

Ella Minnow Pea

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On a small island off the east coast of America, 18-year-old Ella Minnow Pea lives in a language-adoring society, governed by an omnipotent Council. Her close-knit community idolizes Nevin Nollop, the creator of the pangram “The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog” and for whom the island is named. This sentence is inscribed in stone above Nollop’s memorial statue with tiles for each letter. One day, the tile for the letter z falls. After days of deep discussion, the Council releases a verdict: the letter z is no longer to be a part of the English language, and any further usage will result in harsh penalties. As more tiles fall, the Council continues to eliminate corresponding letters from the alphabet. While some of Ella’s neighbors suffer from slip-ups, and others purposely disobey in protest, severe punishment ensues all violations. This leads Ella to doubt the Council’s decision to impose such unreasonable rules, as well as resent the cruel enforcement that causes families to fall apart and into financial ruin. As her community shrinks and crumbles, Ella struggles to find a solution and end the madness.

The story is told through a series of letters between Ella’s family and friends, which allows readers to become familiar with several witty narrators and intimately understand their relationships. Since the residents of Nollop share an intense reverence for and devotion to language, the letters are initially nothing short of magnificent poetic prose. However, as tiles fall and letters are abolished, readers perceive firsthand how characters increasingly struggle to communicate through writing. The author cleverly thrusts readers into the midst of the action with epistolary writing, which is especially applicable to this book’s conflict.

Although this book could fall under the genre of dystopia, it has several notably different attributes. Since the conflict is primarily intellectual, there is little action, and major events are only revealed through the characters’ letters. In addition, the Nollopians’ struggle against their authoritarian government is distinctive for its lesser degree of physical violence. The typical government-overthrow scene is absent from Ella’s story, and there is no following war. Rather, the author focuses more on commentary about the foundation of Nollopian society. Readers interested in linguistics and poetry will likely find the most enjoyment in analyzing the author’s artful manipulation of the English language.

Ella Minnow Pea is a relatively difficult fun read, but short and perfect for a weekend afternoon. The resolution is not only satisfying, perfectly demonstrating the author’s message about Nollopian society, but completely unexpected! Due to the expansive vocabulary used and unconventional style of the book, English language lovers will discover a particular intrigue in and affection for *Ella Minnow Pea*. I recommend this book to teenagers and young adults who are looking for an intellectual challenge and a unique experience.

Recommended Titles:

In the Country of Last Things by Paul Auster

Dear Committee Members by Julie Schumacher

Average is the New Awesome by Samantha Matt

1984 by George Orwell

Riddley Walker by Russell Hoban