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ALPHABET BOOKS AREN'T FOR BABIES: THE USE OF ALPHABET BOOKS IN THE
SECONDARY CLASSROOM

by
Chloe Skye Crane

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
May 2023

Approved by

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This thesis is dedicated to

My Mo and Papaw for showing me what true Texans look like, taking me to the library almost every day growing up until they couldn't anymore, and reading me a pile of books. I would not be where I am without them.

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My mom, dad, and brother

For allowing me to shine in the spotlight for all of my life, for supporting my wild ideas, and making me believe I'm capable of everything. I love you.

ABSTRACT

CHLOE SKYE CRANE: Alphabet Books Aren't for Babies: The Use of Alphabet Books in the Secondary Classroom (Under the direction of Dr. Rosemary Oliphant-Ingham)

The goal of this thesis is to examine the role of alphabet books within the secondary classroom through the lens of research potential, development of cultural awareness, and the educational benefits for the secondary learner as well as three different types of alphabet books varying from least to most complex. The literature review supporting this thesis is broken into five sections: what are alphabet books, a closer look at three examples, the research potential in alphabet books, developing cultural awareness and empathy, and educational benefits (which includes subsections for skills developed). Following the literature review is the text of an alphabet book about the American South. It is an example of an alphabet written specifically for secondary readers with the goal of expanding cultural understanding and empathy. Each letter of the alphabet has three different connections: one to a musician, one to a city, and one to a cultural item. The final section is a reflection over the research and writing process.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Trying to find unique ways to engage students has been a struggle for educators since there became a need for the profession. Oftentimes they find themselves feeling their only option is to reinvent the wheel or do the same dull opener, especially in the secondary classroom. Unit openers meant to generate interest sometimes do the opposite and instead cause students to lose the interest the activity was meant to create. However, there are options frequently left underutilized. Children's literature of many types tends to easily lend itself to the curriculum present in a secondary classroom. Folk tales, fairy tales, stories that connect to the content being taught all seem to make sense in both the mind of the teacher and the student. Children's literature was spurred by a movement to make more child-focused literature during World War II and has continued to progress and evolve (McDaniel 2020). The goals, structures, and audiences of children's literature have shifted over the years. The goal of education is now supplemented by goals like entertainment (arguably a goal of early children's literature) or identity-affirming and empathy-teaching.

While children's literature still makes sense in the secondary classroom, alphabet books may not. These books, while a common form of children's literature, seem largely absent from grades seven to twelve, but it's not without good reason. Upon first glance, these books seem entirely too simple for secondary readers. Older students and secondary teachers tend to avoid such books as they tend to expect "...texts containing labeled illustrations of common objects in 'A is for apple; B is for baby' vein" (Chaney 1993). They believe alphabet books to be representative of childish understandings of the English language lacking any depth or sincerity. This is not true of all alphabet books. While the alphabet books of old (and some current ones) use the very simple writing pattern of one letter to one word association with no explanation, the

complexity of many is hard to ignore. Most people have a fond nostalgia for these alphabet books and remember reading them as a child. Some use them as a fun way to represent the place or culture they are from. Very little is drawn out of the alphabet book for older students beyond a bit of entertainment. A quick Google search reinforces the idea of alphabet books being for children just learning to read. The phrasing is simple and short, the illustrations bright, and the connections between the letters and the objects are straightforward. This is only upon first glance though. Whether looking at *The Z Was Zapped* by Chris Van Allsburg or *A is For Appalachia: The Alphabet Book of Appalachian History*, the complexity and thinking required to understand these books is clear. Alphabet books have evolved quite greatly since their first iteration. Authors and illustrators continue to find unique and creative ways to break the mold of the traditional alphabet book. These new styles of writing and illustrating alphabet books help to prevent the genre from becoming stale. New goals and structures particularly serve to help benefit older readers.

This thesis will examine the true potential of alphabet books in the secondary classroom. To do this, I will explain what alphabet books actually are at their core and examine three styles of alphabet books at different levels of reading difficulty and complexity of topics as well as research articles to ultimately illustrate the possibility of the alphabet book in the secondary classroom through the lens of research benefits, the development of empathy and cultural awareness, and educational impact. All of the research justifying these assertions is pulled from reputable journal articles published by verified sources. The three books that will be examined in this thesis are *C is for Country* by Lil Nas X (2021), *L is for Lonestar* by Carol Crane (2001), and *A is For Appalachia: An Alphabet Book of Appalachian Heritage* by Linda Hager Pack (2009). Each book serves a different level of reader as well as works toward a different goal. One book

tells a story, one examines a place, and one examines a specific culture stemming out of a geographic location. Chapter 3 will then look at the American South through an alphabet book I have written in an effort to expose students to a much more complex version of the South that includes both its beauty and creativity and its struggles. Each letter has a connection to a city, a musician, and a cultural item or artifact. This book, entitled *A, B, See You in the South: An Alphabet Book of the American South*, is written for secondary classrooms to fulfill the expected benefits of this type of children's literature in the secondary classroom. The book is designed to expose students to a culture they could be unfamiliar with or to broaden their understanding of their own culture as well as serve as a springboard for research. This book will reinforce the idea that alphabet books are a creative resource to enhance the curriculum in the secondary classroom.

The book itself is 26 pages along with an index of further research and sources. Each page consists of one letter with three different connections. An example would be "A is for alligators that roam the south and Atlanta where delicious food will fill your mouth and Alan Jackson who always sings a good tune." The cultural item would be alligators, the city would be Atlanta, and the musician would be Alan Jackson. This means a total of 78 different items are covered within the 26 letters, illustrating the great potential for expansion within alphabet books. The connections vary widely from country artists to modern rappers to southern cities to northern cities with a connection to the South but ultimately relate to the South in some way to give students a more complete understanding of what the South is. Understanding the complex nature of the place in which they reside is the goal of the book. The final pages after the text of the book itself are a research index. Each connection has a short paragraph with a website as a cited source so readers can access to learn more information. The index is included to ensure readers have a

jumping-off point of sorts to be able to research from in an effort to reduce the struggle of finding a beginning for research. The connections essentially become a list of 78 different possible research topics that can be expanded upon. Some of the connections are meant to be unexpected or shocking in an effort to interest readers in finding out more information about the associations made within the text.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

What Are Alphabet Books?

The invention of children's books is a relatively recent development in the history of books. The transition to illustrated children's books "...was not fully accomplished until after World War II when graphic designers illustrated picture books as a means to study and explore visual thinking" (Massey 2015). Alphabet books are a type of children's literature that commonly use picture and word associations to explain the alphabet. Every letter of the alphabet is connected to something that starts with the same letter. They are a common form of children's literature used to help emergent readers develop their understanding of the alphabet as well as their vocabulary and further language development. The common alphabet book used for primary readers has 26 different items or phrases that connect to each letter of the alphabet and "...have a consistent and predictable organizational pattern, which renders them user friendly" (Chaney 1993). The most common example of this would be each letter tying to one item that starts with the same letter. However, there are more complicated versions of these books. While there are still connections to each letter, those connections can be achieved in unique ways. Some books used just visual information such as *The Z Was Zapped* by Chris Van Allsburg followed by a short simple sentence to explain. These illustrations leave vast amounts of information to the imagination and spur the reader onto research of their own.

