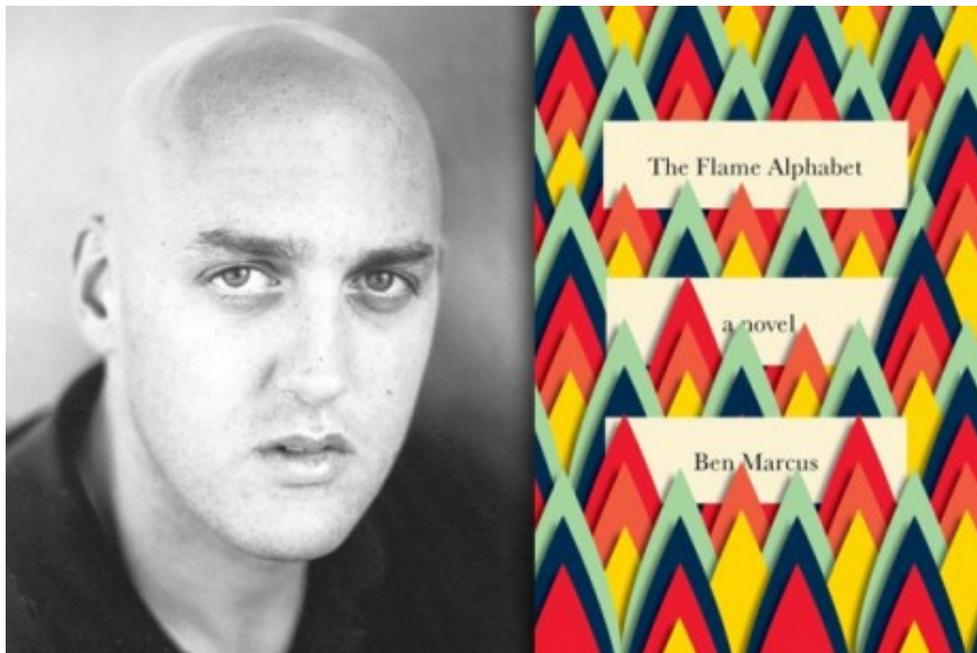


SUNDAY, JAN 15, 2012 7:00 PM UTC

Ben Marcus: Human beings are making a comeback

The acclaimed writer tells Salon conquering a fear of sentimentality was key to his new novel, "The Flame Alphabet"

BY ROSS SIMONINI



Ben Marcus (Credit: Random House)

Ben Marcus writes outside the limitations of language. He discovers the impossible combinations of words, the inabilities of certain phrases and inside those faults, he builds a world just beyond the reader's comprehension. When Marcus puts words together, they seem to cancel each other out, leaving behind something almost like meaning, but softer and less stubborn: language that can't be taken literally.

His debut, "The Age of Wire and String," reads like reference material — a poetic manual, an encyclopedic list of objects, characters and concepts that Marcus simultaneously defines and undefines. His second book, "Notable American Women," is a collage of forms that includes

correspondence, story segments, definitions, faux textbook passages, and chronologies, which collectively tell the story of a boy named Ben Marcus who lives in a community of "silenthists" and endures pseudo-scientific experiments performed on him by his family.

Surprisingly, Marcus' new book, "The Flame Alphabet," is a novel at every sentence. It's also a mystery, a compulsive page-turner and is told in a relatively straightforward, linear way — very few postmodern sleights of hand. The language conflict in this book lies not in the telling, but in the story itself, a nightmarish tale of parents who are made ill from the speech of their teenage daughter. It's a simple premise, but when the language toxicity strikes, the book's world quickly turns dystopic, with sinister Jewish sects and Cronenbergian biotechnologies hiding in every corner.

I interviewed Marcus before Tuesday's publication of "The Flame Alphabet" over a series of emails. We discussed the various preoccupations in his writing career, William Burroughs, Kabbalah and his children's earliest uses of language.

You are a fiction writer who is interested in science. You use its language, its method, its attitude. But to call you a science fiction writer doesn't seem quite right. As a writer, what's your interest in science?

