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Book Review

A Take-Along Parlor Companion for Modern Days

By ELAINE KENDALL

My Own Alphabet by Bobbie Louise Hawkins (Coffee House Press: \$9.95; 151 pages.)

A novelist, playwright and poet who often performs in company with singers, Hawkins has collected some of her favorite quotations from other writers and combined them with her own meditations and anecdotes to create this winsome collage. The result is a contemporary version of a quaint idea: the Victorian Parlor Companion.

In the 19th Century, such books were standard fixtures on sitting-room tables. Callers would leaf through them during breaks in the conversation, confident that anything they found would be a suitable subject for discussion in mixed company. Courting couples could sit on the mohair davenport close enough to read selections aloud. If their hands happened to touch as a page was turned, the lapse would be overlooked, and if a particularly sentimental passage brought a tear to the lady's eye, the young man might even brush it away.

Parlor Companions became obsolete when the gramophone replaced the stereopticon, but you can still sometimes find them in secondhand bookstores—the leather binding scuffed, the gold stamping faded, but the inside intact, with views of Notre Dame de Paris, a reproduction of Millet's "The Gleaners," even engravings from Greek mythology, if the gods could be portrayed clothed. There would be appropriate excerpts from Great Authors after each illustration; Ruskin on art, Bullfinch on myth, snippets of Tennyson and Browning.

Victorian in Plan Only

There's nothing Victorian about Hawkins' book except the plan. Organizing the chapters alphabetically, she surrounds each letter with her own miniature essays, a tag from another commentator, and once in a while, an entire short story.

Now, in 1989, A is for Abortion, Absolutes and Adieu; C for a comment upon John Cage; N for Nietzsche's sister Elizabeth; W, as might be expected, for Writing and Work. Friends, relations and chance encounters turn up along with scenes from the author's life, glimpses into her original and whimsical thought processes, and almost always, the related quotes with hardly a cliché in the lot.

Sharing the letter U with a succinct appraisal of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle are several phrases of unknown origin, any of which could enhance anything from a T-shirt to a class in Modern Philosophy. Though my favorite is "Only Dead Fish Go With the Flow," the other seven are equally refreshing.

On a more elevated plane, I was delighted to find Remy de Gourmont represented by "In a certain sense, printing proved a drawback to letters. It . . . cast contempt on books that failed to find a publisher."

Hawkins has included a few examples of her own fiction; a fully-fledged short story, "This One's for Linda Joy," is a fine memoir of an eccentric Texas cousin that captures both the writer's ambivalence toward her family and the tragicomic life of Linda Joy herself. "Maggie Magee" was Hawkins' pseudonym for her first and

only published mystery story, an exercise showing her extraordinary versatility but proving that her talents are far too subtle to find a permanent home in Ellery Queen's magazine.

Leeway to Expand

She excels at the short take, the oblique view and the sort of incident that allows the storyteller leeway to expand, change and alter the fundamental nugget of actuality. Clearly meant to be heard rather than printed, these little tales capture the idiom and essence of each setting. The best take place in Texas, from which she escaped early enough to develop a sense of detachment, but too late not to be formed by its code. Northern California, where she's lived more recently, is treated with the fond irony it deserves.

Hawkins' curious, witty and occasionally militant slant on the beginning and end of love, on growing older, on a writer's disciplines and family obligations make "My Own Alphabet" an unclassifiable but altogether beguiling album.

If you haven't got a front parlor, take it to the beach, out on the patio, or on your next plane trip.