The oldest form of alphabet books in Western culture are hornbooks from 15th century Europe. These books are very unlike the books of today's society with bindings and pages. The

earliest alphabet books were written on a wooden paddle and covered with a thin layer from a cow's horn, hence the name hornbooks (McDaniel 2020). More modern versions emerged in the 19th century with primers and early readers. The layout of these books with large letters, words, and pictures remains not unlike the style of many alphabet books today. The alphabet books written today, however, are far more diverse in the goals they're meant to achieve. While most books do seek to "...help young children become more familiar with the letters that make up everyday words and phrases", many books also seek to inform readers about more than the alphabet (McDaniel 2020). These books also seek to entertain more than they attempt to help children learn the alphabet. Some books are written at complexity too high for young readers to grasp and strive to make the reader think, question, or feel something just as any longer novel or short story would.

These higher-level uses can be seen more specifically within the secondary curriculum and classroom, but are often overlooked. However, books used at this level can "...present memorable social data about people's actions, influence student acquisition of the specific language used to communicate that information, and promote a suppleness of mind needed to assimilate content-area knowledge" (Farris and Fuhler 1994). The alphabet book has extensive benefits including use as a research tool, a way to develop cultural awareness and empathy for diverse people unlike the reader, and educational development.

A Closer Look at Alphabet Books: Three Examples

There are many different types of alphabet books. As mentioned earlier, the most common is written with one letter-word association. An example of this would be Lil Nas X's *C is For Country* (illustrated by Theodore Taylor III and published in 2021). Every letter is tied to one word. These words vary some in that some are nouns, some are adjectives, and some are

onomatopoeia. These differing parts of speech make the book more complex than the traditional idea but only slightly. Most of the letters are accompanied by a short sentence that explains what the word means or why it connects to the author who is the main character. The plot follows the author as a small child living on a farm, from sunrise to bedtime with horses in the country, to connect to the author's song "Old Town Road." Plot is one way, if an uncommon way, to connect letters in an alphabet book. The illustrations are bright and colorful and keep the reader's attention quite well. This book is meant almost entirely for the purpose of entertainment. The words used in the book are easily understood by young readers. There's not much potential for further research or conversation.

L is for Lonestar: A Texas Alphabet by Carol Crane would be an example of the next level of complexity on the spectrum of alphabet books. Each page consists of a letter in a rhyming couplet. To the side of this, the margin of the book contains more information about what the item is. Some letters take up a two-page spread and are accompanied by elaborate illustrations done by Alan Stacy. Unlike Lil Nas X's book, the letters in this book are tied by theme rather than by plot. Each letter relates back to the state of Texas. Most of the words are nouns, but some are adjectives used to describe places or things like "underground" which Crane uses to explain the oil industry in Texas. This is a far more common example of an alphabet book. Themes unite the letter associations. This is only one of a series of alphabet books about a place. Carol Crane has also written *P is for Palmetto: A South Carolina Alphabet* and *S is for Sunshine: A Florida Alphabet*. Alphabet books such as these saw a resurgence in popularity in the early to mid-2000s in an effort to teach children more about geography and the idea of place (McDaniel 2020).

Yet another level of complexity can be found in *A is for Appalachia: The Alphabet Book of Appalachian Heritage* by Linda Hager Pack. This book's theme is not unlike that of Carol Crane's alphabet books about place, but the theme of this book deals more with culture than with physical geography or features of the Appalachian region. Each letter is associated with one word that relates to a certain part of the culture in the area. Pack writes "U is for undertaker" which is then explained by a paragraph following the sentence. The paragraph explains what that specific item has to do with a broader cultural application (like funerary traditions). The watercolor illustrations also sometimes use words within their illustrations to help explain further. Words of common folktales, songs, and poems are used to deepen the reader's understanding of Appalachian culture. These aspects combine to make an extremely complex alphabet book meant for students on a higher reading level. Pack's book is a perfect example of a book to be used in the secondary classroom.

Each of these books represent only one possibility of the alphabet book. While the same letter-word association structure remains, the ways in which this structure is either used or achieved varies widely. Simple rhyming helps make some connections, while others are made through simple sentences and more complex paragraphs that follow to actually inform those connections. The goals of these books are, however, very different. Lil Nas X's book appears to be telling the story of the progression of the main character's day through the alphabet. Carol Crane's is trying to inform the reader about a place along with entertaining rhyme schemes. Linda Hager Pack's book tries to inform even more than Crane's does. It serves almost like an encyclopedia or dictionary of culture. When looked at in combination, these books exemplify the idea that all alphabet books are in fact different as well as the dynamic nature of the alphabet

book. These books can be used to achieve widely varying goals that are met through unique paths which are individual to each author and illustrator.

Alphabet Books as a Research Nexus

The typical alphabet book includes at least twenty-six different opportunities for research, if not more. Some alphabet books are understandably too simple for this. “D is for duck” does not easily lend itself to research and may cause a secondary student to shut down, believing the book to be too easy for them. However, “D is for dulcimer” creates questions (Pack 2009). Although the author includes a short few sentences explaining the context of dulcimer, much is still left to curiosity. These questions created by the book serve as “...a stimulus for research” (Chaney 1993). Prompting questioning and curiosity is an excellent strategy for teaching new topics and ideas, especially if it’s something students believe to be old or overdone. Dulcimer would be an unfamiliar word to many students. This exhibits the complexity in alphabet books that “...can stimulate thinking and offer a world of possibilities in the area of research and inquiry” (Bradley and Bradley 2014). The ways in which thinking and inquiry are created may differ. Readers and students may need to think about how the author made the connection they did. While some connections are straightforward by using the first letter of the object to connect to the letter of the alphabet, others are less clear. Students may need to use critical thinking skills to research and determine the connection between the letter and the word and understand then how the author made that connection.

The idea of researching can be paralyzing to students on occasion. Allowing freedom of topic is exciting but overwhelming at the same time. Having no sense of what to research or no jumping off point for the research can prevent students from even starting their research. The

alphabet book helps to limit students in a purposeful way. These books help “...not only to present a variety of concepts or examples related to the topic, but also to awaken an interest among students, thus invoking additional inquiry” (Chaney 1993). Alphabet books purposefully tend to leave certain things surface-level. Even looking at Pack’s *A is for Appalachia: The Alphabet Book of Appalachian Heritage*, the most complex of the examined books, it’s clear that there’s a considerable opportunity for more research. Books like these give students 26 topics automatically. The fear of picking the wrong topic is taken away when students become interested in a topic through an alphabet book. Colorful illustrations and rhyming words used in some books have the potential to make students feel more comfortable. Interest generated by the book takes over the anxiety of beginning a project. Students already feel like they know something about the topic and the playing field is leveled in a sense.

Interest in research can also be created through visual aspects. While “...text in these books is usually limited to a single sentence or to a word serving as a label for the picture”, it does not mean the books lack information (Chaney 1992). This lack of text serves to create visual interest simply because of the fact that there’s little text to process, while the illustrations serve to create visual interest by using bright colors, varying art styles, and unique mediums.

Developing Empathy and Awareness Through Alphabet Books

Alphabet books allow the readers, whether of a young age or in the secondary classroom, to understand a different culture, or in other words develop empathy for another, unlike their own or to feel affirmed in their own identity. Culture can mean any number of things: traditions, holidays, food, religions, clothing. The list truly is extensive. While alphabet books may not give students every single detail about other cultures, it does at least give them insight into lives and cultures different from their own that they may not have known about prior to reading. Not only

does it inform them, but “...alphabet books offer many opportunities for students to compare and contrast the language and customs among and between cultural groups, including their own” (Chaney 1993). This comparing and contrasting, while being a chance for developing further critical thinking skills, is an opportunity for students to begin to understand the commonalities between cultures and lifestyles. This understanding would then ideally prompt students to behavior that reflects their newly developed empathy for cultures around them. Alphabet books have the potential to introduce students to 26 different cultures or 26 aspects of one culture, which is far more than a normal lesson about culture would be able to typically incorporate. A world of potential is opened up that may not have existed prior to the book being introduced.

