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Alphabet is the story of Simon Austen who is serving a life sentence for murder. Intelligent but illiterate, charming but also damaged, brutal and manipulative, Simon admits to what he's done but his motives are far from clear, even to himself. Then Simon learns to read and write. From his high security prison he begins an illicit correspondence with a series of women. The more he learns - about them and about himself - the higher the stakes become. Simon finds himself on a perilous and unpredictable journey as he stumbles towards self-knowledge and redemption. Part psychological thriller, part fable, Alphabet explores both the dark parts of the human psyche and the possibilities of transformation.

Alphabet arose out of Kathy Page's experience working for a year as Writer in Residence in a high security men's prison in the UK. 'The Prison,' she has writes 'was both fascinating and dreadful. It was a place of frighteningly intense feelings, and, at the same time, given there was no outlet for them, one of utter stultification. It was about as hard a reality as you could get, yet nowhere else could fantasies and delusions grow so thick and fast...I was eventually given a set of keys and allowed to roam the prison quite freely. I talked to inmates in their cells, while they worked mending TV sets or sewing tee shirts, or outside in the yard with its geometrically patterned flower beds. I sat in a windowless office and read inmates files. Not surprisingly, I found the place exhausting but at the same time it was imaginatively very stimulating. What was it like to work here, year in year out? What was it like be a man who had committed murder and who must serve out his time in a place like this? What kind of relationships were possible for him? Which was the 'real' man: the one in the record, the neglected little boy he wrote about in class, or the one raising hundreds of pounds for charity? How much can a person change?'

Kathy Page was born in England but is currently living on the west coast of Canada with her husband and two children. She is the author of six novels, including The Story of My Face, which was long-listed for the Orange Prize in 2002, and she has also written for radio and TV. Her short fiction is widely anthologised. She has held Writer's Residencies in the UK, Finland and Estonia, and currently teaches at Malaspina University College.

For more information about Kathy Page's life and work, visit her website www.KathyPage.info

Q&A with Kathy Page

Q: This is a book about one man, Simon Austen. He is a fascinating character, compelling and ultimately sympathetic despite his terrible faults. Did you model him on anyone in particular?

A: When I worked in the prison, I certainly met men who were in some ways like him. I was powerfully struck, there, by the way in which extremes of behaviour could co-exist within the same person. Many of the men I was working with could be *both* very kind and terribly cruel; it was not a matter of either or, but of two sides of the personality co-existing. Opposites can co-exist and although I knew this before, my experience in the prison really brought it home to me. Simon is a complex character; he is, I hope, very much himself but he is also in some way an archetypal figure because his double-sidedness is, I think, fundamental to our humanity: we are in potential both cruel and kind, heroic and base, terrible and wonderful. So, like most fictional characters, Simon is an amalgam of different parts of people I have observed, large doses of imagination (and of course my own conscious and unconscious projections). He was a character who arrived almost whole, and the way he came to me first was through his voice, lying its way towards the truth. I wrote far more letters from him than actually appear in the book.

Q: Early in Alphabet, we see Simon learn to read and write. Would you say that the rest of the story turns on this experience?

A: Certainly it is the beginning of a long, intricate journey towards contact with the rest of humanity. At the beginning of the novel, Simon is completely unable to communicate at a deep level. The work he does with Ted, the literacy teacher not only opens up all kinds of possibilities for communication with others, but as well as that, the process of learning is itself the first part of his sentimental education. As Simon puts it, he has: 'nothing at all against the man and that's a not bad feeling at all'. The door is open, after this, for other kinds of relationships to develop, and when he begins to write letters to women outside the prison, Simon is, without realising it, beginning a process of learning which he can't fully control.

Q: Is Alphabet a love story?

A: It is a story about how one man begins to learn to love, but it is not in any way romantic. On the contrary: I was very aware, as I planned and wrote it, of the whole area of romantic relationships in prison. Many men in prison do meet women and begin romantic and often quite passionate relationships with them, whether they are prison

staff, or women contacted via pen friendships or through other prisoners. This struck me as in some way emblematic of the whole process of 'falling in love' where imagination can leap across huge distances and our ideals and idealized or best selves come to the fore. Yet, in a situation such as Simon's, the barriers to real contact with the other are immense, and the 'price' of love is an increasingly painful understanding of the crime he has committed. I was drawn to evoke the different feelings, all of them intense, that people call 'love' and to explore imaginatively the process of coming, bit by bit, to know another person.

Q: At one point Simon is taken to an experimental prison where he has to do group therapy. Just as it seems to be working, he is thrown out. Why did you take the story this way, as opposed to, say, continuing the therapy to its conclusion?

