The Rock Alphabet by Henrietta Rose-Innes (Kwela)

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A woman finds two naked boys asleep in a cave in the Cederberg. When she wakes them, the eldest bites her and runs away; the younger is much more tractable. She takes both of them home with her, believing they can tell her what happened to her father, Bernard Faro, an amateur archaeologist who got lost in the mountains, and the boys grow up in her home in Cape Town. The younger, whom she calls Jean, takes readily, indeed eagerly, to the conveniences of suburban living; the eldest, whom she names Flin, is never tamed and refuses to speak, though between him and Jean there is a kind of wordless communication, a private language that is almost telepathic.

Thus starts this complex novel, deftly introducing what becomes an intriguing exploration of human structures of meaning as imposed upon natural things: human beings make meaningful patterns, signs, maps, diagrams; baboons and dassies leave behind only their droppings. The title of the novel neatly encapsulates the tension between the elemental and the sophisticated, fused in a cryptic system of signification.

Jean is the character who most consciously and perplexedly confronts the world of signs. He is instinctively drawn to the sensations of his new environment, "Smells of food, ink, paper, cloth. Human things." Needing to name and fix these things, he takes readily to the teaching of the "Pearl Lady", "coaxing English out of his clogged throat until language flowed clear... she taught him the alphabet … the letters alchemically bonding to form a new compound; a new thing." Thus he discovers the alphabet, probably the most flexible sign system invented by humans, and becomes a calligrapher: "the alphabet made beautiful."

But Jean is also a child of the mountains and he needs to reconcile the beauty of human signs with the harsher appeal of nature and the primal call of his brother. For Flin too, has his system of signs: he is in fact the creator of the stone alphabet, the cryptic set of marks found in the Cederberg, "talking the sub-voice, talking the rock language, invisible, inaudible, the alphabet of the stones." What he hates is the alphabet of the commercial world that so appeals to his brother: "It was secret code Jean used to join the world, a code Flin did not want to know."

Rejecting this world and this code, "angrily rejecting letters, words, tearing the paper,". Flin disappears again into the Cederberg. Jean goes to England, and returns as an adult, to confront his past, as represented by Flin's wordless call, and to claim his inheritance, both literally and figuratively.

Complicating the pattern is Ivy, the young woman who works, not very expertly or enthusiastically, classifying and cataloguing the collection of the late Bernard Faro, trying to decipher his notes and interpret his diagrams and "exasperatingly vague site descriptions." She finds some of the artefacts pretty, but in general she is attracted, not to the crude earth colours, but to the "gorgeous colours" of her childhood, and dresses accordingly: "unsure of style, of fashion, she chose items that appealed to her on a childish level: favourite colours, pretty shiny things." When the archaeological institute closes, she for a while makes a living constructing mosaic patterns, which she finds oddly

satisfying: “A row of coloured squares, lined up peach plum and pistachio, made sense to her like an equation would make sense to a mathematician.”

Ivy, too, is searching for a pattern that will satisfy her; and she, too, needs to learn the other system of meaning, the stone alphabet. In moving to the Cederberg, to start a guest house on the farm belonging to the Faro family, she discovers the traces left by Flin, “Words in a language, letters in an alphabet. … a language of a mind not unlike her own – not in words but directly in textures, colours, shapes.”

Learning to understand the language of the mountain, she responds also to its colours, smells, noises: “gold, umber, baboon-blood red, amethyst and glinting black. Cold gritty rock, hot sand, bird whistles, noises that come in though the eyes, sweetly piercing smells that enter through the ears. Bones and stones.”

Together, she and Jean come to terms with the rock alphabet, the inarticulate language of inanimate things and animals, not as a Flin-like rejection of human pattern, but as a timeless basis that “lies beneath” the “human things.”.

The Rock Alphabet is, then, a book about puzzles, about signs, about systems of signification. It is itself a colourful and complex mosaic, too rich to be done justice to in a review. It is a novel to read, savour and reread.