Furthermore, alphabet books offer the opportunity to affirm the cultural identity of readers and help them feel like they belong, both within the classroom community and the world. Students from cultures that deviate from the norm at schools may feel uncomfortable or unseen in lessons based on a standardized curriculum Alphabet books can offer a chance to be seen, even if for a brief moment, in a book. Alphabet books can cover a wide array of subjects. If a culture exists, there may well be an alphabet book about it somewhere. Using alphabet books that explain about different cultures is a chance for “...building self-esteem for all students regardless of their specific culture or ethnic group” (Bradley and Bradley 2014). Peers getting the chance to see themselves and their classmates in books helps create a community of understanding rather than a mono-culture with a lack of understanding. This community of learners then understands at least a surface-level amount of knowledge about the cultures within their classroom. It allows students to be able to ask the questions they didn’t even know they needed to ask in the first place. It also can strengthen the community already present in the classroom. Linda Hager Pack’s *A is for Appalachia: The Alphabet Book of Appalachian*

Heritage is an example of this sort of book. Appalachian heritage is relatively unknown and a student may feel recognized by the reading of the text. The text "...encourages students to have pride in their heritage and inspires them to share their experiences..." (Bradley and Bradley 2014). Seeing that an author finds value in their culture may prompt students to either start to find that value in their own culture or affirm the value they already see present. Reading these types of books gives students a clear opportunity to figure out where they fit in the classroom as well as "... identify their role in society" (Massey 2015). Seeing their culture in a book communicates to the student that they play a valuable role in the classroom community. Their culture deserves to be written about, talked about, and further explored.

The Educational Benefit of Alphabet Books

There are numerous opportunities to reap the educational benefits of alphabet books in the secondary classroom. The same benefits found in alphabet books when read to young readers still apply to secondary students. They reinforce understanding of the alphabet as well as introduce students to vocabulary they may be unfamiliar with or unable to define. Alphabet books promote both "...oral and written language development opportunities..." (Chaney 1993). Developing reading skills, visual literacy, and writing skills are all possibilities within the reading of an alphabet book.

Reading Skills

A frequently ignored fact is that students in secondary classrooms may not be able to read on grade-level. Truthfully, they may sometimes be several grades below their grade-level. Teachers often may not realize this because secondary students are better at hiding the fact they cannot read as well as their peers. The reason they may not be on grade-level for reading

comprehension and fluency can be tied back to many different factors. One of which is the fact that “...content-area literacy is a struggle for most students as each academic area is fraught with unique and confounding text structure and information such as historical documents, scientific text, and overwhelming topics” (Massey 2015). Students may not be able to understand content-specific material because they lack the skills to possibly read it in the first place as well as the schema to understand the context surrounding the word. Complicated readings can cause students to shut down and feel unintelligent if the readings feel out of reach of their understanding. Reading a full novel or book on a topic may feel impossible, but a children’s book may be far more approachable. Bradley and Bradley posit that “The simple story lines and clever inclusion of alphabet sequence provide support for the struggler and challenge for fluent learners, thus offering great opportunities for differentiation” (2014). The uncomplicated arrangement and clear letter-word connections provides a reading experience that both serves to make the reader feel accomplished as well as improve the reader’s fluency. Furthermore, it causes the fluent reader to slow down and evaluate. These types of readers tend to skip over words or read too quickly and miss information in an effort to understand the main points of complex readings. The short sentences make the reader slow down and truly process the information presented in the text rather than rushing through to get finished. Alphabet books serve to benefit a spectrum of students, not just the learner who is struggling to read on grade-level.

Visual Literacy

Another important educational benefit gained from the presentation of alphabet books in the secondary classroom is the improvement of visual literacy. Visual literacy is defined as “...the ability to put coherent thoughts into words, words into sentences, and sentences into larger

units” (Stewig 1978). In an ever-increasing digitally-driven world, it would be a disservice to not help students understand how to verbalize not only what they see but their feelings and opinions about what they see. Illustrations within alphabet books provide an excellent opportunity to develop three subskills of verbal literacy: “...to describe objectively...to compare two different objects...to value one of the objects” (Stewig 1978). Students need to be able to explain what they see in concise words. They then must be able to compare and contrast images or illustrations. Noting the differences and the similarities between images helps students begin to start the third skill. Students being able not only to pick which images or illustrations they like but also explain why they prefer one over the other shows clear understanding of not only the skill to read images, but also to critically think. While it could be argued movies or videos are options for developing visual literacy, asking students to evaluate fast-moving movies or videos could be too overwhelming at first. Easing students into developing these skills through pictures in alphabet books allows the students to fully develop said skills before they move onto more complicated visual media. The opportunities for discussion of art within alphabet books is seemingly endless. *The Z Was Zapped* by Chris Van Allsburg would be an excellent choice of book for developing an understanding of how to process visual media. This book presents an illustration of an action happening to a letter. The reader must play a guessing game of sorts to determine what action is being illustrated. They can then turn the page and read the text to see what the action was. This book could teach many lessons, but learning to determine meaning from an image would be an obvious one.

Writing Skills

The advancement of writing skills is another educational benefit that can be reaped from the humble alphabet book. Upon first glance, it may seem confusing to say writing skills can

develop from a book. The book itself may not develop the skills, but the activities inspired by the alphabet book can. Themed alphabet books “...present a unique writing style with visuals of the subject in various artistic styles” (Bradley and Bradley 2014). An alphabet book would most likely not be a style of writing a secondary student would think of, but is a helpful model-structure to use. Asking students to write their own book about a topic discussed in class offers a built-in structure. As mentioned with research, the fear of getting started or writing the wrong way could prevent students from starting. Alphabet books can be viewed as “...a means of helping students organize their writing and regards these books as invitations for writers to write” (Chaney 1993). This low-stakes structure that is almost a fill-in-the-blank exercise could be a unique writing activity that doesn’t unnerve students who are not comfortable with their own writing abilities. Organization can be a challenging aspect of writing for numerous students. Offering a clear structure with little room for confusion but great room for creativity gives students an exciting opportunity to write. Furthermore, alphabet books provide “...students with numerous writing opportunities, from poetry to scientific observations” (Thompson 1992). Alphabet books present the idea that writing does not have to exist solely in the shape of essays or long-form books or articles. Writing can be simple and low-pressure instead of something anxiety-inducing.

Vocabulary Skills

Alphabet books also offer the opportunity to broaden the vocabulary knowledge of students. Introducing vocabulary can become repetitive or boring for students and teachers alike, if not overwhelming. Teachers feel like coming up with new techniques is challenging while students could check out if disinterested. An alphabet book is a possible option to introduce the words for a unit of study in a unique way. Twenty-six letters in the alphabet means the potential

of twenty-six new words being learned. If the words are not new, it could mean the words are further explained or even defined instead of just being recognized. Chaney defines the books as being “...instrumental in expanding students' vocabulary and concept knowledge...” (1993). Alphabet books and simple vocabulary are not automatically tied together, despite assumptions one might make based on their target audience. This would help with established vocabulary students need to understand before moving into a unit. The potential for freedom of choice in studying vocabulary exists as well. Thompson suggests having students mirror an alphabet book to “...make their own dictionaries of unusual or foreign terms...” (1992). This allows students some agency while still achieving the same goal of learning unfamiliar vocabulary words. Vocabulary through an alphabet book feels more freeing than the traditional technique of reading definitions and giving examples of the word in a sentence.