A: Well, the simple way to answer this is to say that that is *what happened!* It arises from characterisation. It is in Simon's nature both to do well and to keep something back from his therapists, and to infuriate some of them; what happens is a consequence of that. It's also true to say that I have a fascination with what I call the twisted path: I think it's rare that we move, arrow-like from one stage in life to the next, and even if we did, it would certainly be dull in dramatic terms. Simon is expelled from his new 'family' in Wentworth, and other terrible things happen to him as result. But, at the same time, because an essential part of him is his keenness, his avidity to learn and make use of new experiences, he is able to hang on to some of the gains he made there. Ultimately a whole new set of possibilities arise out of his expulsion, terrible as it seems at first.

This links up to the whole notion of transformation: I have always been interested in ideas about identity and change and one of the questions I wanted to explore as I wrote the book was Can a person change? I wanted to explore imaginatively what that process might involve for someone like Simon who has committed a terrible crime against another person. Part at least of the purpose of prison sentences is reform and rehabilitation. The words trip off our tongues, but what does this mean, really? Clearly, it's not a matter of waving a magic wand, but a huge effort that involves whole teams of people. Mostly it does not work, but sometimes it does. What is being changed? Habits of thought and behaviour, or the personality itself? How much can a person change and still be him or herself? Those are some of the things I hope readers will be thinking about and excited by as they read Alphabet....

Praise for Alphabet:

'An excellent book group choice.' New Books magazine, UK

'Alphabet is not just highly readable, but one of the strongest, most eloquent, most tightly constructed novels of the year... It is a measure of the quiet artistry of Alphabet that, out of material that would have been at home in the blackest of black comedies, Kathy Page has fashioned a fable about redemptive love... she has celebrated, with rare deftness, the resilience of the human heart.'

David Robson, The Sunday Telegraph, UK.

'I hurried to return to the book whenever I'd been forced to put it down. In this emotional page-turner, Page throws hope into a mixed up world where only fantasies and delusions dare to grow... when I got to the end of Alphabet, I found myself longing for more.'

Susan Musgrove, The Globe and Mail.

'a wonderful book, peculiar, intense, revealing, challenging, and above all, riveting... I kept asking myself, how could she know this?'

Erwin James, Guardian columnist and author of A Life Inside.

'Simon is one of the most complex characters I've ever met in a novel. His attempt to win redemption is totally engrossing and I won't spoil the suspense by saying more.' Lynne Van Luven, Times Colonist.

'Sometimes novelists go too far, and sometimes they manage to demonstrate that too far is where they needed to go... Alphabet is a book which lets us see the humanity and vulnerability which accompany monstrous acts.' Roz Cavenay, Time Out, UK

'*Alphabet* is a stunning *tour de force*. I have rarely encountered a novel so compelling, so disturbing, so ultimately satisfying as this new work by Kathy Page... Her unlikely hero is Simon Austen, a twenty-something illiterate, abandoned early in life by his mother to a childhood of foster homes and truancy, who has murdered his girlfriend for no better reason than her refusal to remove her tinted contact lenses. How can readers *like* such an unliveable character? Miraculously, we do, as we begin to sense Simon's intelligence from his wry observations, his ability to manipulate people and situations, his determination to make use of whatever comes to hand to survive as a lifer. Page makes us fellow-travellers on Simon's tortuous journey to self-knowledge... Initially we are amused by Simon's irreverence, his quick one-liners, his bolshie defence of his limited independence; finally, we arrive with him, battered yet exhilarated, by the most extraordinary routes, at a point where Simon has dealt with Before, and can visualize a release from the present into After.' Margaret Thompson, Wordworks.

Discussion points.

We never get to see Simon outside of the prison. Why do you think the story ends as it does?

This is a gritty, realistic novel but at the same time, reviewers have called it a fable. Why do you think this is?

How does Simon's understanding of love change in the course of the story?

'All relationships, even the bad ones, are good.' Discuss.

Alphabet is set in a prison and Simon's journey is an extreme and particular one. What is it that makes it possible to identify with him?

Also by Kathy Page:

The Story of My Face, Weidenfeld & Nicolson/McArthur, 2002.

Thirteen year old Natalie baron is adrift in the world and looking for someone to latch on to: she meets Barbara Hern and her family, followers of an extreme Protestant sect founded by Tuomas Envall. Natalie sets about insinuating herself into their lives, unaware that her presence will be a catalyst for a series of devastating events that break the family apart and change not only Natalie's face, but the course of her life.

Thirty years later, living in a tiny wooden house surrounded by melting ice in Elijoki, Finland, Natalie researches the life of Tuomas Envall in an attempt to come to understand what took place. But she is not the only person with a stake in the past, and has to fight for the right to the story of her face.... The Story of My Face is a story of human need, passionate belief and the loss of innocence, a psychological thriller that looks back and an accident which shaped a life.

'A marvellously well-crafted book, subtle and measured yet with the powerful, disconcerting tug of deep and dangerous water. I can't remember the last time I was so compelled, impressed and unsettled by the emotional world of a novel as I was by this one.' Sarah Waters, author of Fingersmith.

