Ella Minnow Pea* is an exuberant novel of language and ideas that should be of particular interest to high school and college students. As a political satire, it reflects the paranoid absurdities of both the political correctness movement and the domestic war on terror. But the book is also a dazzling linguistic performance that will appeal to anyone who enjoys the subtleties and suppleness of the English language. The 19th-century violinist Niccolò Paganini was famous for snapping three strings of his instrument in mid-concerto and playing on without missing a beat. In *Ella Minnow Pea* Mark Dunn goes Paganini 21 better, divesting himself of most of the letters of the English alphabet and doing so in perfect accordance with the dictates of his story.

The island republic of Nollop is situated 21 miles southeast of Charleston, South Carolina, and named after its native son Nevin Nollop, the creator of the typist's pangram "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog." Nollop is blessed with beautiful beaches, stunning sunsets and an exceptionally literate citizenry that has followed the founder's injunction to "push the perimeter of this glorious language." [74] One can see just how literate from even a cursory perusal of the letters of *Ella Minnow Pea*, the 18-year-old laundress who is the book's heroine and principal narrator. *Ella Minnow Pea* is an epistolary novel, unfolding through the correspondence among Ella, her cousin Tassie Purcy, and various other characters, along with communiqués from Nollop's governing High Island Council.

One July evening a tile falls from the monument that

commemorates Nollop's iconic sentence. In panic, the Council's members sequester themselves to glean the purpose and design behind the "detachment." Shortly they announce their decision: The fall of the tile clearly represents the great Nollop's posthumous wishes, and since the tile in question bears the letter 'Z' it must follow that Nollop wants that letter extirpated from the island's speech and writing. The Council obliges with a ban, threatening violators with flogging, the stocks, or permanent exile. And although at first Ella believes that the loss of 'Z' will be only a minor inconvenience, she soon realizes that the ban has grotesquely far-ranging implications. These become increasingly evident as more tiles tumble and more letters are taken out of circulation. Soon communication becomes all but impossible, island life has come to a standstill, and the best and brightest of Nollop's citizens have been exiled. In the end only Ella is left to break the Council's stranglehold—by composing a pangram even pithier than Nollop's.

#### ABOUT THIS BOOK

"A curiously compelling . . . satire of human foibles, and a light-stepping commentary on censorship and totalitarianism." —*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

"Wordsmiths of every stripe will appreciate this whimsical fable, in which Dunn brilliantly demonstrates his ability to delight and captivate." —*Publishers weekly*

"Dunn... stirs a lot of farce and comic relief into the story....If you're up to the deciphering task, you'll go on a merry romp in this book." —*Library Journal* (starred)

#### On OuLiPo: An Introductory Note

*Ella Minnow Pea* is a lipogrammatic novel; that is, it is written to avoid using certain letters of the alphabet—ultimately, all of them save 'l, m, n, o, p.' As such, it is a late example of the school of literature known as 'OuLiPo,' an acronym for 'Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle' or 'Workshop for Potential Literature.' Although OuLiPo originated in France, where it was co-founded in 1960 by the writer and mathematician Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais, it has come to include works by Italian (Italo Calvino), Argentinean (Julio Cortázar), and U.S. (Harry Mathews, Walter Abish) writers. Oulipian novels are composed under certain constraints of language, plot or structure. According to Professor Paul Harris of Los Angeles' Loyola Marymount University, such "constraints push writers into new linguistic territories—one might say that an Oulipian work is a sort of ongoing investigation into language itself." Harris's essay "The OuLiPo," can be viewed at:

<http://clawwww.lmu.edu/faculty/pharris/oulipo.htm>

Actually, OuLiPo only brings to fiction principles of organization that have been present in poetry since the appearance of the sonnet and the villanelle. And as many poets have noted, placing voluntary restrictions on *how* one writes may paradoxically liberate *what* one writes. In the words of Queneau, "the Oulipian writer is always inspired" [Harris, *ibid.*]

#### ABOUT THIS AUTHOR

Mark Dunn is the author of more than 25 full-length plays,

including *Belles*, *Five Tellers Dancing in the Rain* and *Armistice Day*. He has been the recipient of several national awards, including the 1997 Nesburn Prize and the Beverly Hills Theatre Guild/July Harris Playwriting Award. He is currently playwright-in-residence with the New Jersey Repertory Company and the Community Theatre League in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Originally from Memphis, he now lives in Greenwich Village with his wife, Mary. *Ella Minnow Pea* is his first novel. [Info on file, in printout from Mostlyfiction.com]

## DISCUSSION AND WRITING

### Understanding the Story

1. What event precipitates the novel's action? [3] What is the letter on the fallen tile? [5]
2. Why does the Council hold an emergency meeting and how does it explain the 'detachment' of the tile? [6] Does Ella agree with this explanation? [7] Do you?
3. What is Nevin Nollop's legacy to the people of Nollop? [5, 10]
4. What is the Council's first edict? [5-7]
5. How does Ella think the edict will change life on the island? [7] How do Tassie's predictions differ from hers? [9-10] Which of them turns out to be right?
6. What are the edict's incidental consequences? How does it (and its successors) affect the island's libraries, schools, press and even its extra-literary activities? [17-19, 21-2, 27, 30, 76] What does this suggest about the importance of language?
7. Why can't dissenting Nollopians simply launch a recall motion against the Council? [10, 29]
8. Do the Council's edicts contain any loopholes or exemptions? [13] What are they and how are they later put to use by Ella and her allies? [102-3, 127]
9. What does Tassie mean when she writes, "In the sanctuary of my thoughts, I am a fearless renegade"? [18]
10. How does the Council go about enforcing its rulings? [21, 29, 119] In particular, how does it find out which of its subjects are using forbidden letters?
11. What does Ella mean when she says that the law "builds rock walls between hearts" [22]? What evidence do you see for this?
12. What headline appears on the final edition of the Nollop *Tribune*? [30] How do other dissenting Nollopians use language to defy the Council? [48-9]
13. How do Mr. and Mrs. Towgate justify informing on Mittie Purcy? [32, 39-43] What implicit accusation does Mr. Towgate level against Tassie? [40]
14. Who is Nathan Warren and how has he learned of Nollop's predicament? [44-5] What vital and disturbing piece of news does he bring with him from the States? [50] What does he propose to

do with this information? [51-3]

