

# ALPHABET SOUP:



## Read All About It

By GYLES BRANDRETH

Did you ever wonder why more words start with the letter "s" than with any other letter of the alphabet?

In "Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary," for instance, there are 168 pages of "s" words alone, running from "Saanen" to "syzygy." That adds up to quite a list.

According to the experts, it isn't the beautiful curve of the "s" that makes it so popular, but its sound. Ms. Gretchen Brunk, one of America's leading etymologists, points out that the "s" combines more easily with other consonants than does any other letter — "sc," "sk," "sn," "sp," "st," etc. — for ease of pronunciation.

Ms. Brunk also notes that "s" is the first letter for three "very productive prefixes; sub-, super-, and syn-, as in "sublease," "supersonic," and "synchronize."

And finally, there is the "sh" sound. In other alphabets the "sh" is written with a different letter, but in the English alphabet it is listed under "s," giving the letter a big boost in the word race.

The "s" and "sh" sounds have a place in history, too. We regard the word "shibboleth" today as meaning an empty phrase mouthed by the opposition party. Back in biblical days, however, "shibboleth" meant "grain" or "stream."

The story goes that the Gileadites pronounced this



word with the "sh" sound and the Ephraimites with the "s" sound. Thus it was easy to tell friend from foe by just asking him to say the word; and "shibboleth" began to be used as a sort of password, passing into the language in its present form.

The letter that begins the fewest number of words, by the way, is "x." It carries its lonely vigil on only 1½ pages of "Webster's New Collegiate," with such words as "xylophone," "X-ray," "xerography," and "Xanthippe," the shrewish wife of Socrates.

\* \* \*

Word-lovers spend a lot of their time reading the dictionary, but they need to take a break from it now and then, and turn to something a little lighter.

Here are some of my favor-

ite bedside books — and even if you can't find these volumes in your local library, you can have some fun trying to invent equally unlikely titles and authors for books of your own:

### Practical Books

"Household Repairs" by Andy Mann

"Carpet Fitting" by Walter Wall

"Domestic Insulation" by Celia Holmes and Isadora Jarr

"Central Heating" by Bernie Coles and Ray D. Aytor

"Bedding" by Ida Down

"Painting and Decorating" by Matt Coates

"Better Gardening" by Anita Lawn

### Non-Fiction

"Tolstoi" by Warren Peace

"Dental Surgery" by Phil McAvity

"Slimming" by Lena Boddy

"Rural Transport" by Orson Cart

"The American South" by Louise Yanner

"Consumer Guide to Credit" by Owen Munny

### Novels

"Diagonals" by Chris Cross

"A Life of Crime" by Robin Banks

"Spring" by Teresa Green

"The Rebound" by Rick O'Shea

"The Barmaid" by Phyllis Glass

"Temper the Wind" by Sean Lamb