

'I can't remember the last time I was
so compelled, impressed and unsettled by the
emotional world of a novel'

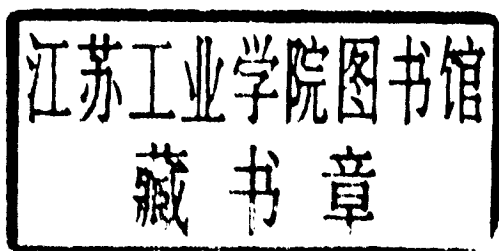
Sarah Waters on the Orange-longlisted *The Story of My Face*

A L P H A B E T

Kathy Page

ALPHABET

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ALPHABET

For Richard

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B

I

There's no chair, even. The room is blue-grey, fluorescent-lit, like the rest.

'Property?' the man at the counter asks. They've already taken his real clothes: Simon's standing there in a striped shirt and a pair of thin jeans that won't stay up.

'Anything that might get nicked or trashed,' the man says, 'Give it here –' he's done this a thousand times, has the timing just so. 'We'll seal it up nice and tight . . . then we'll lose it for you good and proper . . . Ha! Seriously, there's no liability . . .' Oh, he's proud of himself, all right. His white shirt glows almost violet. The breast pocket is stretched over a pack of twenty Bensons. The top of his bald head shines in the light. He taps the side of his nose, leans forwards:

'What you got, then,' he says, 'Mummy's ashes? The bleedin' crown jewels? Spit it out, we haven't got all day.' There are six more behind me, Simon thinks, and there's fuck knows what ahead . . . In the end, it can't matter much what happens to these two particular items of his. Except that this way he doesn't have to look after them and if they really are lost, whatever this bald bastard says, it won't be his fault. And he's dog tired. The sooner he gets through this then the sooner he might get to lie down and he could sleep on a bed of knives in an earthquake so long as he was lying down.

He grins back at the big-headed, fat-fingered man with a sense of his own sense of humour; he keeps his thoughts to himself and puts his goods on the counter. First, the envelope. It's a small, thin envelope with just his name, Simon Austen, on the outside.

'It's sealed,' he says. *Well*, says the slow look he gets back, *opening your sodding correspondence is the last thing on earth I'd do, because, like you, it'll be a piece of –*

Simon's too beat-up to react. His eyes are so sticky he can hear every blink, feel it too. He had the shower after the strip search, but it was cold and he can still smell his own sweat. He stares at the counter top, dirty oak edging with Formica inset, and remembers how the envelope was given him by a washed-out, dyke-type social worker who first checked his birth certificate and gave him a speech about not expecting too much. Then she watched him tear it open, unfold the single sheet inside. After that, she read it to him, all two lines of it: 'I am sorry. This is the way things had to be. I really hope things turn out well for you, Sharon.' That's what the woman said it amounted to. Then she asked him would he like some time to talk about his feelings for his mother and when he said no, she said he needed counselling and gave him a list of phone numbers as long as an arm; he was so fucked off with her that he nearly binned the letter, but in the end he smoothed it out and resealed the envelope, kept it for years in the lining pocket of his pilot jacket . . . Well, as a matter of fact things turned out just about as badly as they possibly could, and this lot can lose the fucking thing if they want to, he thinks. He's moving on. In.

'One watch,' fat-fingers observes.

'It's a Rolex,' Simon tells him. Though it's not. He got it with his first month's proper pay, from someone he met in a pub. It loses. He was ripped off. So, good riddance. He'll travel light: washing things, bedroll, plate, bowl, mug.

'That it?'

He does his squiggle with the pen. The joker opposite seals up his things, then pushes over an empty envelope: brown with black type, official looking.

'Your Free Letter,' he says.

'What's it for?'

'Well, son, you can wipe your arse with it if you want!'

'Right, mate,' Simon spits back. 'Maybe I will.' His hands are fisted and he's woken right up now.

'Keep your head down,' the man says, pleased, turning away. Simon shoves the envelope in his pocket, collects two sheets and a blanket, stuffs them in the pillowcase, moves on.