15. What are the "ten salients" of the Council's proclamation to the people of Nollop? [55] How does it justify its actions? What does the story about Nollop and his stenographer suggest about the founder's character? [56]

16. What transpires at the first meeting of the island's dissidents? [68-9]

17. Why does Ella maintain that the loss of the letter 'D' robs islanders "of great chunks of our very history?" [69]

18. Following D's departure, what alternate names does the Council give the days of the week? [70] At what point do these names, too, become inoperative, and what takes their place? [[115, 127, 130]

19. What were Nollop's last words, and what is their relevance to the story? [74, 78-9]

20. What seemingly minor piece of information do we learn about Ella's father? How will this become important later in the novel? [82, 119-20]

21. Describe the challenge that Nate issues to Mr. Lyttle. [94-6] What is it intended to prove? Why does the rest of the council agree to it? [99-100] What is the significance of the term "Enterprise 32"? [107]

22. What further edict does the Council issue against exiles? [100] Is this decree meant simply as punishment or does it serve an ulterior purpose?

23. What brings about Mittie's second violation of a Council edict? [116] What particular regret does she express when reporting the incident to her daughter? [117]

24. Why is Rory Cummels expelled from Nollop? [121-2] How does his offense differ from those of the other characters' and what does it say about the metastasis of the Nollopian cult?

25. In a letter to Nate, Tassie writes, "We are our own cavalry. The only cavalry there is. Whose horses seem in permanent hobble status." [123] What does she mean by this?

26. Why is Tassie imprisoned and how is she freed? [127-8, 132, 147-8]

27. How does Georgeanne Towgate come to repent her earlier actions? [130, 139, 159]

28. What is so striking about Amos Pea's parting letter to his family? [133-4, 195-7]

29. What happens to life on Nollop as the Council's bans become increasingly restrictive? [149-51, 154] What does the Council do to restore order? [151]

30. Who is Tom and what is his role in Enterprise 32? [151-4]

31. What new concession does the Council make to facilitate



*written* communication among Nollopians? [165]

32. How does Professor Mannheim die and who relates the "greekphos" [169] news to Ella? What does this augur for the success of the Enterprise? [170-3]

33. Describe the demise of Georgeanne Towgate. [175-181] Do you think the manner of her death reflects her personality or it a response to the rigors of life in an alphabetically-deprived society?

34. Who is Ella's last remaining ally in the Enterprise [181-2]? What keeps her from abandoning the project or following her loved ones into exile? [187]

35. How does Ella come to meet the challenge to the Council? [197] How does the author demonstrate the validity of her sentence? Why does she refuse to take full credit for it? [201]

36. What final revelation emerges about the once-revered Nollop? [204-205]

### **Language: Pangrams, Anagrams, and Portmanteau Words**

1. *Ella Minnow Pea* features an expansive and often exotic vocabulary, plentifully augmented by neologisms and especially by *portmanteau* words, hybrids that combine the sounds and meanings of two different words. Which of the following words are 'real' and which are coinages? Define the real words and suggest definitions (and etymologies) for the invented ones: *leapdash*, *multypewritudes*, *empyrean*, *extirpated*, *posteritified*, *lucubrating*, *biblio-shelves*, *promulgated*, *anser-herd*, *littoral*, *vocabulazy*, *pisciverous*, *anodized*, *ineffable*, *aposiopesis*, *caesura*, *scissoresonance*, *hurlatory*, *delishmerelle*, *heavipendence*, *pureplicity*, *taciteries*, *partete*, *Nollopimpotents*, *immotility*, *intensured*, *rectilitude*, *apostates*, *stagnationality*, *pyrrhic*, *Pentapriests*, *humongolacity*, *concomitate*, *fenesters*, *gripgrasping*, *illicitabetical*, *Screnity*, *grocerateria*, *concilliteurs*, *pharisaic*, *nemisister*, *invisilibinguista*, *expurgatory-tangibull*, *tenebrous*, *learn-y-house*, *impregness*, *exanimate*, *genoerasure*, *espy-ation*, *unlearnity*, *gopher-mental*, *intoxi-tipsy*

2. In addition to coining words, Mark Dunn invents a number of phrases intended to serve as euphemisms or to express an idea without the use of a banned letter. Define the following phrases and discuss their probable derivations: *dull-brass-and-pauper's-punch*, *High and Almighties*, *spinal-defectives*, *town baa-baas*, *bastinado-beneficed*, *tuss-and-tangled*, *ask-me-now*, *pound-logical*, *Heavenly Omnigreatness*, *crepuscular-to-auroric*

3. One of the advantages (and challenges) of an epistolary novel is that it reveals its characters through their voices. What do the voices of Dunn's characters tell you about them? Compare Ella's literary style to Tassie's, or the younger girls' voices to those of their elders. How do Georgeanne Towgate's letters differ from Nate's or Tom's? Pay special attention to the collective voice of the High Council, as revealed in its edicts and manifestos. What methods does the author use to help us distinguish between speakers? What happens to their voices as the pool of linguistic resources dwindles?

4. The more letters are eliminated from the islanders'-and the

novel's-discourse, the greater the risk of incoherence. How does the book succeed in conveying the increasing poverty of Nollopian speech and writing without becoming unintelligible?

5. In addition to its lipograms and pangrams, does *Ella Minnow Pea* contain any other verbal patterns? Does the language of one chapter, for example, telegraph which letter will fall in the next? Is "Not, though, when L. E. goons motor through-their horns wailing. Hooligans." [139] an anagram, or does it just look like one? Is the name "Nollop" a pun for "No l-o-p?" There is also the possibility that the very density of the novel's linguistic surface is meant to tease readers into looking for codes where none exist. Is Mark Dunn playing a game with us? With this in mind, you may wish to look at such works of literature as George Perec's *Life: A User's Manual*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* or Jorge Luis Borges' stories, "The Circular Ruins" and "Death and the Compass."