Introductory Activities

Further opportunity presented by alphabet books is the chance to create interest in a new topic. Creating interest is truly the age-old struggle for educators. Some openers can feel tired or boring, others ineffective or isolated. However, children's books and more specifically alphabet books can pique interest in informed learners and those new to topics alike. Students may consider alphabet books and picture books to be too immature, but one author describes students after seeing “...the colorful pictures and...the descriptive text...were captivated by the wide range of topics presented in these slim volumes” (Chaney 1993). The chances of at least one of the twenty-six topics contained in alphabet books interesting a student in some way are incredibly high, much higher than a typical opener that addresses only a few aspects of a topic. These books access so many different types of information in their text and their illustrations that provide unique opportunities for far more than one connection. Other introductions limit

opportunities for connections by only presenting a few topics. Furthermore, Chaney identifies alphabet books as introductions to “...be especially helpful for supporting reluctant or at-risk readers prior to or during content area study of difficult topics” (1993). Alphabet books tend to feel more approachable than some unit introductory activities like class discussions, which can be intimidating, or writing activities, which can feel too difficult. A pre-quiz could unintentionally cause students to shut down if they answer questions wrong, even if it's ungraded. A writing activity may feel too overwhelming to the students. Offering the students a relaxing moment of listening to a simple book full of colorful pictures could also serve to calm the class.

As evidenced, the uses of the alphabet book go far beyond learning the alphabet. Their use in the secondary classroom as a research encouragement, a tool to teach cultural awareness and empathy, an identity-affirming exercise, and a resource within the classroom presents endless opportunities for both student and teacher. Alphabet books often go beyond the simple assumptions people make about them based on their humble structure.

Chapter 3: A, B, See You in the South

A is for Alligators that roam the south and Atlanta where delicious food will fill your mouth and Alan Jackson who always sings a good tune.

B is Biscuits which are a delicious breakfast bread and Baton Rouge, which means a stick that is red and B.B. King who never made a move too soon.

C is for Chattanooga where the Moonpie is made and Cracklins', a snack of high grade and Charley Pride, who was Mississippi born and raised.

D is for Detroit where many southern artists got their start and the Delta Mississippi's agricultural counterpart and Dolly Parton whose music and philanthropy is highly-praised.

E is for Euless, next to DFW airport, and Eudora Welty, whose writing has the power to transport and Elvis Presley, who they call the King.

F is for Fort Worth where the west begins and Football which is better when your team wins and Fats Domino who missed his girl, "Josephine."

G is for Greenville, home of "Shoeless Joe" and for a delicious Cajun stew called Gumbo and George Strait who says without love, you ain't livin'.

H is for Houston, a city meant for baseball, and Hotty Toddy which is yelled during football and Hank Williams who wanted to know what you've got cookin'.

I is for Independence, an unincorporated city, and Iced Tea so sweet it can give you a cavity and the Indigo Girls who are “Closer to Fine”.

J is for Jackson, home of Medgar Evers, and Jambalaya which to cook requires an endeavor and Johnny Cash who walked the line.

K is for Kerrville, home of James Avery, and Kris Kristofferson, recognized for his song’s delivery, and King Cake, a Louisiana sweet.

L is for Little Rock, home of brave schoolboys and schoolgirls, and Loretta Lynn, a “Blue Kentucky Girl,” and Lay’s potato chips, a salty treat.

M is Montgomery where the buses were boycotted and Mardi Gras, the celebration jackpot, and Muddy Waters who sang for “Forty Days and Forty Nights”.

N is for Nashville where you can find plenty of guitars and NASCAR, full of lightning-fast cars, and Nanci Griffith who likes “Drive In Movies and Dashboard lights”.

O is for Oak Ridge that couldn't really exist, and Okefenokee Swamp on which many people reminisce and the Old 97s, who wish every night was Friday night.

P is for Paris, the cowboy's getaway, and Potato Salad which is very gourmet, and Post Malone, who grew up in Texas. Crazy, right?

Q is for Quanah, a city named for the last chief of the Comanche nation, and Queso, which is a wonderful creation and Quavo whose songs always entertain.

R is for Raleigh, next door to the Tarheels, and Red Velvet Cake, a favorite dessert after a meal, and Ronnie Milsap who sings about “Smoky Mountain Rain”.

S is for Savannah, home of the Girl Scouts, and shrimp and grits which are sure to sell out, and Sam Cooke, whose death over 5,000 people did lament.

T is for Tuscaloosa, home of the Crimson Tide, and Tabasco that makes you wild eyed and Tom Petty who has a southern accent.

U is for University Park, home of the SMU Mustangs, and Upside Down Cake that has a sweet tang and Usher, who loves his boo.

V is for Vicksburg, the city on a bluff, and Voodoo, some very interesting stuff, and Vince Vance and the Valiants. All they want for Christmas is you.

W is for Waco, home of the Baylor Bears, and Waffle House where no one has any cares and Willie Nelson. A cowboy is what he grew into.

X is for Xenophon, a lawless land, and XIT, home of countless ranch hands. X stands for the Crossroads, where Robert Johnson paid his due.

Y is for Yazoo City, home of a famous author, and Yoknapawtawpha where fictional characters have a lot to offer. It's also for You Give Me Butterflies which is what Kacey Musgraves penned.

Z is for Zachary, just a small town, and Zebra Cakes which are always good to have around, and ZZ Top, some sharp-dressed men.

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The American Alligator is found in the southeastern United States. They live on the Atlantic Coast from North Carolina all the way to the Texas Gulf Coast. They live in warm swampy areas because they're cold-blooded and enjoy long lives as predators. For more information visit:

<https://srelherp.uga.edu/alligators/allmis.htm>

Atlanta is the capital of Georgia founded in 1837. It's known as a transportation hub because of its ties to the railroad as well as Delta Airlines and is often considered the gateway to the American south. For more information visit: <https://www.atlantaga.gov/visitors/history>

Alan Jackson was born in 1958 in Newnan, GA. He moved to Nashville, TN to start a career in country music in the 1980s with the motto "keep it country". He was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2014. For more information visit:

<https://www.countrymusichalloffame.org/hall-of-fame/alan-jackson#:~:text=In%20addition%20to%20his%202017,Hall%20of%20Fame%20in%202018.>

Baton Rouge was founded by French explorers, incorporated in 1817, and became the state capital of Louisiana in 1849. It's home to Louisiana State University and serves as a meeting place for Cajun, Creole, and other cultures within the state. For more information visit:

<https://www.brla.gov/837/About-Baton-Rouge>

The biscuit of the American South is not the traditional idea of a biscuit. This fluffy treat is tied to Southern cuisine as a side dish as well as a common breakfast food. For more information

visit: <https://recipes.howstuffworks.com/history-light-and-fluffy-biscuits.htm>

B.B. King was born in Itta Bena, MS in 1925 on a plantation. When he was young, he played on street corners and performed for crowds. He made his way to Memphis in 1947 and started a career. B.B., with his guitar named Lucille, became one of the most famous blues musicians. For more information visit: <https://www.bbking.com/>

Chattanooga, TN means "rock rising to a point" in Creek language. Set on a bluff, Chattanooga developed as a river port. It's famous for being the home of the Chattanooga Bakery, which created the Moon Pie. For more information visit:

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Chattanooga> <https://moonpie.com/about>

Cracklin' are fried pieces of pork belly. It's a salty treat often found at gas stations and markets across the South. For more information visit: <https://www.cajunfoodtours.com/blog/cracklin-a-delicious-cajun-treat/>

Charley Pride was born in Sledge, MS to a family of sharecroppers in 1927. Before he was a country star, he was a baseball player and a soldier. In 1966, he signed a contract RCA records and his career took off. He became an icon, both in America and abroad, and was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2000. For more information visit::

