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EDITORIAL BOARD

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Shelby Shapiro (Ph.D. American Studies), the General Editor of *The Independent Scholar*, served for many years as the English-language editor of *Tsum punkt/To the Point*, the magazine of Yiddish of Greater Washington, as well as for its predecessor publication. He is currently Associate Editor of *Records of the State of Connecticut*. His Ph.D. dissertation dealt with acculturation and American Jewish women in the Yiddish press; he is a Yiddish-English translator, and his research interests include Jazz and Blues (having presented jazz radio programs for nine years), the labor movement, the First World War, and immigrant anarchism.

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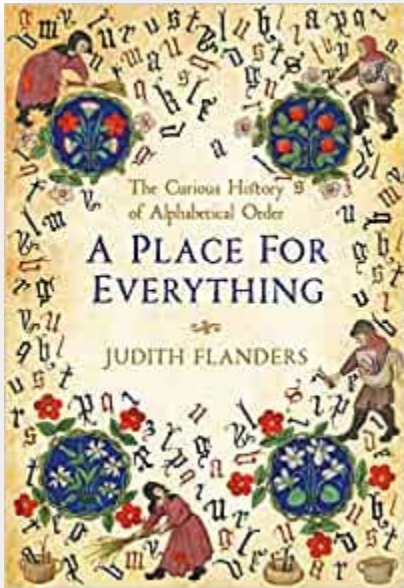
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A Place for Everything: The Curious History of Alphabetical Order

Judith Flanders

New York: Basic Books, 2020

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235pp. + Bibliography, Index, time-line. Illus.

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[A Place For Everything: The Curious History of Alphabetical Order: Amazon.co.uk: Flanders, Judith: 9781509881567: Books](https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/9781509881567)

Review by Shelby Shapiro. Review first published online 23 March 2022 and will appear in Volume 9 of *The Independent Scholar*.

"Everything has a history": so said the mysterious "they." In *A Place for Everything: The Curious History of Alphabetical Order* (2020) social historian Judith Flanders presents a case in point. What could be more obvious and taken-for-granted than alphabetical order? This is as natural as a-b-c—except that it isn't. In this wide and deep-ranging panoramic study, Judith Flanders takes the reader across continents, civilizations, cultures, and centuries as she traces how and why alphabetical order came to be the favored form for organization, storage and searching.

The book is divided into ten chapters (please note her form of ordering): Antiquity, Benedictines, Categories, Distinctions, Expansion, Firsts, Government, History, Index Cards, then skipping to Y2K. This book presents

a deep dive into the concepts and applications of different forms of ordering, sorting, distinguishing, categorizing, and storing information.

The alphabet as an ordering tool, as demonstrated by the chapter headings in this book.

On a deeper level, this book is less about alphabetical order and more about the development of different methods and concepts of information storage, retrieval, ordering and the development of appropriate tools towards those various ends. She points out the role of cultural perceptions and beliefs in perception, ordering and categorizing. For example, Flanders notes the symbolism of numbers:



Numbers more generally also represented more than mere quantity. Three was a key number, representing as it did the holy Trinity; six was perfect, because God created the universe in six days; the number seven was important, too, for God rested on the seventh day; ten stood for the number of commandments; forty for the days Christ spent on earth after the Resurrection. (p. 32)

Flanders warns readers against present-day self-congratulation in a footnote to the above-quoted section: "(d)octors in the West today routinely prescribe drugs for three or seven days—those numbers of the Trinity and the Sabbath—even though evidence from clinical trials suggests that two or eight days works every bit as well" (p. 32n), referenced by a 2006 paper in the *British Medical Journal*. (p. 270n, 11).

Hierarchical ordering tied in with prevailing world views. Thus, "beginning with God, then angels, then, dealing with subjects that arose as it followed the order of the six days of creation, before returning to a hierarchical arc with man, the soul, the body, and the natural world." (p. 67-68).

In discussing the book most frequently used in English—*Roget's Thesaurus*, Flanders notes that "[b]ased on an eighteenth-century view of the natural-history classification system, its layout is organized by phyla, classes, order, and families—a system that is impenetrable to the great majority, if not all, of its modern-day users. The alphabetical index, which all twentieth- and twenty-first-century editions of *Roget* contain, is considered so necessary today that it typically occupies more than half the book." (p. 229).