### Themes

1. Discuss the significance of the novel's two epigrams: *In the beginning was the Word* and *The wicked peon quivered, then gazed balefully at the judges who examined him*. In what different ways does each suggest the book's subject? Is there something especially appropriate about the way the author pairs a verse from the Bible with a pangram composed by an anonymous typesetter—in other words, the sublime with the ridiculous?

2. The entire plot of *Ella Minnow Pea* hinges on a paradox: Nevin Nollop taught his people to revere language and extend its perimeters, yet in enforcing Nollop's posthumous wishes (real or perceived) the Council subjects language to unpardonable indignities and shrinks its perimeters to strait-jacket proportions. Is this simply a result of the Council's ruthlessness and fanaticism or does it arise from something in the very fabric of Nollop? Is Dunn trying to suggest that any belief or value system, when carried to a sufficient extreme, is likely to become self-negating?

3. What does *Ella Minnow Pea* suggest about dictatorships: their origins, aims and methods of accumulating and holding on to power? Is it fair to treat a book as fanciful as this one as a document of totalitarianism?

4. Almost everybody in Nollop seems to be unhappy with the council's edicts, yet no one is able to effectively resist them. Why? What does this suggest about the ways that totalitarian regimes affect not only the outward lives but the hearts and minds of their subjects? Are Nollop's inhabitants simply "spinal defectives," [49] or does their passivity have a more complex motivation?

5. How is Nollop affected by the enforced impoverishment of its language? In particular what effects does this shrinkage have on the relationships and interior lives of Nollop's citizens? Do these developments strike you as believable? What is this novel trying to say about the way language shapes our relationships with others and our sense of self?

6. Do the Council's edicts have any positive consequences? Couldn't one say, for instance, that they inspire the Nollopians to greater feats of linguistic dexterity and imaginativeness? What parallels do you see between the Council's strictures on language

and the strictures imposed by Oulipo? Can one read *Ella Minnow Pea* as a novel that comments on its own structure—the literary equivalent of the Quaker Oats boxes brandished by the Rasmussen family? [p. 48]

7. At the novel's close Ella describes Nollop as a "low order primate elevated to high order ecclesiastical primate, elevated still further in these darkest last days to ultimate prime-A-grade superior being." [201-202] (Note the way Dunn uses the word 'primate' in both its meanings: as an order of mammal and as an ecclesiastical office.) Is *Ella Minnow Pea* a religious fable? If so, what would its moral be?

8. *Ella Minnow Pea*'s strongest characters are women—not just Ella but her cousin Tassie and their respective mothers Gwenette and Mittie. The novel's male characters tend to be villainous like the Council members, weak like Ella's father Amos, or at best helpful adjuncts like Nate and Tom. What is the significance of this?

9. Discuss the novel's use of irony, both the conscious, verbal variety (for example, Ella's telling Georgeanne Towgate's family that her painted body "shoot loog smashing 4 the phooneral" [183] ) and situational irony, arising from the discrepancy between words and reality or expectations and results. (An example of the latter is the Council reassuring Mrs. Pea that "Ours continues to be a free, open society" [78] even as it summons her to be flogged or cephalo-stocked). How does Dunn employ both types of irony?

10. Why do you think Dunn chose to make *Ella Minnow Pea* an epistolary novel? What advantages accrue from telling a story through the letters of its characters? How might this book be different if it had a single narrator and point of view?

11. The dwindling of Nollop's alphabet coincides with the dwindling of its population. This is one example of the novel's structure. What other structural devices does the author employ? You may note the recurring appearance of the ever-diminished "Quick-brown-fox" pangram or the way both Ella and Tassie are given romantic interests who are forced into exile or hiding. Why is structure particularly important in a novel like this one?

12. The best way to enjoy *Ella Minnow Pea* is to read it closely, paying attention to its themes, patterns and linguistic tropes. Discuss the novel's value as a means of teaching the art of critical reading. How would you apply the methods you used to read *Ella Minnow Pea* to approach other texts?

#### BEYOND THE BOOK

1. Research a totalitarian regime of any historical era and compare its history to that of Nollop under the Council. You may wish to consider such phenomena as the religious or secular cult of personality; the gradual escalation of the assault on civil liberty; the politicization of culture and language; the use of informants; and the ways in which ordinary citizens come to internalize the repression of the regime.

2. Compare *Ella Minnow Pea* to other dystopian novels, such as George Orwell's *1984* or *Animal Farm*; Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*; Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*; Thomas M. Disch's *Camp Concentration*; Philip K. Dick's *Through a Scanner Darkly* or

*Radio Free Albemuth*; or Evgeny Zamyatin's *We*. Which of these books seem the most believable? Why do you think the overwhelming majority are tragic rather than comic? Does the fact that *Ella Minnow Pea* is a comic novel makes it less serious?

3. Write a brief essay proving or disproving the following proposition: "The fall of tiles from the cenotaph is a clear expression of Nollop's will and desire—namely that the letters on said tiles be eliminated from use."

4. Compare *Ella Minnow Pea* to another novel that employs Oulipian techniques, e.g. *Life: a User's Manual* or *A Void* by Georges Perec; *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino; *Alphabetical Africa* by Walter Abish; *Exercises in Style* by Raymond Queneau; or *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* by Harry Mathews. On the basis of your reading, do you think these works are notable chiefly for their gamesmanship or do they achieve ends beyond the reach of more conventional fictions?

5. Write a short Oulipian text of your choice, employing any of the following constraints:

- Eschew one or more letters of the alphabet
- Use only one vowel (a, e, i, o, u or—for the truly ambitious—y)
- Make the first letter of each sentence (or line, if you're writing a poem) part of an acronym.
- Write solely in the interrogative or imperative modes.

#### OTHER TITLES OF INTEREST

*Alphabetical Africa* by Walter Abish; *Time's Arrow* by Martin Amis; *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood; *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury; *Ficciones* by Jorge Luis Borges; *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess; *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino; *Hopscotch* by Julio Cortázar; *Through a Scanner Darkly*, *Flow My Tears*, *the Policeman Said* and *Radio Free Albemuth* by Philip K. Dick; *Camp Concentration* by Thomas M. Disch; *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco; *Ride a Cockhorse* by Raymond Kennedy; *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* by Harry Mathews; *1984* and *Animal Farm* by George Orwell; *Life: A User's Manual* and *A Void* by Georges Perec; *Exercises in Style* by Raymond Queneau; *The Wonderful O* by James Thurber; *We* by Evgeny Zamyatin.

#### ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The questions, exercises, and assignments in this teachers guide are intended to guide your students through *Ella Minnow Pea* and help them navigate the multiple levels of this playfully intricate novel. Given the scope of Dunn's vocabulary (and his penchant for coining words and phrases at the drop of a hat) your class will probably want to keep a language journal—and some sort of scratch sheet to test the book's pangrams and other verbal codes. Any discussion of *Ella Minnow Pea* will inevitably touch on the issues of censorship and repression and the difference between literal and deep meanings. Thus, the book is an invaluable introduction to the art of critical reading—as well as to such literary forms as the fable, the political satire, and the epistolary and lipogrammatic novel. It is also a great deal of fun to read. Whatever else this guide accomplishes, we hope it preserves that sense of fun.

This Teacher's Guide was written by Peter Trachtenberg. Peter

Trachtenberg is a published writer of fiction and personal essays. He has taught writing and literature at The New School and the Johns Hopkins University School of Continuing Education.

## From the Reviews:

- "*Ella Minnow Pea* is the first political satire of the 21st century, and, appropriately, it's a kinder, gentler satire. (...) Dunn has produced something between a crossword puzzle and a witty political allegory. (...) There's the whiff of a classic about *Ella Minnow Pea*. It's lighter than those high-school standards *1984* or *Brave New World*, but even when only LMNOP remain, it's touched by sweetness." - Ron Charles, Christian Science Monitor
- "We slowly conclude that without language, without culture -- the two are inextricably bound -- existence itself is at stake. And we forget that the novel is only playful. Soon we see that a void, a blankness, awaits us." - Irving Malin, Review of Contemporary Fiction
- "Dunn obviously spent significant energy and creativity to write without certain letters, and there are several nice turns of phrase in the book. As a novel, though, *Ella Minnow Pea* reads like a literary StairMaster -- a decent workout, but don't expect to go anywhere." - Mark Luce, San Francisco Chronicle
- "As will be apparent, Dunn's book is really a fairy story about intolerance and mass hysteria, in the form of a technical exercise. It is a sweet-natured piece (.....) But compared to Perec, *Ella Minnow Pea* is as simple as ABC." - Kevin Jackson, The Spectator
- "As freedom of expression becomes increasingly problematic, one begins to search for Dunn's satirical target. And it is hard to identify, for this is pure allegory. *Animal Farm*, written for a simpler ideological world, was easy. But are we talking about religious fundamentalism here (a latter-day *Tale of a Tub*) ? The collapse of literacy ? Or are we allegorising allegory? Who knows? Perhaps Dunn is lambasting evil men who would suppress lipograms." - Giles Coren, The Times

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## Ella Minnow Pea A Novel in Letters by Mark Dunn

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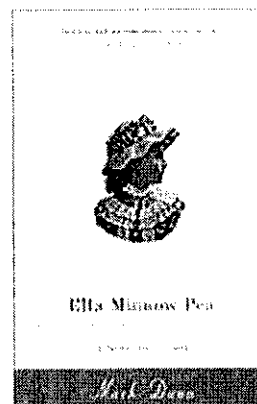
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## About this Book

In **Ella Minnow Pea**, Mark Dunn transports readers to the imaginary island of Nollop, named for Nevin Nollop, inventor of the pangram (a sentence using all letters of the alphabet) "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog." It is an idyllic place, free from technological innovations like television and computers, where Nollopians devote themselves to the liberal arts and especially to the cultivation of language. But when a tile containing the letter "Z" falls from the monument the islanders have erected to honor Nollop and his illustrious sentence, a chain of events is set in motion which will threaten the very foundations of the Nollopian state. The High Island Council calls an emergency session to discuss the fallen letter and in it they see a sign and portent, a message from the great Nollop himself to cease all use of the letter "Z" in spoken and written communication. The Council passes a law against uttering words containing the letter; punishment for violating their strictures can lead to banishment and even death. And as further letters begin to fall, Ella Minnow Pea and her family, along with the rest of community, are forced to live under linguistic siege. Books are destroyed. Newspapers shut down. Citizens are publicly flogged, placed in stocks, their property confiscated and their lives ruined, all for slips of the tongue. But with the help of Nate Warren, a researcher living in South Carolina, the islanders decide to fight back, vowing to create a pangram even shorter and therefore more dazzling than the one for which Nollop has been elevated to divine status. The only question is: can they do it before all is lost?

Charming, intellectually engaging, and filled with fascinating wordplay, **Ella Minnow Pea** is a cautionary tale about authoritarianism, about the dangers of reading signs and symbols where there are none—and about the irrepressible human urge to speak freely.

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## • Discussion Questions

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1. In what ways is **Ella Minnow Pea** unconventional? How is it more like a fable than a novel? What characteristics does it share with other fables? Does it offer a clear moral?
2. Why has Mark Dunn chosen to tell this story through letters rather than a more straightforward narrative? What does Dunn gain by eschewing a single narrative voice in favor of many characters writing to one another about the events that beset their island-nation? What ironies are involved in writing letters about the disappearance of the letters of the alphabet?
3. In response to the first proclamation proscribing the use of the letter "Z," Tassie warns, "it stands to rob us of the freedom to communicate without any manner of fetter or harness" [p. 10]. In what sense can **Ella Minnow Pea** be read as a satire of censorship and the restriction of free speech?
4. All the inhabitants of Nollop are forced into linguistic contortions to avoid being prosecuted by the High Council, substituting words like "cephalus" for "head" and "sub-terra" for "underground" [p. 99]. What are some of the other more amusing verbal acrobatics they are forced to perform?
5. Nate Warren suggests that Nollop was a "charlatan" and a "con man" and that the pangram—"The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog"—responsible for his divine status may have been stolen from someone else. What is Dunn suggesting here about the ways in which human societies venerate and mythologize sacred texts and heroic ancestors?
6. What strategies do the islanders use to protest, oppose, and finally overthrow the tyranny of the High Council? How do these strategies create suspense in the novel?
7. When council representatives come to confiscate Rory Cummel's property, they tell him they are only doing the will of Nollop and that "There is no other Supreme Being but Nollop" [p. 121]. Seen in light of recent events, in the Middle East and elsewhere, can the novel be read as a commentary on religious authoritarianism? What does the novel suggest about the dangers of humans assuming they know God's will with absolute certainty?



