*Alphabetical Diaries*, Sheila Heti (Fitzcarraldo Editions)

In basic terms, this is a diary subjected to a processual restraint: ten years of the author's 'thoughts' rearranged alphabetically. Unlike many conceptual writing pieces (I'm thinking of some of the texts in Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin's marvellous *Against Expression: an anthology of conceptual writing*, which I use with my first year students) Sheila Heti's needs to be read, not simply understood.

I'd previously read a 17 page online piece by Heti which was published as 'From My Diaries (2006-10) in Alphabetical Order', so was expecting a longer version of the same, but the work appears to be partly different material, and has a very different texture to it. The online piece looks like and reads as a list poem, with a lot of headings – single words or short phrases – within the text. It also undercuts itself with its jokey final line: 'What a load of rubbish all this writing is'.

Although that phrase is present in the Fitzcarraldo book, it isn't the final phrase (I won't spoil the read by telling you what is), and here it is simply one phrase in one of the 25 alphabetical chapters (there is no X). Here, the diaries are taken apart and reassembled as dense blocks of prose: relentless, often staccato phrases with little space around them. (K, U and Z are the exceptions, each being much shorter sections.)

You would think that this might simply produce a pile-up, even a car-crash, of language; but you'd be wrong. What is allows the reader to do is focus on the language and experience how each successive phrase reconfigures what has gone before and raises expectations for what comes next. And my students, who always worry about such things, would question what had happened to the author's voice, but Heti's voice is, of course, more than present, because of the vocabulary, syntax and her subjects; it remains her writing. By rearranging sentences alphabetically we notice textures of, and the changes in, her voice, as – for example – 'I was' slips to 'I watched' to 'I welled up' to 'I went back' and then 'I went back', 'I went into', 'I went to', 'I went up' and so on.

By fragmenting and then formulaically rearranging these personal records, Heti has reinvigorated them as more than a journal, brought them to life as a fascinating book which highlights the consistency and inconsistencies of us all, how our minds flit from subject to subject to elsewhere. It is a warm-hearted, individual, exploration of what it is to be alive, what it is to be human. As the opening line says, it is 'A book about how difficult it is to change, why we don't want to, and what is going on in our brain.'

Rupert Loydell

'From My Diaries (2006-10) in Alphabetical Order' is available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/569b06ccb204d58bba69d8c2/t/582f1563e4fcb53e80dfbe4c/1479480680527/HetiFinal.pdf>

(478 words)