I'm interested in the hope we invest in science, and the disappointment we can feel when science flattens, or "explains,"

the larger mysteries of religion. In “The Flame Alphabet,” scientists are baffled in the face of the language toxicity, and religion looms up as something viable (for a little while, anyway). The official attempts to cure the speech fever only makes things worse, so people like Sam, the narrator, are forced to try experiments at home. He takes science into his own hands, tries to create immunity to language, and tests medicines on himself and his wife. It’s not clear that he knows what he’s doing. He’s desperate and it seems like he’ll try anything. Then, later in the book, he tries, again with no training, to create a new language that won’t sicken people. I got interested in this a little bit after following a website of people who are customizing their nutrition and supplementation in order to live much longer, in some cases experimenting heavily on themselves and sharing documentation with their community. Most of us have understandably ceded ground to specialists when it comes to medicine, but I can’t help wondering what people would do if this knowledge was stumped, or cut off from us. If we had to become specialists in the face of some new crisis. I’ve always been interested in expertise and authority. In my earlier books, the knowingness and rhetorical soundness of science was an allure, the seduction and believability of the language that carried the scientific message. In “The Flame Alphabet,” I think maybe that has shifted. Sam’s language doesn’t ape the tones of science, and as an expert he’s miserable. He wants to succeed in his experiments, but he fails. He is alone with a terrible problem. He can’t count on anyone else to help him, although someone does try to seduce him with a dangerous solution. Throughout the book he keeps trying to own the dilemma, as a kind of amateur, doomed scientist, and each of these acts have their consequences.

That’s pretty much the entire story of the book. A spoiler.

Right. The authoritative, seductive language in “The Flame Alphabet” comes out of a religious rhetoric more than a scientific one. Sam thinks in Jewish tenets, and has an intimate relationship with these words.

To me, the religious language in the book has a deliberate wobble to it. He uses it to comfort himself, but it doesn’t work. Religion is part of Sam’s identity, but even he doesn’t fully understand his beliefs, and when some of his religious positions are undermined, he’s frightened. So if he “thinks in tenets,” as you say, and those tenets are cast into doubt, then he loses part of himself. To me that’s why he falls back on his family. His family doesn’t need to be explained. His family doesn’t have a theory. It’s in his blood. Take a nice, well-meaning character and hack at his core philosophy with an ax until he doesn’t know what to think anymore, then see what happens. It’s one kind of drama.

What kind of relationship does the Judaism of “The Flame Alphabet” have to modern-day Judaism?

It was important to me that the forest Jews in “The Flame Alphabet” seem not just plausible but perhaps even likely (minus the homegrown technology, maybe). Judaism has so many private shades to its history. Kabbalah is built around secrecy, and not just secrecy, it’s built around the notion that if you can say something, or if you can think it, it’s probably not legitimate. In certain strains of Judaism there’s a profound passion for the ineffable. Contemplation of God is meant to be forever elusive, because, you know, our tiny minds can’t possibly comprehend Him. If we find ourselves comprehending Him, then we can be sure we’re off track. Understanding itself is a sign that we’re wrong. This is tremendously captivating to me, because it undermines the whole idea of thought, the entirety of being human. It’s a terribly lonely notion, and lonely notions are very attractive to me. On the other hand, of course, the Jewish faith has a strong intellectual tradition, and Torah interpretation can get pretty heated and intense. I’m interested in these contradictory impulses: hyper-analysis and stone-cold secrecy.

Physical materials are essential to your writing. The emphasis on certain materials in your books sometimes supersedes characters. It’s an attention to materiality that I’ve only really experienced in sculpture.

Part of the homegrown technology in “The Flame Alphabet” is a religious appliance that operates like a radio, transmitting a message from a distant rabbi to the narrator’s forest synagogue. But its materials of construction are meant to be dissonant. With language, I like how you can be vivid and precise and yet still create a kind of hazy, unseeable

image, something that your mind can't quite assemble, even if in parts it should all make sense. There's a device called a "listener" that they use in the forest synagogue, and this would seem to be an electronic transmitter, but it has a fleshy underside, it's slippery, and it gets uncomfortably hot. Sometimes it also has a different name. These things are discordant, and I guess it helps me endow the object with more mystery. I haven't really analyzed why I like doing this, but one guess is that it preserves some enigmatic feeling around an object. It makes me uneasy to picture it, it stays mysterious to me even if I'm the one who is supposed to explain it.

Your particular vocabulary of materials (cloth, felt, foam) feels analog, almost nostalgic in these digital times. Does your writing seem contemporary to you? Or do you consciously prevent the modern world from seeping into your world?

From what I can tell, what you call digital culture is itself in love with analog materials, or with aping an analog sensibility, exploring the accidental, the random, the lo-fi, the warm spontaneity of earlier times. But I don't have a conscious strategy with this stuff. I used to write about cloth a lot because it seemed so flat and ungiving, sort of boring. I thought I was choosing materials and objects that didn't carry a lot of their own associations (at least not to me). This meant I could maybe more fully control the meaning of something — but soon these objects became resonant to me. And I used to be afraid of sentimentality, of over-inscribing feeling rather than letting it emerge more subtly. But it's been a little while since I've put textiles ahead of characters in importance. Human beings are making a comeback in my work.