**8. Ella Minnow Pea** dwells heavily on the theme of communication—reading, writing, and talking. What is Dunn suggesting by having the members of the High Island Council read the falling letters as signs—supernatural communications from Nollop—which ultimately make communication nearly impossible? What does the novel as whole say about the nature and purpose of communication and community?

**9.** How important are the love relationships in the novel—for example those between Tassie and Nate and between Rory and Mittie—to the main action? How do they enhance the plot?

**10.** Tassie writes that she longs to "live across the channel. . . . With telephones that actually work, and television and computers and books—all the books one could ever hope to read" [p. 32]. What does the novel imply about the dangers of trying to create a utopian society? What examples of intolerant societies—religious or otherwise—exist in the world today? Is the message of this novel relevant to those situations?

**11.** What is the significance of Amos Minnow Pea writing, quite by accident, a sentence which surpasses Nollop's illustrious pangram? In what way does this undermine the divine value that the high council attributes to Nollop's sentence?

**12.** At the end of the novel, Ella suggests a memorial to those who suffered from the High Council's tyranny: "a large box filled with sixty moonshine jugs—piled high, toppling over, corks popping, liquor flowing. Disorder to match the clutter and chaos of our marvelous language. Words upon words, piled high, toppling over, thoughts popping, correspondence and conversation overflowing" [p. 206]. Why is this an appropriate memorial? In what ways is language chaotic? In what ways is it ordered and restrictive? Why is Ella comparing liquor and conversation in this passage?

**13.** How does Dunn manage to make **Ella Minnow Pea** both a whimsical fable and a serious anti-authoritarian satire? What elements of the novel seem comical or lighthearted? What elements seem more pointed? How well does the author integrate them into the story?

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## • Critical Praise

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"There's the whiff of a classic about **Ella Minnow Pea**."

—*The Christian Science Monitor*

"A love letter to alphabetarians and logomaniacs everywhere."

—Myla Goldberg

# Interview, Mark Dunn (*Ella Minnow Pea*)

**Mark Dunn:** This is actually the third novel I've written. I couldn't find a publisher for the first two. I've been writing plays and novels since the early eighties. My first love is the theater; I've written many plays and enjoy telling stories through dialogue. And that's a strong component in each of the three novels I've written. And I think that's true of *Ella Minnow Pea*; I look at letter writing as a form of conversation, you just have to wait a little longer to get the answer back. It allows me to use the voices of my characters in a very conversational style, albeit in this particular book I do put some pretty formal language restrictions on the characters. But dialogue, I think, is one of the strengths of my writing.

**BT:** What challenges did you face as a novelist that surprised you?

**MD:** I think every day working on that novel presented a new challenge. I expected that because of the odd, progressively lipogramatic format, and I have to say progressive because people conjure a book written without one letter of the alphabet, and they don't realize that this is almost like the ultimate challenge. There are specific challenges that revealed themselves. I'll give you one example. I decided early on that I had to remove an important letter from the alphabet, so I thought the least amount of damage would be done by removing the letter 'D', not realizing how important it is for creating past tense. And just how many words in our language use that letter, there's just no getting around it. All of a sudden I went from having a pretty easy time finding the write words to use to having to really dig in to the thesaurus to find substitutory ways to tell my story. And there are a lot of other examples about the way things really surprised me.

**BT:** You obviously have a deep love of language, and I get the feeling you're a force to be reckoned with in Scrabble. Where did your love of words come from?

**MD:** I'll give you an answer that you might find surprising. I actually have a slight reading disability. It's not terrible, but the result is that I'm a chronically slow reader and it's frustrating because I can't get through all of the books that I want to read. But because of that I've been determined to approach language in a wholly different way and to make it work for me. From an early age I would sit and read the dictionary, and see the ways words relate to each other, and how they're employed in different ways and used in different contexts. It's incredibly nerdy stuff, but it did allow me to approach the language in such an odd way that I think it facilitated writing a book like this, where language is used so differently from what we're familiar with.

**BT:** That's interesting, because as the letters progressively drop out of the story, it seems like the pacing of the novel speeds up, and that probably would benefit you as a reader.

**MD:** That's a nice dividend. There's so many ways in which things worked themselves out in this novel, and a lot of it was just plain luck.

**BT:** Where did the inspiration for this particular story come from?

**MD:** I have some major concerns about people who impose their beliefs upon others, and by doing so rob others of their civil liberties. And that was an area that I explored in some other work and that I really wanted to take to an extreme, but in such a way that it didn't repulse readers. It was almost like I wanted to have it both ways. I wanted to employ some really high stakes, but I didn't want to have a blood bath like a lot of dystopian novels do. I wanted it to be something that high school kids could read and think about what the book was trying to say without being disturbed by its presentation. And I think that's why a couple of people have compared it to a "kindler, gentler *1984*."

**BT:** You manage to explore a topic as weighty as totalitarianism with an impressively light touch. Did you set out intending to find a balance between these diametrically opposed qualities?

**MD:** Which you think would be difficult, but once you get used to the light touch, you can sort of keep it going and be a little bit dark, a little bit ironic, and a little satirical in places, but not do it to such an extreme that it's going to put people off. I think I achieved a balance that I'm comfortable with.

**BT:** Did you have something topical in mind when you chose to tackle this subject?

**MD:** At the risk of offending a lot of people who are really calcified in their religious views, a lot of what concerns me, and has for years, is the imposition of one's religious views on others and the ramifications of that. As I was finishing this book, they were blowing up the Buddhist statues in [Bamyan] Afghanistan. That resonated really strongly for me. That they were so convinced that they knew the only path to God that they would destroy something the things that other people had created in their own attempt to understand God is incredibly offensive to me.