The man in front of him has a moustache, the one behind a full chin's worth of hair. He can hear the creak of both of their pairs of

shoes, the rattle of their key chains, their breath, his own. They pass through the next pair of doors, solid, then barred, and the next, and the next, pausing each time to wait for the key to slip in and do its work, two openings, two closures. Nothing is said. He thinks how he could die here. Be killed. Start using drugs and do the job himself. Just get old . . . and all of a sudden, how badly he wants what he's not had, all of it, even not knowing what it is! How much he wants to throw the switch, dematerialise, reappear somewhere else or as someone else, anyone. His heart is already fighting to escape his chest when the last set of doors opens on to the wing and the stench and echo of captivity smashes into him. It's like the opening of a furnace door. A wall of heat. They have to push him through.

'Go on,' says the bearded man behind, 'go on now, son, this here is a one-way street.'

2

I'm no good at reading, he tells them when they ask about his needs. Because Education is under-resourced, Ted Kennet comes on the bus to help out, changing twice, week after week.

Smoke? Ted asks as he sits down the first time. Next time he brings a paper bag of assorted sweets, *sweets* for God's sake: A for aniseed, B for butterscotch, C for candy twist: it doesn't have to be apple, ball, cat. It can be anything you want and it doesn't even have to start at the beginning and march through to the end. 'Start where you want!' Ted says. 'You pick. I'm trying to make it easy for you.'

They work in the back of the Education staff room, sitting under some book shelves that haven't been put up straight. People keep coming in to get to the stationery cupboard, which has to be unlocked and locked again every time.

'Remember, you do want this, even if you sometimes think you don't,' says Ted. If he's not busy with his roll-up machine or his pencils and paper, he sits with his big square hands like dead weights on his knees. The veins in his nose and cheeks are all bust up, the wrinkles on his forehead go up as well as down, cutting it up into squares. His hair is cut short and neat, but most of it has long gone. Simon's never sat as close to someone so old before and every time Ted coughs, he can hear something bubbling in his chest. D for disgusting.

Sometimes he loses patience. A for aggro. B for bastard. C for cunt.

'G for get on with it. I don't give up easily,' Ted says. According to him, reading is one hand (he lifts it, shows the palm, carved by lines into an elaborate hieroglyph) and writing is the other. Without them you'd be having to open doors with your teeth and toes. 'You've got a mind,' he says. 'Use it.'

Simon notes that Ted isn't well, and they don't pay him. He's impressed, though he won't fool himself that Ted's kindness is entirely personal to him because he also knows he's lost his wife and doesn't want to stay in and mope. And then again, it's clear that Ted is of the type that needs to do good. He's already put in thirty years as a UCAAT shop steward. You should have joined, he says. Might have made a difference, who knows? He believes in the two Rs, Rights and Wrongs. Illiteracy is a wrong on a par with being cut off from the electricity.

'It keeps you out,' he says. Knowledge, which begins with a K, is power. Work is another right. 'Two million unemployed!' he spits, grinding his roll-up into the ash tray. 'How come Thatcher's still got a job?'

Simon doesn't remember anyone in his previous life actually explaining in detail how, for the most part, the letters stand for sounds, how you build up the words. They must have, but he certainly didn't take it in. He was at Burnside, and number 32, and with Iris and John Kingswell in their poxy bungalow with its brown carpet and drafty louvred window panes. He's got one big memory that does for all the schools he ever didn't attend – the smell of stew and sweat, the feeling of misery as he walked in and the bite of free air in his lungs as he slipped over the fence at half past ten, running free. So it's more than strange where he has ended up:

'Paradoxical.' It's from the Greek, Ted says. 'Goes both ways.'

He's got all the time in the world and it isn't like school at all. Simon remembers everything. Soon he's way beyond the alphabet and the short, sensible words like man, dog, hat. Aeroplane. Cough. Through. Enough. Paragraphs, punctuation, even a soup-song of French and scraps of Latin as required: *et cetera, per se, ergo, ad infinitum*, he's picking them all up. And as for Ted, Simon feels something about him he can't remember feeling before: I've got absolutely nothing against the man, he thinks, and that's a not-bad feeling at all.