When you describe language as “unseeable,” is it also “unhearable”? Is it “unknowable”? What are you trying to achieve in the absence of this kind of sensory stimulus?

Maybe it's a version of the uncanny: something with sensible parts that, when assembled, generates strangeness. But this isn't really something I do very much anymore. In the last few years I feel more interested in wringing the strange from the common. The common, the quotidian, is so much more unyielding to me, really stubborn and hard to work with, and I like this because it makes me think and it makes me worry. I can't just plunge my hand into the meat of it. I need new approaches.

Your writing is filled with references to tools and people who are left partially understood by the reader, with only small chunks of information available. For you, are these detail also partially understood? Do you know information the reader does not?

Hm, no. I'm not playing any kind of game where I try to leave the reader out of the master plan. But if a detail doesn't add dramatic energy then I see no reason to spoil the writing with it. I guess I prefer one or two sharp details, rather than a laundry list of "facts" about a character, since this frustrates me when I read, being asked to collect data that may not matter. Sometimes — although I'm not very adept at this — I withhold things if revealing them later will prove suspenseful. But to me as a reader, I don't ever find that having a lot of information about something is equal to having a dramatic experience. I like stories that are highly restrained at the informational level.

Are the fictional worlds you've created in your books unique to each book, or do you have the sense that you are always working within the same world, that all the worlds in your books are somehow connected and governed by the same laws?

The world in "The Age of Wire and String" is one that hasn't invited me back. I sometimes want to return, to add another layer of descriptions and definitions, but it's a hermetic place and once I left it the door sort of closed. I do find that certain figures return: Thompson, Perkins, some invented thinkers who are called on to provide philosophical support to the narrative war. I keep thinking these people will get their day, but it may be that they function best in the peanut gallery, intoning deceptive statements when the story needs ideas. But then, of course, there are my own three or four, uh, ideas, which return and return and return, no matter what I do. It's a bit of a problem. I'm contemplating writing about what doesn't interest me, and pushing on it until I can start to care: this as a way to maybe outsmart my horrible limitations.

Humor is all over your work, but it doesn't completely define it or characterize the narrative as lighthearted. Is humor essential in a reading of your work? If someone doesn't find the book funny, do certain aspects of the story break down?

I guess I would hope that different reactions could be accommodated. Sometimes something horrifying — a child crouching over her mother, delivering the language weapon, rendering her mother unconscious — is queasily funny for some people and just plain upsetting to others. I'm not interested in, or capable of, regulating this. I don't write jokes, so nothing, I would think, lives or dies on its humor. "The Flame Alphabet," to me, is fueled by escalating circumstances — some horrible, sad stuff — and I guess sometimes there's something funny in the sorrow. But none of this is for me to say. I like that people will react in their own way. Sometimes when I read from this book, people laugh. And then I'll read the same chapter to another audience and no one laughs. Someone after a reading said to me he wasn't sure it was OK to laugh.

In writing "The Flame Alphabet," did you consider William Burroughs' ideas about language as a virus? Do they resonate with your own ideas?

Burroughs has paternity on that idea, and it's an amazing one, not least because it grants a kind of immortality to language. There's a saying about this. Viruses can't die because they are not alive in the first place — or something along those lines. Viruses live (or, you know, instead of *live* they *wait*) for thousands or even millions of years, while languages (specific ones) die pretty quickly. And viruses mutate, devour their hosts, adapt to threats, hide in plain sight. It is difficult not to bow down to the genius of the virus, to see ourselves as merely shelter for their larger plan. Our bodies are just wind tarps for viruses. And also to bow down to the genius of Burroughs. His work was very important to me, in particular the trilogy that begins with "Cities of the Red Night." A masterpiece that hardly seems read anymore. Beautiful, mad, weird and scary.

In raising your own children, I'm curious what you've noticed about their early uses of language.

Both my kids, pretty early on, saw language as a means to get what they wanted, so well before they could use specific words, they aped the sounds and lengths of sentences, sometimes smuggling a specific word in just for authority. My daughter would mouth off a little gibberish preamble that ended with the word "*books*," emphatically pronounced. And this meant we were to read to her. She knew what a question was, just not how to populate it. It was like the pure goo of language without the sad objects that take the ambiguity away. Very beautiful. My son, when he was learning to talk, seemed to know he wasn't making sense, and he'd go into stealth mode, eyeing us sneakily, gauging if he was getting away with it. I love the phase when they don't make sense, because you can believe they are saying wonderful, strange things. Soft little prophets. When they actually begin to talk, it turns out their message is quite ordinary: *Give me something, now*.