**BT:** It must have been quite a challenge, as the book progressed, to write with an ever-contracting palette of letters.

**MD:** I call it a challenge, but it was also incredibly fun. The Nollopian people also create their own words, and later in the book, their own sound-alike language, and that continued to be fun for me throughout the writing process and didn't send me tossing the book across the room.

**BT:** That begs the question, what is your favorite word that you made up to skirt the Nollopian authorities?

**MD:** Gosh, I think I coined about 150 words in the book. There's a couple that I loved, and one that comes quickly to mind is "stagnationality." I love the idea of stagnation on a national level. Another I like, because of its onomatopoetic quality, is "scissoresonance." It has a great Zzzzz thing going on. That was another aspect of what was so much fun, not only was I getting to tell this fun story but I was also getting to reinvent the language.

**BT:** Did you use the "Find" function on your computer to make sure you were not using a "banned" letter by mistake?

**MD:** I would dead without the "Find" function! What I would do, periodically, is to go back through the chapters I'd done before and run the "Search" feature on each of the letters that had been outlawed. And the biggest fear of my original editor was that the book would be finished and we'd all breathe a sigh of relief and a few days later someone would come out of the woodwork and alert us to a letter that shouldn't be there. I think we caught them all, though. So far nobody has come forward.

**BT:** Did you think while you were writing the book that there was a population of wordfreaks out there who would love it, or were you simply trying to amuse yourself?

**MD:** I suspected that there would be some people who really got into that aspect of the book, but so far I haven't received any letters from people like that. My hope was that it would appeal to a lot of different groups of people in a lot of different ways. I haven't been chased down any alleys by any word geeks yet, though.

**BT:** Nollop is a place where words are revered. What do you think about the esteem in which language is held in today's society?

**MD:** It kind of depresses me. I think we, living here in New York City, are lucky in that this city reveres language so much. I love getting on the subway and seeing everyone reading a book. But American society... I think we're getting away from that. I don't think we're instilling in our kids a love of the written word, because of the tendency for them to sit too often in front of TVs and computer screens, and I miss that. I see a paucity in the language that kids are using now. I hope that if the book does nothing else it makes people take a look at the importance of language in our lives.

**BT:** Was this story as much fun to write as it was to read?

**MD:** That was the big question that I had. I enjoyed writing it so much that I thought there's no way people will have this much fun reading it. I felt like I was on this journey and I didn't realized that there would be so many people who would want to take this journey, too

**Book Club November 2007**

**Ella Minnow Pea by Mark Dunn** a playwright and novelist.

His works incorporate experiments in form and language.

Best known for Ella Minnow Pea which is a **Progressively Lipogrammatic Epistolary Fable**

Lipogrammatic: Writing in which one or more letters are forbidden to be used.

Epistolary: Relating to or used in letters, contained or expressed in or carried on by letters

A panagram: A phrase, sentence or verse featuring all the letters of the alphabet.  
Nevin Nollop's famous sentence: "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog." Is an example of a panagram.

Unfamiliar words found in the first 8 pages:

Cenotaph: Monument in honor of a person buried elsewhere; empty tomb

Armanda: Any large fleet or ship or aircraft

Palmetto: Any several fan palms, a cabbage palmetto; Mediterranean dwarf fan palm

Fealty: A feudal vassal's or tenants acknowledgement of loyalty and obligation to his lord

Promulgated: Past, proclaim made publicly known in state, a decree, and public view

Sapience: Wisdom

Sagacity: Any long narrative, keen perspective

Aposiopesis: Breaking off in the middle of a sentence. i.e. and there, lying before me, was ---- but I can't describe the horror of it.

Other words not found in the dictionary:

Mltypewritudes

Fetle

Extrirpated

Expitle

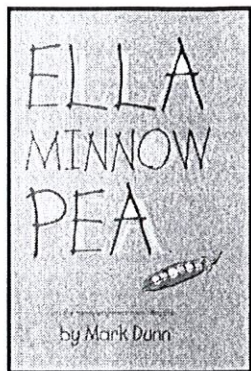
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## NoveList



Popularity: ★★★★★  
 Level: Adult

## Ella Minnow Pea: a progressively lipogrammatic epistolary fable by Mark Dunn

**Author:** Dunn, Mark, 1956-

Recounts what happens when the citizens of an island must rely on all their ingenuity to communicate in an increasingly limited language when the government progressively bans letters from the alphabet.

San Francisco: MacAdam/Cage Pub., c2001, 205 p.

### Subject Headings:

Communes  
 Islands  
 Epistolary novels  
 Fables  
 Lipograms  
 South Carolina

### Reviews for this Title:

**School Library Journal Review:** *Adult/High School*—With shades of Kurt Vonnegut, George Orwell, and William Pène du Bois, *Ella Minnow Pea* is delightfully clever from start to finish. It's set on Nollop, a fictional island off the coast of South Carolina named for its long-dead founder, Nevin Nollop, the "genius" who came up with "The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog." A huge cenotaph of Nollop's sentence stands over the town square—and one day, the "z" falls to the ground. Nollop's elected-for-life Council interprets this as a missive from beyond the grave, "that the letter 'Z' should be utterly excised—fully extirpated—absolutely heave-ho'ed from our communal vocabulary!" Other letters soon follow, and the novel becomes progressively lipogrammatic (a "lipogram" being writing in which one or more letters are forbidden), told exclusively in the form of letters from one citizen to another as they struggle to adapt (a third offense means banishment). Not even the discovery that the glue holding the letters up is calcifying sways the zealots on the Council (perhaps Nollop intended its deterioration). It's decided that only the construction of another sentence that uses every alphabet letter in only 32 graphemes could discredit Nollop's "divine" word. Dunn plays his setup to the hilt, and the result is perfect for teens fond of wicked wit, wordplay, and stories that use the absurd to get at the serious.—Emily Lloyd, *Fairfax County Public Library, VA* (Reviewed March 1, 2002) (*School Library Journal*, vol 48, issue 3, p260)