Eighteen months later, he's functional and Ted is coming mainly to chat. They discuss the news, which is nearly always bad: unemployment, privatisation, the Falklands. Then there's a message

saying Ted is sick. He doesn't turn up for three weeks. Simon writes to him in his best joined-up, but it turns out that he's died.

Ted gave him a trade: he writes letters. He sits cross-legged on the bed in his six-foot-by-nine cell with a hardboard offcut to lean on and writes to lazy solicitors, members of parliament, the Home Secretary, the Parole Board; to unfaithful girlfriends, reluctant wives, sad mothers. He charges by the side, and depending on how hard it is to do. He puts a lot into it. He has designed several kinds of handwriting to suit the different tasks. He listens to what the bloke is saying, and then he cuts out the rambles, or fuzzes over the bluntness, makes it sound better. He looks words up, finds better ones, checks legal points if he can. Standing there blushing and fumbling to get the right words out is one thing but with a letter you can hit the bull's eye first time: 'I get results,' he tells his prospects. Though not of course every time. He's seen a bloke crying over a letter he's received, then had a bear-hug from him a fortnight later. Seeing as he doesn't have his own post, he even throws in his *free envelope* now and then. Plus, the other thing he does, because he's clean as a whistle, is sell his piss when they're testing. It's not so bad, though he thinks a lot of Ted when the Iron Lady gets in again. *Landslide*.

He gets into education, big time. He cuts the letter-writing out and concentrates on coursework, assignments. He passes GCSE English, Maths, Sociology and Computers, plus RSA typing and the Certificate in Verbal Communication, before they stop him, half way through his first A level, and decide to move him here, where they say he's had too much education and has to get to the back of the queue. Any kind of activity is a plus and has to be shared out. A bit of kitchen work. A stint in the electronics shop, assembling recycled hi-fis. So now he's been over seven years inside, twelve months in the same cell with the same wanker next door.

They told me I'm bright, he reminds himself. There's definitely truth in it because when he was sent to casualty for an abscess on one of his back teeth, he was sitting there in agony, waiting for hours with a screw chained to each arm and then finally the doctor came in and asked: 'Which one of you is Simon?' A *doctor*, right?

I could eventually get a degree, he tells himself. It's not impossible.

3

The Portakabins smell of paint burning on radiators and whoever's been in here before. Someone moves next door, the floor shifts. There's no ventilation and probation's man of the moment, Barry, is always giving up but actually, he smokes, heavily at that.

'How's things, Simon?' he asks. He's got a soft Welsh burr to his speech, a boyish face, though he must be forty plus.

'Pretty standard,' Simon tells him, 'bored witless.' Barry leans back in his chair, puts his hands behind his head. The narrow window is behind him, high up, looks right onto the prison wall. Also, it's never been cleaned. So Simon has to look at Barry, looking back at him with his serious brown eyes, or else at his own hands. He keeps his hands clean and neat, so there's not much going on there either.

'I'm still working on Education,' Barry continues, 'but the system's so crowded. More cuts in the pipeline too. A shame. But all the same, there is plenty else for you to think about. Did you consider what we said last time?' At this point, he comes out of his leaning back position and checks his notes, to remind himself what was said four months ago. 'Simon,' he says, 'you appear to be very cynical.'

'You must be too,' Simon comes back at him.

'You're capable of insight,' Barry persists, 'but you're still in denial. You can't progress until you break out of it.'

'You'd know, of course,' Simon says. 'Been there, have you?'

'Listen, Simon. The reason I'm here,' Barry says, 'is that in my old job, I always wondered what happened afterwards.' Well, Simon thinks at him, this is it! This is what happens afterwards! He decides against saying it. There's a long silence. Outside the Portakabin, some screws walk past, key chains jangling, and there's a sudden,

staccato burst of laughter, which blanks out as the B wing door closes behind them.