<https://charleypride.com/about/>

Dolly Parton was born in 1946 in Locust Ridge, TN. She grew up in a large family that gave her a love of music. Dolly Parton moved to Nashville in 1964 to become a country singer and her career took off in 1967 when she had her first Top 40 Hit. She was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1999 and is famous for her relatable songs, theme parks, acting career,

and her philanthropy. For more information visit: <https://www.countrymusichalloffame.org/hall-of-fame/dolly-parton>

Detroit, MI was first established as a fort in 1701. Incorporated as a city in 1815, the city was famous for manufacturing and freedom as the final stop on the Underground Railroad. It's also known as the home of Motown Music, which was formed by many Black musicians who were born in the South and moved North because of racial tension. For more information visit: <https://detroitmi.gov/departments/detroit-history>

The Mississippi Delta is often referred to as the most southern place on Earth. Located along the western Mississippi border and extending to central Mississippi, it was home to many plantations during the 1800s which then became sharecropping farms. After Emancipation, the Delta became a hub for Black culture and expression in music, food, activism, and many other areas. For more information visit: <https://southernspaces.org/2004/mississippi-delta/>

Elvis Presley was born in Tupelo, MS in 1935 and moved to Memphis, TN as a teenager. In 1954, he began singing with Sun Records in Memphis and his career took off. Elvis always stayed true to his southern roots and the gospel and blues music he heard growing up in the South. For more information visit: <https://www.graceland.com/biography>

Dallas Fort Worth Airport opened in 1974 and continues to be one of the largest operating airports. Today, it has five terminals with 168 different gates and covers 26.9 square miles in the heart of Dallas and Fort Worth. For more information visit: <https://www.dfairport.com/business/about/facts/>

Eudora Welty was born and raised in Jackson, MS. She went through the public school system there until attending Mississippi State College for Women and the University of Wisconsin. Her first short story was published in 1936. She continued to publish novels and short stories that showed the South to the rest of the world until her death in 2001. For more information visit:

<https://eudorawelty.org/biography/>

Fort Worth was once a hunting ground for indigenous people in north central Texas. A treaty was established in 1843 that the Native Americans would stay to the west of a line where Fort Worth would eventually be, making it "where the west begins." Fort Worth is the home of cowboys and cattle ranchers who hang around the Stockyards where they ran cattle through long ago. For more information visit: <https://www.fortworthtexas.gov/about/history>

In December 1932, the National Collegiate Athletic Association's Southeastern Conference was formed. Its original members were the University of Alabama, Auburn University, University of Florida, University of Georgia, Georgia Tech, University of Kentucky, Louisiana State University, University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, Sewanee, University of Tennessee, Tulane, and Vanderbilt. While its members have changed since 1932, the Saturday tradition of football games and tailgating remains the same. For more information visit:

<https://www.saturdaydownsouth.com/sec-football/brief-history-southeastern-conference/>

Antoine Domino Jr. was born in New Orleans, LA in 1928. At seven years old, he learned to play piano and found the music scene in New Orleans. At 14, he dropped out of school to pursue his music. He got the nickname "Fats" in 1946 and had a series of Top 40 hits in the 1950s. His

strong New Orleans rhythms pioneered later rock and roll songs. For more information visit:

<https://www.biography.com/musicians/fats-domino>

Joseph Jefferson Jackson was born in 1887 in Greenville, SC. He never learned to read and worked at a cotton mill from age six but as a teenager, he was an amazing baseball player. He became "Shoeless" Joe when he hit a triple while barefoot. In 1908, his contract was bought by the Philadelphia As from the Greenville Spinners. He remained a southern boy for the rest of his career. In 1917, he helped lead his team to victory in the World Series. "Shoeless" Joe was banned from Major League Baseball after the 1919 World Series after he was accused and convicted of accepting money for losing the World Series on purpose. For more information visit: <https://www.biography.com/athletes/shoeless-joe-jackson>

Gumbo is Creole stew made from seafood, meat, and vegetables served over rice. Cooking gumbo is a community experience with family and friends filled with the sharing of culture and stories. For more information visit: <https://www.foodnetwork.com/how-to/packages/food-network-essentials/what-is-gumbo#:~:text=Gumbo%20is%20a%20hearty%20stew%20made%20from%20combinations%20of%20seafood,equal%20parts%20flour%20and%20fat>.

George Strait was born in Poteet, TX in 1952. While in the army in Hawaii, he became a fan of Hank Williams and became a singer in a country band. In 1981, he signed a record deal and quickly began his reign at the top of the charts with a #6 hit. He continued to gain stardom and acted in movies. George Strait was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2006. For more information visit: <https://www.countrymusichalloffame.org/hall-of-fame/george-strait>

Houston, TX was founded in 1832 by the Allen brothers who settled land from the Galveston Land Company. Houston was advertised as the city where "17 railroads meet the sea." Houston is home of the Johnson Space Center and the Houston Astros. For more information visit:

<https://www.visithoustontexas.com/about-houston/history/>

The University of Mississippi was founded in 1848 in Oxford, MS. Often called Ole Miss, the university's rallying cry is hotty toddy. It's known for tailgates on Saturdays in the Grove and its beautiful campus design.

Hank Williams was born in 1923 in Mount Olive, AL. He was influenced by blues and gospel music. He was thirteen when he debuted on the radio and became a regular on the Louisiana Hayride soon after. He died at the age of 29 in 1953. For more information visit:

<https://www.biography.com/musicians/hank-williams>

Independence, MS is a census-designated area in Tate County. Its population is roughly 233 and it's 1.8 square miles. For more information visit:

<https://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US2834700-independence-ms/>

Sweet iced tea is a popular drink in the American South. It evolved from hot tea from British colonists. It can be found in many southern homes and restaurants across the regions.

The Indigo Girls met as fifth-graders in Georgia and began making music with each other in high school. Their first album was released in 1987 and they signed a record deal in 1988. They continue to release boundary-pushing folk music like their song "Closer to Fine". For more information visit: <https://www.kennedy-center.org/artists/t/ta-tn/-the-indigo-girls/>

Medgar Evers, the NAACP's first field officer in Mississippi, made his home in Jackson. He spoke out against racist Jim Crow laws, segregated education, and the injustices surrounding Emmett Till's murder. In 1963, Medgar Evers was killed in his home custom-designed home in Jackson. For more information visit: <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/civil-rights-leaders/medgar-evers>

Jambalaya is a favorite rice and meat dish in the state of Louisiana. It is made by slow-cooking rice, vegetables, meat, seafood, seasonings, and stock together. It came to Louisiana from the many cultures that blended together when settlers established the state. For more information visit: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/jambalaya>

Johnny Cash was born in Arkansas in 1932 to a family of sharecroppers. After being in the Air Force, Johnny went to Memphis and signed with Sun Records. His music changed as he grew and began to explain the human struggle more, becoming an outspoken advocate for equality. The Johnny Cash Show in 1969 blended artists from across genres and political beliefs, even taking Johnny Cash as far as the White House. He died in 2003. For more information visit: <https://www.johnnycash.com/about/biography/>

King Cake is a favorite pastry made around Mardi Gras time. The name comes from the kings that brought Jesus gifts in the Bible. The cake is iced with yellow, green, and purple and has a plastic baby or golden coin hidden inside. Better watch out! For more information visit: <https://www.neworleans.com/events/holidays-seasonal/mardi-gras/history-and-traditions/king-cakes/>

Kris Kristofferson was born in Brownsville, TX in 1936. Kristofferson grew up all over, following his father in the army and eventually became a Rhodes scholar in Oxford. He joined the army in 1960 and finally started a music career in 1965. His first album came out in 1970 after working as a janitor at CBS music. He became an icon of a different style of country music that was rougher than the traditional sound. For more information visit:

<https://kriskristofferson.com/biography/>

James Avery was founded in Kerrville, TX in 1954 by Mr. Avery himself. A former Air Force pilot and professor, he started a jewelry making business in his garage in Kerrville. Today, the jewelry company still operates there, just in a much larger factory. For more information visit:

<https://www.jamesavery.com/about-us/about-us.html>

Loretta Lynn was born in Butcher Holler, KY in 1932. She grew up the daughter of a poor coal miner and married her husband at age 15. In 1953, she bought a guitar for \$17 and formed her first band in 1959. Her first album and Grand Ole Opry appearance occurred in 1960 and her career took off after moving to Nashville in 1961. Loretta Lynn was an outspoken singer unafraid to sing songs that embraced her heritage or might upset country radio. She passed away in 2022. For more information visit: <https://lorettalynn.com/timeline/>

Little Rock, AR sits on the banks of the Arkansas River at the meeting of the Ozark Plateau, the Arkansas Delta, and the Southwest Plains. Little Rock first appeared on a map in 1799 and was founded by a French explorer. Little Rock became a key spot for the Civil Rights' movement in 1957 when the Little Rock Nine integrated Central High School. For more information visit:

<https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/little-rock-970/> or

<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/little-rock-nine>

The H.W. Lay Company was a snack company formed in 1939 in Nashville, TN. This company merged with C.E. Doolin's corn chip company out of San Antonio to form the Frito-Lay Company in 1961. This southern snack company continues to make snacks loved across the nation. For more information visit: <https://www.fritolay.com/about-frito-lay/company-story>

In 1955, Rosa Parks sat down on a bus in Montgomery, AL. She sat in the first row of the section where Black people were allowed to sit. When more white people got on the bus, the driver tried to force Rosa and the people around her to move back. Rosa did not. She was arrested. This launched the Montgomery Bus Boycott, where Black people stopped using the city buses to gain equal access to the buses. For more information visit: <https://www.ushistory.org/us/54b.asp>

Mardi Gras can be traced to medieval France. It was brought to America by French explorers in the 1700s. Mardi Gras balls were established for the first time in 1740 and street parades began in the late 1830s. In 1875, Governor Henry Warmouth signed the "Mardi Gras Act" into law and made Fat Tuesday a legal holiday for the state of Louisiana. It continues to be celebrated happily all over the southeastern region. For more information visit:

<https://www.mardigrasneworleans.com/history/>

McKinley Morganfield was born in 1915 in Issaquena County, MS. He grew up in Clarksdale, MS where he played in puddles and earned himself the nickname "Muddy Waters." He played harmonica from the age of five and got his first guitar at 17. In 1943, he moved to Chicago where he could enjoy more freedom and grow his music career. He took the Mississippi blues with him and his career took off in 1950. He died in 1983 and was inducted into the Rock and

Roll Hall of Fame in 1987. For more information visit:

<https://www.biography.com/musicians/muddy-waters>

Nanci Griffith was born in Seguin, TX in 1953. She grew up listening to jazz, folk, and country music and reading the stories of Eudora Welty. She became famous after appearing on Austin City Limits in 1985. Nanci wanted to celebrate the every day South in her songs. She passed away in 2021. (<https://musicianguide.com/biographies/1608004219/Nanci-Griffith.html>)

NASCAR stands for the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing and was founded in Daytona Beach, FL in 1948. NASCAR became a regional and nationwide phenomenon with the races of Richard Petty, who was from North Carolina, in the 1970s and Dale Earnhardt, also from North Carolina, in the 1980s. NASCAR remains tied to the South today as a popular pastime. For more information visit: <https://www.britannica.com/sports/NASCAR>

Nashville was founded in 1806 and developed as a river depot for middle Tennessee. The city became known for its schools and was often called the "Athens of the South." The Grand Ole Opry began in Nashville as a radio program in 1925 and continues today as a concert series. Country music record labels, artists, and fans flocked to the city and still do today. For more information visit: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Nashville-Tennessee>

Oak Ridge, TN was built in 1942 as a secret headquarters for building the atomic bomb that would end World War II. It became Tennessee's fifth largest city where people worked but didn't fully know what they were working on. Uranium from Oak Ridge would be used in the "Little Boy" atomic bomb. For more information visit: <https://www.nps.gov/places/oak-ridge-tennessee.htm>

The Old 97s were founded in Dallas, TX in 1992. The band's first break was with their 1995 album *Wreck Your Life*. They went on to experience success as an alternative-country band and continue to release music today. For more information visit: <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/old-97s-mn0000461698/biography>

The Okefenokee Swamp sits on the border of Georgia and Florida and the joining of the Suwannee and St. Mary's Rivers. Its 353,981 acres are home to many threatened and endangered species including the indigo snake and the wood stork. It became a Wetland of International Importance in 1971 and is the setting of many southeastern myths and legends. For more information visit: <https://www.fws.gov/refuge/okefenokee>

The "Second Largest Paris in the World" was founded in 1845 in East Texas. It was a center for agricultural trade and now serves as a center for healthcare for the surrounding smaller towns. A 65-foot replica of the Eiffel Tower topped by a shiny red cowboy hat stands in the center of town. For more information visit: <https://www.east-texas.com/paris-texas.htm>

Potato salad in America dates back to the mid-19th century and involved oil and vinegar more than mayonnaise and mustard. Mayonnaise in jars wasn't available until the 1930s so the southern idea of potato salad is more current than that. Whether you prefer mayonnaise in your potato salad or not, you're sure to find it at every southern gathering. For more information visit: <https://www.npr.org/2009/06/10/105166775/rethinking-potato-salad#:~:text=It%20was%20first%20introduced%20to,came%20here%20with%20European%20settlers.>

Austin Post, who goes by the name of Post Malone, was born in New York but lived some of his childhood and all of his adolescence in Grapevine, TX. He grew up with a love of music and was inspired by the video game Guitar Hero. He worked at a local fried chicken restaurant as a teenager and signed a recording contract in 2015. His music blends country, rap, and emo music into his own unique style. For more information visit:

<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm7970428/bio>

Quanah Parker was born in 1848 near Wichita Falls, TX. He was the son of Chief Peta Nocona and Cynthia Ann Parker, a white woman taken captive by the Comanche tribe as a child. Quanah Parker bravely fought to keep the land he was born on in the Red River Indian War in Texas, but eventually surrendered and relocated to Oklahoma. He became known as the chief of all the Comanches and served as a go-between for his people and white culture. Quanah practiced his native culture until his death in 1911. For more information visit:

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Quanah-Parker>

Quavious “Quavo” Marshall was born in Georgia in 1991. In 2009, he formed the group Migos with his cousin and nephew. Their track entitled “Versace” became famous when another rapper released a remix. Quavo helped bring even more rap and hip-hop culture to the state of Georgia. For more information visit: <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/quavo-mn0003390457/biography>

Queso is a favorite Tex-Mex appetizer. Short for "chile con queso," it's a creamy, sometimes spicy, cheese dip served with tortilla chips. The recipe for queso varies around the region but it's sure to be a hit at every tailgate. For more information visit: <https://www.usdairy.com/news-articles/what-is-queso>

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was founded in 1795 as the first public university in America. The phrase "tar heel" comes from when North Carolina was a supplier for the naval industry. Workers made turpentine, tar, and pitch which sometimes got on their heels when barefoot on summer days. While first meant as an insult to the common worker, it became a symbol of state pride. For more information visit: <https://museum.unc.edu/faqs#tarheels>