**Publishers Weekly Review:** Playwright Dunn tries his hand at fiction in this "progressively lipogrammatic epistolary fable," and the result is a novel bursting with creativity, neological mischief and clever manipulation of the English language. The story takes place in the present day on the fictional island of Nollop off the coast of South Carolina, where over a century earlier, the great Nevin Nollop invented a 35-letter panagram (a phrase, sentence or verse containing every letter in the alphabet). As the creator of "the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog," Nollop was deified for his achievement. The island's inhabitants live an anachronistic existence, with letter-writing remaining the principal form of communication. Life seems almost utopian in its simplicity until letters of the alphabet start falling from the inscription on the statue erected in Nollop's honor, and the island's governing council decrees that as each letter falls, it must be extirpated from both spoken and written language. Forced to choose from a gradually shrinking pool of words, the novel's protagonists—a family of islanders—seek ways to communicate without employing the forbidden letters. A band of intrepid islanders forms an underground resistance movement; their goal is to create a shorter panagram than Nollop's original, thereby rescinding the council's draconian diktat. The entire novel consists of their letters to each other, and the messages grow progressively quirkier and more inventive as alternative spellings ("yesters" for "yesterday") and word clusters ("yellow sphere" for "sun") come to dominate the language. Dunn obviously relishes the challenge of telling a story with a contracting alphabet. Though frequently choppy and bizarre, the content of the letters can easily be deciphered, a neat trick



that elicits smiles. Wordsmiths of every stripe will appreciate this whimsical fable, in which Dunn brilliantly demonstrates his ability to delight and captivate. (*Oct. 1*)  
 — *Staff* (Reviewed September 17, 2001) (*Publishers Weekly*, vol 248, issue 38, p52)

**Library Journal Review: /\* Starred Review \*/** Woe to the poor Nollopians. Some 100 years ago, they honored native son Nevin Nollop by erecting a statue of him, to which they affixed in tiles the sentence that made him famous: "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog." The islanders venerated language, and peace and harmony blessed them for decades upon decades. Then the unthinkable happens—the tiles begin to fall one by one, first the z, then the q, and on and on—and the island's sense of harmony begins to crumble like the glue holding up the tiles. The loss of the z is considered an ethereal message from Nollop, and the island councilors respond by voting to banish it from all communication and impose progressive penalties for its use. As the other letters fall and more proclamations come down, suspicion and dread grip the islanders, who turn in one another in for violating the orders. In the meantime, a small cadre of citizens works tirelessly to halt the devastation. As a fable, this book works exceedingly well. The story, made up entirely of correspondence, conjures up the same mounting tension and repression as in "The Lottery" or *Fahrenheit 451*. But playwright Dunn also stirs a lot of farce and comic relief into the story with his characterization and with the stilted formality of the official edicts. And, with the ever-diminishing lexicon, the letters get more creative with spelling, word choice, and juxtaposition: "It wasn't wise 4 a person to paint her whole selph. Thing apowt this phirst. Yew will see that it is not healthy. Also, please answer yor portal when I rap." If you're up to the deciphering task, you'll go on a merry romp in this book. Highly recommended.—*Lisa Nussbaum, Dauphin Cty. Lib. Syst., Harrisburg, PA* (Reviewed October 1, 2001) (*Library Journal*, vol 126, issue 16, p139)

**Kirkus Reviews** A mostly lighthearted tweaking of literary sensibilities, playwright Dunn's first novel gets good mileage from a simple notion: People can carry hero worship way too far. The hero in question is Nevin Nollop, "inventor" of the well-known pangram "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog." The tiny island of Nollop, off the South Carolina coast, is an independent nation devoted to the preservation of his memory and achievement—devoted, that is, until the letters start falling from the sentence on the man's monument, one by one. A series of notes and letters from citizens of this highly literate nation, particularly Ella and Tassie, two young cousins who are members of the Minnow Pea family, records the actions of the island's ruling council, which decides that the fallen letters (and the words that contain them) are meant to be removed from Nollop's vocabulary. "Z" goes first, followed by "Q" and a quick succession of others; each of the fallen is treated as were its predecessors, with a "three strikes and you're out" penalty imposed on any Nollopians who fail to make the required adjustments. This creates severe hardship for the islanders, who begin to leave voluntarily or by penalty; life comes to a virtual standstill for those who remain. A young journalist from the mainland arrives in secret to appeal to the reason of the sole council member who still seems to have any, and before he's unmasked and deported he both plants a seed of hope and steals Tassie's heart. But it's on the shoulders of Ella, brave Ella, that the burden of rescuing the island from its madness ultimately falls. Cleverness is the hook with this little fable—those delighting in wordplay will be duly rewarded by seeing language stretched to its limits.  
 (*Kirkus Reviews*, August 15, 2001)

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## Review

### ELLA MINNOW PEA: A Novel in Letters

**Mark Dunn**

Anchor Books

Fiction

ISBN: 0385722435

ELLA MINNOW PEA by Mark Dunn is a great novel on many levels. First of all, it's funny. Next, it's unusual. Then, it's witty and wise. It relates the story of one girl's fight for freedom of expression. You see, Ella is a girl that lives on the island of Nollop off the shoreline of the Palmetto State. The island is named after Nevin Nollop, a sort of deity on their lands, for he was the one who originated the immortal phrase "The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog."

There is a large statue of Mr. Nollop on the island with his immortal phrase written underneath. However, due to some faulty adhesive properties, the letters have started to fall off, shattering on the ground. The government is up in arms about what to do in regard to the falling letters. Is it Mr. Nollop's spirit dropping them? Is Mr. Nollop telling them something from the ether? The totalitarian government thinks it so, so every letter that drops is one less letter the natives are allowed to speak or even write. Goodness me! What are the residents to do now that the letter T has dropped off? And the Q? And the D? As the letters fall from the statue, they also fall away from the novel, leading the reader into a quirky tale that linguists will love and people with happy imaginations will delight in.