'Women are an issue for you, aren't they?' Barry throws this in casually, as if it was a matter of sugars in tea, not half the human race. 'I've got a set of cards here, it's a way of starting up a discussion.' He shows them: the cards have a statement written on them and you have to say your gut feeling as to whether you agree or disagree.

'Want to give it a try?' *Why should I care?* Simon thinks. What matters to him more is when is Barry going to get out his thermos flask, as he normally does about half way through, and give them both a cup of proper coffee.

Barry hands him the first card. It's typed very large, and covered in shiny plastic laminate.

'Women have smaller brains and are less intelligent than men,' it says.

'Pass,' Simon says, because he'd say the opposite except that some of them do spectacularly stupid things. Like: almost all of the men in here, cons and screws, even *Barry*, are married to someone or as good as. He takes the next card.

'Women are naturally more caring,' it says. *Naturally* is confusing.

'Pass,' he says again. 'I don't mind telling you what I think,' he says, 'if you'll only get the coffee out.' He watches Barry extract the flask from his bulging briefcase and pour: the steel cup for himself, the plastic liner for Simon. Sugar from a small glass jar. The strong, bitter smell of the coffee seems to come from half a life away. The caffeine kicks in after a sip or two.

'Women. Off the top of my head –' Simon tells Barry, 'One: They like to be looked at. They smell nice. Even the cross-sex-postings we have here. Two: They tend not to hit out. A woman may scare you in some way, the chances of her actually, physically hurting you are almost nil. Three: they give birth, or decide not to. Sometimes they have children without meaning to and sometimes they have them and then they don't want them –' at this point Barry tries to interrupt but Simon is in his stride: 'OK,' he concedes, 'men have something to do with it, but not much. All of us have been inside a woman's body. A lot of people spend a lot of time trying to get back inside one: I'm not one of them. I'd hate to be a woman. If I was one, I'd steer completely clear of men. I'd be a lesbian! And I certainly wouldn't have something grow inside me. And another thing,'

Simon tells Barry, 'you have to use a woman's weaknesses to make her like you.' He's lost track of the numbers so he stops, and drinks down the rest of the coffee, which has cooled down to just right. He watches Barry writing down what he's said.

'There's an awful lot in there,' Barry tells him when he's finished, 'and, without being judgemental, because with your background it's not at all surprising, I'd say there were a lot of contradictions too . . .' He gives Simon a big smile, and takes a sip from his own cup. 'Well, Amanda liked you, didn't she?' he says. Simon just looks through him; no one's going to catch him that way.

'What scares you about women?' Barry asks after another long pause. 'What is it —'

'They have the say-so, don't they?' Simon says. 'Teachers. Thatcher. That Currie Woman. Madonna.'

'It's clear that you need to feel a very high level of control over your life,' Barry tells him. Simon recognises this as a direct quote from Dr Grice.

'Well, I'm in the right place, then, aren't I just!' he says, and cracks up, but Barry's lips don't even twitch; he says nothing for a bit, then fumbles in his bag for the Marlboros. Simon reaches out and takes one for trade. Barry lights up, then plays with the cigarette, tapping it into the white saucer he uses as an ashtray, even though it doesn't need doing yet.

'It's up to you, Simon,' he says eventually, and they spend the next ten minutes or so talking over the football.

Simon is angry when he gets back. It's true about women, but at the same time, he thinks, Barry is top to toe absolute purest bullshit. Up to me? Too right. So what are you and the other one paid for? Because here's his view: of course you can understand how a bicycle works, but you still have to find your actual, physical balance and learn to ride it. You could actually do that *without* the understanding. What you really need is first, a bicycle, second, time to practise. The resources available here, *vis-à-vis learning how to relate to women*, are limited, stretched to breaking point, to say the least: The screwesses, who don't count (rumour has it they may not be actual women), the chaplain's groupies, and four of the teachers in Education, where he is not allowed to go. Female members of the public are not exactly queuing up to give lessons, are they? Fair