Flanders demonstrates various forms of ordering and categorizing that existed before, during, and after the "triumph" of alphabetical order. The Dewey Decimal System, for example, orders by subject, and utilizes other forms within the main subject heading. She also points out how he baked misogyny and allegiance to Christianity into the system): under religion (numbers 200+), Dewey allotted numbers 200-289 for Christianity, and just number 297 for Islam "Women, meanwhile, are patronizingly categorized alongside etiquette." (p. 217n).

She demonstrates how various ordering systems had cognitive side-effects, and physical ones. in the form of technological changes. Thus, the vertical or hanging file

first made its appearance in 1893 (p. 219). This method of information storage could be used in any type of ordering system. Ordering problems led to desk designs, and spindles for storage of individual items of information. To this Flanders could have added different kinds of storage system for books, a subject nicely covered by engineering historian Henry Petroski in his *The Book on the Bookshelf* (1999).

Along the way there are all manner of fascinating digressions: the word "criss-cross," for example, came from "Christ's cross," a wooden panel setting forth the alphabet, numbers, and the Lord's Prayer, often with a cross at the top. Students would say "Christ's cross me speed" before reciting the alphabet as early as the 15th Century C.E.; in a footnote Flanders comments that "Over the centuries the phrase was reduced first to 'Christ's cross,' then in nineteenth-century dialect, to 'criss-cross,' to mean the alphabet, which was probably reinforced by the convention whereby those who could not write signed documents with an 'x,' or crisscross." (pp. 124-125, 125n). She talks about everything from Babylonian inscriptions to Sumerian cuneiforms, from the development of telephone systems and switchboards to the appearance of telephone directories years later, and alphabetically tabbed paper dividers.

In discussing the organization of encyclopedias in an alphabetical system, she writes:

But until the alphabet became the encyclopedia's principal organizing system, these works could not be seen as truly modern. Nor because one system of organizing is better than any other, but because the use of alphabetical order, once more, marks a transition in worldview. Just as the spread of alphabetically organized dictionaries and indexes had indicated a shift from seeing words purely as meaning to seeing them as a series of letters, so too the arrival of alphabetically ordered encyclopedias indicated a shift from seeing the world as a hierarchical, ordered place, explicable and comprehensible if only a person knew enough, to seeing it as a random series of events and people and places. (p. 186).

There is nothing inevitable about alphabetical order. Flanders notes that the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* " . . . returned to the Middle Ages in 1974, when it divided its content into a 'Macropaedia,' a 'Micropaedia,' and



a “Propaedia.” To make all this useful to readers “required a two-volume alphabetical index.” (p. 196n). Flanders discusses the challenges posed by languages written in ideograms, such as Chinese. Japanese has three writing systems: the ideogram-type kanji (where symbols represent words or concepts), and two alphabetical scripts, both of which are written according to syllable-plus-vowel: *hirakana* and *katakana*, the latter often used for foreign names. (p. 231). Thus jazz guitarist Herbie Ellis becomes in *katakana* “*he-ru-bi e-ri-su*”. While in 1921, the International Olympic Committee mandated that countries would appear in the opening ceremony in alphabetical order. But whose alphabet? Further mandates amending that decision occurred in 1921, 1964 and 1988. In the Beijing Olympics of 2008, the host country used a system going back to the fourth century. (pp. 227-228).

This book fits in well with the work of sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel, author of books such as *The Seven Day Circle: The History and Meaning of the Week* (1985); *Hidden in Plain Sight: The Social Structure of Irrelevance* (2015); and *Taken for Granted: The Remarkable Power of the Unremarkable* (2018). He has made it his mission to bring the background into the foreground: what role does the frame play in defining the picture? *The Seven Day Circle* discusses the seven-day week as a social construct.

Judith Flanders’ *A Place for Everything* deserves a place on your bookshelf. Informative, witty, thought-provoking and well-researched, this book makes the reader more aware and conscious of the what, why and how of categorizing, ordering, and understanding.

Shelby Shapiro (Ph.D. American Studies), the General Editor of *The Independent Scholar*, served for many years as the English-language editor of *Tsum punkt/To the Point*, the magazine of Yiddish of Greater Washington, as well as for its predecessor publication. He is currently Associate Editor of *Records of the State of Connecticut*. His Ph.D. dissertation dealt with acculturation and American Jewish women in the Yiddish press; he is a Yiddish-English translator, and his research interests include Jazz and Blues (having presented jazz radio programs for nine years), the labor movement, the First World War, and immigrant anarchism.