Dunn, a writer of startling inventiveness, has written something that perhaps will be around years later, delighting young and old. It is that good of a tale. The story itself is in letters, epistolary notes between residents on the island. The main protagonist (Ella Minnow Pea) is a uniting of letters, L, M, N, O, P. There are letters everywhere, strung together twixt this word and that. Sadly, the government of Nollop takes those letters away, snapping the ties that make, strung together, letters words, and words thoughts.

It leaves our dear Ella Minnow Pea to her own wiles, fighting for friends, family, and freedom.



If you mind your Ps and Qs, you'll find this story wondrous and something that you'll give your friends to read and then they'll give it to their friends.

--- Reviewed by Jonathan Shipley

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## About This Book

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A Novel in Letters  
by Mark Dunn**List Price:** \$12.00**Pages:** 224**Format:** Hardcover/Paperback**ISBN:** 0385722435**Publisher:** Anchor[Buy this book from Amazon.com](#)[Canadian Readers: Buy this book from Amazon.ca](#)

## Author Biography

Mark Dunn is the author of more than twenty-five full-length plays, including the widely produced *Belles* and *Five Tellers* *Dancing in the Rain*. He has received several national playwriting awards and is currently playwright-in-residence with the New Jersey Repertory Company and the Community Theatre League in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. **Ella Minnow Pea** is his first novel.

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In **Ella Minnow Pea**, Mark Dunn transports readers to the imaginary island of Nollop, named for Nevin Nollop, inventor of the pangram (a sentence using all letters of the alphabet) "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog." It is an idyllic place, free from technological innovations like television and computers, where Nollopians devote themselves to the liberal arts and especially to the cultivation of language. But when a tile containing the letter "Z" falls from the monument the islanders have erected to honor Nollop and his illustrious sentence, a chain of events is set in motion which will threaten the very foundations of the Nollopian state. The High Island Council calls an emergency session to discuss the fallen letter and in it they see a sign and portent, a message from the great Nollop himself to cease all use of the letter "Z" in spoken and written communication. The Council passes a law against uttering words containing the letter; punishment for violating their strictures can lead to banishment and even death. And as further letters begin to fall, Ella Minnow Pea and her family, along with the rest of community, are forced to live under linguistic siege. Books are destroyed. Newspapers shut down. Citizens are publicly flogged, placed in stocks, their property confiscated and their lives ruined, all for slips of the tongue. But with the help of Nate Warren, a researcher living in South Carolina, the islanders decide to fight back, vowing to create a pangram even shorter and therefore more dazzling than the one for which Nollop has been elevated to divine status. The only question is: can they do it before all is lost?

Charming, intellectually engaging, and filled with fascinating wordplay, **Ella Minnow Pea** is a cautionary tale about authoritarianism, about the dangers of reading signs and symbols where there are none—and about the irrepressible human urge to speak freely.

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## • Discussion Questions

1. In what ways is **Ella Minnow Pea** unconventional? How is it more like a fable than a novel? What characteristics does it share with other fables? Does it offer a clear moral?
2. Why has Mark Dunn chosen to tell this story through letters rather than a more straightforward narrative? What does Dunn gain by eschewing a single narrative voice in favor of many characters writing to one another about the events that beset their island-nation? What ironies are involved in writing letters about the disappearance of the letters of the alphabet?
3. In response to the first proclamation proscribing the use of the letter "Z," Tassie warns, "it stands to rob us of the freedom to communicate without any manner of fetter or harness" [p. 10]. In what sense can **Ella Minnow Pea** be read as a satire of censorship and the restriction of free speech?
4. All the inhabitants of Nollop are forced into linguistic contortions to avoid being prosecuted by the High Council, substituting words like "cephalus" for "head" and "sub-terra" for "underground" [p. 99]. What are some of the other more amusing verbal acrobatics they are forced to perform?
5. Nate Warren suggests that Nollop was a "charlatan" and a "con man" and that the

pangram—"The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog"—responsible for his divine status may have been stolen from someone else. What is Dunn suggesting here about the ways in which human societies venerate and mythologize sacred texts and heroic ancestors?

**6.** What strategies do the islanders use to protest, oppose, and finally overthrow the tyranny of the High Council? How do these strategies create suspense in the novel?

**7.** When council representatives come to confiscate Rory Cummel's property, they tell him they are only doing the will of Nollop and that "There is no other Supreme Being but Nollop" [p. 121]. Seen in light of recent events, in the Middle East and elsewhere, can the novel be read as a commentary on religious authoritarianism? What does the novel suggest about the dangers of humans assuming they know God's will with absolute certainty?

**8. *Ella Minnow Pea*** dwells heavily on the theme of communication—reading, writing, and talking. What is Dunn suggesting by having the members of the High Island Council read the falling letters as signs—supernatural communications from Nollop—which ultimately make communication nearly impossible? What does the novel as whole say about the nature and purpose of communication and community?

**9.** How important are the love relationships in the novel—for example those between Tassie and Nate and between Rory and Mittie—to the main action? How do they enhance the plot?

**10.** Tassie writes that she longs to "live across the channel. . . . With telephones that actually work, and television and computers and books—all the books one could ever hope to read" [p. 32]. What does the novel imply about the dangers of trying to create a utopian society? What examples of intolerant societies—religious or otherwise—exist in the world today? Is the message of this novel relevant to those situations?

**11.** What is the significance of Amos Minnow Pea writing, quite by accident, a sentence which surpasses Nollop's illustrious pangram? In what way does this undermine the divine value that the high council attributes to Nollop's sentence?

**12.** At the end of the novel, Ella suggests a memorial to those who suffered from the High Council's tyranny: "a large box filled with sixty moonshine jugs—piled high, toppling over, corks popping, liquor flowing. Disorder to match the clutter and chaos of our marvelous language. Words upon words, piled high, toppling over, thoughts popping, correspondence and conversation overflowing" [p. 206]. Why is this an appropriate memorial? In what ways is language chaotic? In what ways is it ordered and restrictive? Why is Ella comparing liquor and conversation in this passage?

**13.** How does Dunn manage to make ***Ella Minnow Pea*** both a whimsical fable and a serious anti-authoritarian satire? What elements of the novel seem comical or lighthearted? What elements seem more pointed? How well does the author integrate them into the story?