
Literature

Spanish through Literature

By Maria de Lourdes Victoria

A few years ago, I decided to write a novel. I'd been mulling over the idea for some time, until the day came when the "daily grind" overwhelmed my patience. Without another thought, I grabbed it by the scruff of its neck, locked it away in my trunk for foolish things and sat down in front of my computer screen to give full rein to my imagination. That's when all my problems began.

My first sentence came out in Spanish, and my second in English. The third was a confused hotchpotch of both languages. I started again. This time, a whole paragraph came out in Spanish. The next was in Spanglish, and the third stubbornly refused to materialize. Months passed and there I was, feverishly writing and erasing, without ever making up my mind which language to write the blessed novel in.

I went for help. The experts counseled me to write in English. It's a much bigger market, they pointed out; it will open up more doors for you. My relatives, on the other hand, threatened to stop speaking to me; I would be betraying my roots, they raged. In the end, my heart spoke up and whispered the whole story into my ear. It told me the whole fifty-six chapters, without stopping, in the only language that it knew how to speak: Spanish.

Deciding which language to write in is not the only challenge that bilingual writers face. Those of us living in this city also battle with a lack of resources. As far as I am aware, there is no place we can go to learn, improve or simply share our lovingly crafted writing in our mother tongue.

Outside academic spheres, there are no conferences for writers in Spanish, or public events that promote the use and enjoyment of the language. Those obstinate souls, like yours truly, who decide to learn on their own, very soon come up against a snag: the stock of educational material sold in bookstores is paltry; in general, not even the big bookstores offer a decent collection of literature in Spanish.

Writing in Spanish also presents the challenge of translation. To be able to participate in contests, or to apply for residencies or scholarships, you have to translate your work into English. Apart from the obvious expense, the process necessarily implies a loss of expressiveness: the music inherent in our lines, the passion that certain words incite, or the flavor of untranslatable terms like "*nata*", or "*estrenar*" or "*apapachar*". How, for example, can we sing to our English-speaking grandson a Spanish rhyme like *los ricos raspados revoltosos corrían rápido rumbo al río para no derretirse?*

Fortunately, every cloud has a silver lining and, as the Spanish saying goes, "when life brings you lemons, start making lemonade". And that's exactly what we writers working in Spanish have had to do: make lemonade – although "drawing blood" might be a better name for it. By the force of our own wills – or by elbowing our way forward – we have carved out our own space, a little niche where Spanish is celebrated, in all its brilliant diversity, including all of its rich and flavorful regionalisms. We have named this space "House of Writers / Casa de Escritores", the academy that Paola Casla Taylor and I have founded, to a small degree out of necessity, and to a large degree out of nostalgia.

"House of Writers / Casa de Escritores" is an academy of Spanish that offers on-line workshops in writing and literature, including courses for students whose inherited language is Spanish. Our on-line method facilitates wide flexibility in terms of schedules, while limiting the drawbacks and expenses of travel. For students who live here in the city and prefer personal contact, we provide monthly meetings with their teachers on our premises, located downtown. To those who request it, we offer project guidance from beginning to end, offering them advice on the planning, drafting, translation and publication of their work.

The academy is home to university professors and authors who have received awards and prizes for their publications. And our editing and translation team is made up of translators dedicated specifically to the translation of literature.

In keeping with our mission to promote bilingualism in the community, "House of Writers / Casa de Escritores" frequently organizes bilingual lectures in Seattle. On September 26, for example, we will participate in the first of a series of four lectures with the title: *Mas allá de una lengua* ("Beyond One Language"). The event, supported by the city and by a collective of organizations, will be a celebration of literature in Spanish, English and Purhépecha. Of the six authors who will present their works, five are professors with Casa de Escritores.

"House of Writers / Casa de Escritores" was founded for our students to enjoy a space that was denied to other writers. And so that grandmothers like me can write and sing their out-of-tune rhymes at full volume, without having to flatten the rolling Spanish "rrrr"s.

For more information about House of Writers / Casa de Escritores:

www.casadeescritores.com

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