Red velvet cake was invented in the 1800s during the Victorian era. Velvet means the cake would be soft and smooth because of the cocoa powder used. The red color in the cake comes from a chemical reaction between the cocoa powder and the acid in buttermilk. These days, the red is enhanced by red food coloring. It's become a staple at southern celebrations and parties. For more information visit: <https://sunflourbakingcompany.com/blogs/news/the-history-behind-traditional-red-velvet-cake-and-cupcake>

Ronnie Milsap was born blind in Robbinsville, NC in 1943. At age six, he went to the state school for the blind where he learned classical music techniques and put his own spin on them based on songs he heard on the radio. Ronnie wanted to sing soul music, but moved to Nashville after Charley Pride encouraged him to give country a try. He had 42 country top-ten hits that blended his R&B roots and a new country sound. He was elected into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2014. For more information visit: <https://www.countrymusicHalloffame.org/hall-of-fame/ronnie-milsap>

The Girl Scouts started in 1912 in Savannah, GA by Juliette Gordon Low. The first troop had 18 girls. In a time before women could vote, Juliette encouraged girls to embrace their strengths and

find their full potential. The Girls Scouts continue to promote this spirit nationwide today. For more information visit: <https://www.girlscouts.org/en/discover/about-us/history.html>

Shrimp and grits was born in Low country plantation kitchens from an African dish made of ground maize and shellfish. In the mid-1980s, a New York Times food editor brought the dish to the national forefront of cuisine. While the recipe differs around the region, the basics remain the same delicious ingredients. For more information visit: <https://www.uchealth.org/today/shrimp-and-grits/#:~:text=The%20history%20of%20shrimp%20and,Lowcountry%20of%20the%20American%20South.>

Sam Cooke was born in Clarksdale, MS in 1931. While his family moved to Chicago in 1933, Sam brought with him his southern gospel roots and blues melodies. Sam started a popular gospel career but left it behind in 1957 to record soul music. His songs became anthems for the Civil Rights Movement and he was the first Black artist to make his own record company. He died in 1964 and his funeral was attended by 5,000 people. For more information visit: https://www.songhall.org/profile/Sam_Cooke

The University of Alabama was established in 1831 as the state's first public college in Tuscaloosa, AL. It now educates 38,000 students and has enshrined its Crimson Tide in college football history with its national championship titles. For more information visit: <https://www.ua.edu/about/history>

Edmund McIlhenny was frustrated with the bland diet he ate during Reconstruction after the Civil War. He came up with an idea for a sauce to fix it. In 1869, Edmund sent out 658 bottles of

a sauce he called Tabasco from his South Louisiana home. Today, Tabasco is not only a staple condiment in the southerner's diet, but labeled in 36 languages and sold in 195 countries and territories. For more information visit: <https://www.tabasco.com/tabasco-history/>

Tom Petty was born in Gainesville, FL in 1950. His difficult life made him escape through the music of Elvis Presley and the Beatles. He started playing bass in a band at the age of 17 and dropped out of school. He formed a band called Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers which had their big break in 1979 with the song “Don't Do Me Like That.” The band continued to release chart-climbing singles until they parted ways. Tom Petty died in 2017. For more information visit: <https://www.biography.com/musicians/tom-petty>

Southern Methodist University opened its doors in 1915 in University Park, a suburb of Dallas, TX. The university continued to expand over the years, adding new buildings and dormitories to fit its growing population. Today, it's the site of the George W. Bush Presidential Library and the home countless college students. For more information visit:

<https://www.smudailycampus.com/news/brief-history>

Usher Raymond was born in Dallas, TX in 1978 and raised in Chattanooga, TN. He began singing at church at age six. After moving to Atlanta, Usher performed on a televised TV show and won a record contract. He released his first album at 15. He continued to make chart-topping R&B hits like “My Boo” and also developed a successful acting career. For more information visit: <https://www.biography.com/musicians/usher>

Upside-down cakes made with fruit were popular in the late 19th century, but pineapple upside-down cake became a famed southern dessert in 1925 when a woman from Virginia submitted an

entry to a pineapple recipe contest in 1925. For more information

visit: <https://www.tasteofhome.com/article/i-made-the-1926-recipe-for-dole-pineapple-upside-down-cake-and-im-head-over-heels/#:~:text=By%20the%201920s%2C%20canned%20pineapple,Robert%20Davis%20from%20Norfolk%2C%20Virginia.>

Vicksburg, MS was founded in 1811 on the Mississippi River and became a hub of commerce, farming, and river traffic. The Battle of Vicksburg was a key victory for the Union army in 1863 and helped guarantee winning the Civil War. Vicksburg is now a popular tourist spot for history buffs and continues to be an important spot for river commerce. For more information visit:

<https://www.vicksburg.org/community/page/history-vicksburg>

Vince Vance grew up in New Orleans, LA and loved to make music. He worked as a high school band director and piano player on Bourbon Street until 1971 when he approached a group of waiters about forming a 1950s style act. While the band members have changed, Vince Vance himself has remained the same. The band has released 18 albums and one of their most popular songs is the holiday hit All I Want for Christmas is You. For more information visit:

https://www.nola.com/entertainment_life/music/vince-vance-looks-back-at-40-colorful-years-with-the-valiants/article_4c179e2d-4507-5c42-a057-076fd6f35a96.html

Voodoo came to New Orleans from enslaved people who blended their religious traditions from Africa with the practices of the local Catholic community. The core belief is in spirits that act in daily life. Marie Laveau was a legendary Voodoo Queen in the city of New Orleans with whom businessmen and politicians worked to make decisions. Voodoo is still an important tourist draw

in the city. For more information visit: <https://www.neworleans.com/things-to-do/multicultural/traditions/voodoo/>

Willie Nelson was born in Abbott, TX in 1933. He grew up listening to Bob Wills' western swing and Ernest Tubb's dancehall tunes. He first became a songwriter in the late 1950s and moved to Nashville in 1960. He penned many famous songs for other artists and signed a record deal in 1962. In 1970, Willie Nelson moved back to Austin, TX and created outlaw country music with Waylon Jennings. He was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1993 and continues to release music. For more information visit:

<https://www.countrymusichalloffame.org/hall-of-fame/willie-nelson>

Waffle House first opened in Georgia in 1955 as a 24-hour sit-down restaurant. The concept remains the same today at its more than 1,900 locations. They serve 24-hour breakfast and hash browns any way you can imagine them. For more information visit:

<https://www.wafflehouse.com/our-story/>

Baylor University was chartered in 1845 in what was then Independence, TX. In 1886, Baylor University and Waco University merged to be more like the Baylor we know today. Baylor is the oldest operating college in the state of Texas. For more information visit:

<https://about.web.baylor.edu/heritage/history>

Xenophon is an unincorporated community in northern Tennessee. This means it doesn't belong to any county, town, or entity. There's no public services, school system, or local government.

