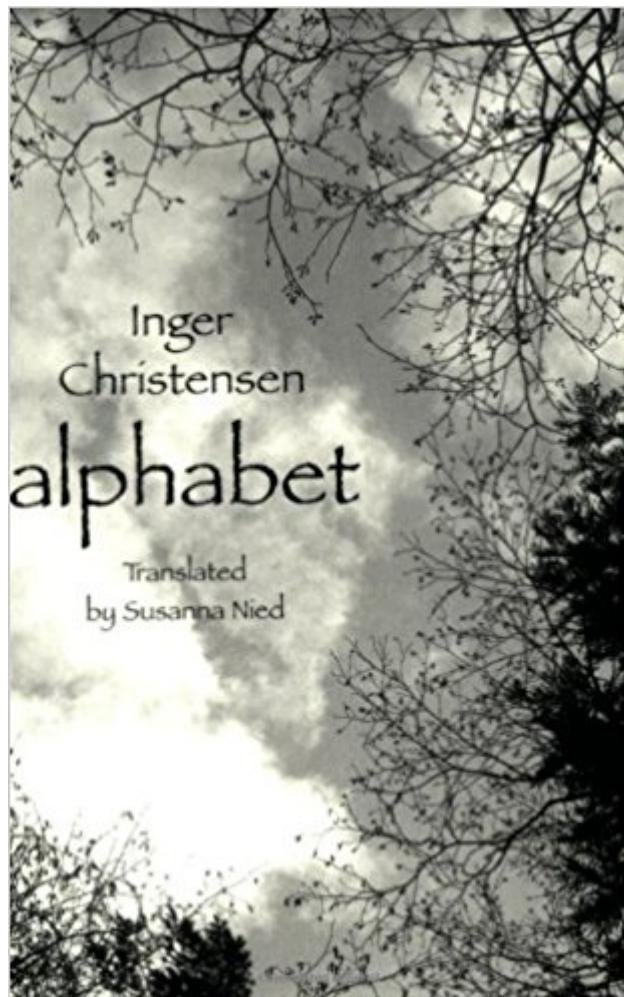


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# Alphabet (New Directions)



## Synopsis

A startling and gorgeous work by Denmark's most admired poet finally available in English translation. Awarded the American-Scandinavian PEN Translation Prize by Michael Hamburger, Susanna Nied's translation of *alphabet* introduces Inger Christensen's poetry to US readers for the first time. Born in 1935, Inger Christensen is Denmark's best known poet. Her award-winning *alphabet* is based structurally on Fibonacci's sequence (a mathematical sequence in which each number is the sum of the two previous numbers), in combination with the alphabet. The gorgeous poetry herein reflects a complex philosophical background, yet has a visionary quality, discovering the metaphysical in the simple stuff of everyday life. In *alphabet*, Christensen creates a framework of psalm-like forms that unfold like expanding universes, while crystallizing both the beauty and the potential for destruction that permeate our times.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Inger Christensen's *Alphabet* is a modern marvel: within the imposed form of the order of the alphabet, she constructs widely varying images, everyday-ish, fanciful, delicate, startling. "Constructs" may be the wrong verb because the language and the images appear effortlessly produced, as if they were simply evoked, although the most cursory look at the collection shows the poet's painstaking attention to form and structure. The same quality of effortlessness, naturalness, obviousness, is exhibited by Susanne Nied's superb translation --indeed the kind of

translation Gogol termed 'a transparent glass'. The personality, culture and idiosyncracies of the translator are nowhere in evidence. Subtly, skillfully, and imaginatively the Danish is transposed into English without the loss of a breath. Inger Christensen is a well-known poet in Denmark, indeed in Europe. Thanks to Susanna Nied she has been introduced to the American public, and may now at long last receive the recognition she deserves also in the US. It is a pleasure to see such lovingly crafted literature, and all involved in bringing it to the American public are to be congratulated: translator, publisher, distributor.

To describe this short book of poems as "breathtaking" would not be a hyperbole. "alphabet" did not merely impress and enchant me, it left me physically winded, gasping as I mouthed the words aloud and marveled at the beautiful writing and brilliant structure. This is not so much a poetry collection as it is a story-in-poetry - the poems form a clear and perfect whole, one that is quite frankly unlike any other book of poems I've ever read. And it's brilliant. The basic structure of "alphabet" as based on Fibonacci's sequence may seem like the important gimmick here, but don't be fooled. This concept essentially enables the book to unfold dramatically, with powerful jumps from one piece to the next. The poems aren't really start or end according to their official number, but there's still an obvious sense of structure and logic to the cutoffs. More than that, however, is the use of the alphabet as a structural tool. The repeating motifs and repeating sounds and letters for each poem are less obvious than the ever-increasing lengths of the poems, but they too serve as a reminder of an overarching CONCEPT to the book. "alphabet" isn't just another poetry collection. This is a wonderfully original and clever book as well, regardless its magical insides. And oh the poems themselves. Inger Christensen's use of repeating ideas and motifs builds magnificently towards the greater story, but even more there's the singular beauty of each line. A perfectly clean translation by Susanna Nied only emphasizes the power of Christensen's original prose. These are lines that must be read aloud, quoted, stroked, mulled over. These are poems to be read again and again. Highly recommended.

This book found me while I was beginning a series of works on Jutland, the Danish poet Inger Christensen's birthplace. It is an astonishing work, everfresh, original, and deeply, integrally beautiful. The poem is built upon the Fibonacci sequence of Leonardo of Pisa and Christensen, early trained as a mathematician, has used this cumulative sequence to create an organic, engaged, poetic masterpiece. This is breathing with numbers.

In alphabet, the Danish poet Inger Christensen makes use of repetition, alliteration, and the Fibonacci sequence (to determine the number of lines in each section). Each poem within this long poem adds to the next. Natural-world beauty is juxtaposed with horrific facts, such as the bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The translator, Susanna Nied, won the 1982 ASF/PEN Translation Prize for Poetry for translating this book. I guess you could say that Christensen is an experimental formalist, but it's more accurate to just say that she's a great writer.

Wonderful and interesting collection. Definitely recommend.

Inger Christensen illuminates simplicity... brilliantly

great

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