For more information visit: <https://mapcarta.com/21683912>

The XIT Ranch in Texas in the 1880s was the largest fenced-in ranch in the world. It sprawled across three million acres in the Texas Panhandle. XIT was named that to stop cattle thieves. For more information visit: <https://xitranch.com/xit-history/>

Robert Johnson was born in Hazlehurst, MS in 1911. Legend states that Robert disappeared for a few weeks in Clarksdale, MS and sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads of Highway 49 and 61 so he could become a better guitar player. His impressive skills with the guitar gained him much fame after his death at the age of 27 from a suspected poisoning. Many modern guitarists draw inspiration from his melodies and style of playing. For more information visit:

<https://www.biography.com/musicians/robert-johnson>

Willie Morris was born in Jackson, MS in 1934 and spent his childhood in Yazoo City where he was editor of the newspaper in high school. After high school, Willie went to the University of Texas at Austin and earned a Rhodes scholarship. In 1971, Morris stopped working for other people and became an independent writer. His book *North Toward Home* gives people an honest look at different lives in the southern region. For more information visit:

<https://www.mswritersandmusicians.com/mississippi-writers/willie-morris>

William Faulkner was born in New Albany, MS in 1897 and lived much of his life in nearby Oxford. His fictional texts were set in the imaginary Yoknapawtapha County, a parallel of Lafayette County in Mississippi. His books were famous for their stream-of-consciousness writing style in which every thought was on the page. He won a Nobel Prize in 1954. Faulkner died in 1962. For more information visit:

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1949/faulkner/facts/>

Kacey Musgraves was born and raised in Golden, TX. By age 12, she played guitar and wrote her own songs. After high school, she moved to Austin and sang demos of songs until appearing on the Nashville Star. This attracted big labels and her first album came out in 2013. Her song Butterflies was released on her 2018 album. Kacey blends pop and country sounds in her songs to create a style all her own. For more information visit: <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/kacey-musgraves-mn0002077491/biography>

Zachary, LA was a wild west town founded in the 1880s. By the 1930s, the small suburb of Baton Rouge had completely changed. It's now a family city, but in the late 1800s, mayors could be killed before they got a chance to serve in office! For more information visit: <https://www.cityofzachary.org/about-zachary/city-history/>

ZZ Top was formed in Houston, TX in the 1960s. Their breakthrough album Tres Hombres came out in 1973. The band is famous for bringing Texas to the people and their 1980s style of blending disco with rock and blues made them worldwide stars. The "little old band from Texas" performed at President George W. Bush's 2001 inauguration and was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2004. For more information visit: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ZZ-Top>

In 1960, Little Debbie became a household name. The McKee Baking Company created the family pack of snacks for a bargain price in Collegedale, TN. To market the new idea, O.D. McKee used his granddaughter's face and name: Debbie. In 1962, full-color packaging was used and the Zebra Cake was one of the original snacks released in 1964. For more information visit: <https://littledebbie.com/291.798/little-debbie-history>

Chapter 4: Reflection

As stated in the introduction, the goal of this thesis was to examine the potential of alphabet books in the secondary classroom. Part of the question answered by this thesis was determining if there even was potential for an alphabet book to be beneficial beyond the primary reader and classroom. Plenty of researchers have advocated for the use of alphabet books extensively within the primary classroom. Helping students learn letter-sound correspondences is an obvious benefit. Finding the use in the secondary classroom is far more difficult, but not impossible. Initial research proved alphabet books are seen as texts for young children and offer no benefit beyond learning to read. Upon further investigation, there is in fact evidence that supports the theory that alphabet books *aren't* for babies.

The idea of using alphabet books as a research tool is almost stupidly simple. The average person looks up things with which they are unfamiliar. Logically, it would make sense to assume the same is true of students and alphabet books. Primary readers often question items in alphabet books. The same questions form among secondary students, but those questions can be answered through independent research. Chaney posits the books "...not only to present a variety of concepts or examples related to the topic, but also to awaken an interest among students, thus invoking additional inquiry" (1993). Interest and curiosity are interchangeable terms here. Creating curiosity in learners is a consistent goal for educators. Curiosity inspires a desire to know more, to learn. The unique array of topics within these books offers an opportunity for students to explore at a low-stakes level while still feeling protected by the idea that the topic

was in the book. Topics become almost like guardrails to keep students on track with their research.

An important possibility of alphabet books in the classroom is the creation of cultural awareness. In an ever-increasingly globalized world, students must learn about other cultures to be informed citizens. This information needs to come from reputable, verified sources. Alphabet books are a way to prompt "...students to have pride in their heritage and inspire...them to share their experiences as well as encourage...children to be sensitive to the similarities and differences among people" (Bradley and Bradley 2014). The opportunity to recognize students and their cultures through curriculum should be taken when the chance is presented. It advances the building of the classroom community as well as student-teacher relationships. From reading an alphabet book about a student's culture, the student then is affirmed in two ways: the author of the book finds their culture worth writing about and the classroom teacher finds value in their classroom. Talking about culture in sensitive and positive ways can be difficult, but alphabet books may ease that concern. Additionally, it can challenge misconceptions among classmates. Cultural misunderstandings can prevent harmful ideations from forming. Reading these books can correct those with misguided ideas and either bring them into the community or support them in restoring a relationship with someone they isolate from the group because of a cultural difference. Writing a book about the American South was a way of doing this. Students may even have misconceptions about the culture in which they exist. Finding books about the familiar helps to clear these confusions and once again affirm the value in their everyday lives.

The educational benefits of reading alphabet books cannot be ignored. There's a reason these books are used to teach primary learners. However, this type of literature ends up "...offering great opportunities for differentiation" (Bradley and Bradley 2014). Not only can it

be used for those who struggle with reading (which are still present in the secondary classroom), but with fluent learners who may read too fast or may be bored by reading. The struggling reader sees the alphabet book as an achievable goal. It's not intimidating, but rather comforting in the sense that the structure is predictable and easily read. The lack of text takes the pressure off of the need to rush through the passage to be done at the same time as more fluent classmates. The pictures in these books may also serve as a comfort to readers who struggle to comprehend overly-complex texts. The illustrations immediately offer a clue to the reader about the topic of the text. The fluent reader learns to slow down and read for meaning rather than completion. The fluent reader can also more intently examine and evaluate the illustrations for content or value, meaning they develop visual literacy. The ability to evaluate images for value and then verbalizing those feelings are highly valuable skills in a modern society driven by visual media. Writing skills and the understanding of effective communication remain important necessities developed by alphabet books. They offer a concrete structure which students can emulate with their own topics or variations of the original topic in the book. There are also opportunities for vocabulary instruction. Unfamiliar words with simple definitions in alphabet books makes not knowing less menacing. This type of book easily lends itself to introductory activities during lesson planning. Developing curiosity and interest is always a sure way to pull students into lessons. Alphabet books offer ways to achieve that goal a minimum of 26 times with each different letter-word association.

Overwhelmingly, alphabet books serve to make activities in the secondary classroom less intimidating. They function as a gateway to understanding and processing new information. The uncomplicated and familiar structure creates a sense of familiarity which can be absent in the structure of long-form texts like novels or plays. This comfort then creates a world of possibility.

Whether learning vocabulary or writing a book on their own, students can access information in an untraditional way that prompts them to form further connections on their own. The humble alphabet book can help create comfort, acceptance, and increased agency that would not be as present were a different medium used to communicate the same information.

The potential for cultural affirmation within alphabet books is something particularly important to this thesis. While the book I wrote follows the basic A-Z structure of an alphabet book, the text is not as sparse as most and the connections more of a stretch. It is certainly a book intended for secondary readers. The goal of this book is overwhelmingly cultural affirmation and expansion. The idea of the American South prompts a variety of reactions, feelings, and opinions that exist on a wide spectrum from positive to negative. Helping students, no matter their geographical location, understand more about a specific place offers numerous benefits. A student from the class could easily be from the place the book is about, even if the location of the classroom is not the same. This helps classmates understand the student more while making that student from a different culture feel more understood. Teaching students to understand the fullness of a culture is vitally important to society. A place's culture is not just its unfortunate history or its food or its music or any one thing. It is a mixture of all of these things: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Using books like these has the capability to prevent educators from feeling as if they need to reinvent the wheel. It is understood that occasionally new activities need to be created, but sometimes it takes going back to primary school for ideas. Simple picture books, and more specifically alphabet books, unlock a world of creative potential for introductory activities, lesson plans, formative and summative assessments, and more.

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