

From the Editor

By Lyn Miller-Lachmann



Soon after the year begins, my seventh grade religious school students and I talk about learning Hebrew. Most of them will celebrate their bar or bat mitzvah in the next fifteen months, which means they have already spent four years studying the Hebrew language and prayers. Unless they have lived in Israel, they actually know very little Hebrew, not even enough to read a road sign or order a meal. Having grown up at a time when girls did not celebrate the bat mitzvah, I know even less than they do.

My class focuses on Jewish history, though, so I can offer them a historical perspective. With the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem nearly two thousand years ago, the Jews entered into the Diaspora. Without a land to call their own, they settled in dozens of foreign lands, learned the languages of their new homes, and combined Hebrew and those local languages into the new tongues of Ladino and Yiddish. During these long centuries, Sabbath worship, holiday rituals, and life cycle events—all conducted in Hebrew—bound the far-flung Jewish people to a common language taught to each generation. With the rise of the Zionist movement at the turn of the twentieth century came a corresponding movement to modernize the Hebrew language, with the goal of making Hebrew a viable means of communication in a modern Jewish state.

Yet the state, at that time, didn't exist. Hebrew remained an unrooted language, spoken by people who had no place to call their own. The mathematically inclined students in one of my classes calculated that 95 generations passed between the destruction of the Second Temple and the establishment of the state of Israel.

According to Ethnologue.com, 516 languages throughout the world today face extinction within a generation. Their only speakers are a handful of elderly individuals. Most of the endangered languages are indigenous tongues of Oceania and the Americas. Like the ancient Jews, their speakers are people who have lost their lands over the years to invaders. The indigenous people have had to submit to their conquerors' dominion or flee to foreign nations. The price of submission—and often of migration—has been forced assimilation and the destruction of native languages through punitive laws, *de facto* discrimination, boarding schools, and other measures.

When a language becomes extinct, its speakers' culture, traditions, and value system face extinction as well. Imagine what would have happened to Judaism had its followers not continued to preserve the Hebrew language over 95 generations. In fact, countless Jews living in Spain, Portugal, and the Americas converted to Catholicism during the four centuries that the Inquisition lasted. Speaking Spanish and Portuguese, taking on Catholic beliefs and practicing Catholic rituals, most of the *conversos* became indistinguishable from their non-Jewish neighbors despite their intentions to practice their religion in secret. Many are only beginning to rediscover their Jewish heritage.

Because language is so crucial to individual and community identity, some educators today are seeking to preserve and strengthen their students' first language while teaching them English. Bilingual picture books can help in this effort, provided that the books are culturally sensitive and contain high quality writing in both languages. In "Descubriendo el sabor: Spanish Bilingual Book Publishing and Cultural Authenticity," Jamie Campbell Naidoo and Julia Lopez-Robertson examine the current state of Spanish-English bilingual books for children, offer guidelines for evaluating titles, and provide a list of exemplary books that have appeared in recent years. The article contains interviews with leading librarians and critics Isabel Schon (whose thought-provoking article in the May issue of *American Libraries* inspired this longer, in-depth piece), Oralia Garza de Cortés, Lucía González, and Alma Flor Ada. Also included are the responses of independent publishers Children's Book Press (a pioneer of bilingual children's book publishing), Cinco Puntos Press, Lee & Low, Piñata Books, the Canadian publisher Groundwood Books, and nonfiction specialist Rosen

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Publishing, as well as Lectorum Publications, owned by Scholastic. Several of the interviewees (such as Alma Flor Ada and Teresa Mlawer of Lectorum) have also translated picture books and offer this perspective as well. Because of its significance and the variety of perspectives contained within, “Descubriendo el sabor” runs more than twice the length of our standard feature article. I see it as becoming the foundation for future explorations and discussions of this subject.

Along with Naidoo and Lopez-Robertson’s piece, the winter issue features Isabel Schon’s regular roundup of recommended books in Spanish. Among the titles on this annotated list are several young adult books published in Colombia, one of them a unique advice book for boys in graphic format on how to survive puberty. Several bilingual books are featured along with informational books for various levels and translations of classic tales.

This issue also contains Christine McDonald’s annual report on indigenous films screened at the Sundance Film Festival. Two years ago, the self-contained Native Forum was disbanded, with Native films now distributed among the regular screenings and competitions. The Sundance report contains an extended review of *Miss Navajo*, a documentary about a beauty contest that is about more than beauty; as McDonald writes, “The Miss Navajo pageant began in 1952 to celebrate ‘women and their traditional values, language, and inner beauty.’” Fluency in the Navajo language is one of the key criteria in the judging of the pageant; contestants are role models and transmitters of the traditions and values of their community. The preservation of language and culture is the subject of several other films highlighted in this article, including films from Muscogee, Filipino, Te-Whanau-a-Apanui (New Zealand), Chinese-American, and Japanese-American directors.

The importance of learning about other peoples whose history and contributions have been hidden informs the “Continuing Diversity” column in this issue. Pamela Salela reviews the hard-to-find, though immensely valuable, scholarly journal *JACYL: Journal of African Children’s and Youth Literature*. *JACYL*, which debuted in 2004, contains critical essays, most of them by writers from the African continent, about African children’s authors and books.

Our “Parting Words” column by Susan Hubbs Motin and the accompanying photo, which adorns our cover, address holiday celebrations at this time of year. In the Northern Hemisphere, where December days are short and nights long, holidays from a variety of spiritual traditions celebrate light. The library display at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota—a place of unusually dark and cold winters—and the photography of Mary C. Shrode capture the beauty of the lights in all these celebrations.

Readers who are planning to attend the American Library Association’s Midwinter meeting in Philadelphia in January are invited to another celebration—EMIERT’s first-ever fund-raiser. EMIERT, the Ethnic and Multicultural Information Exchange Round Table, publishes the *EMIE Bulletin* included in every issue of *MCR*. The fund-raiser, on Saturday, January 12, 2008, from 7 to 11 p.m. at Philadelphia’s renowned World Café, will feature food from around the world, gifts and door prizes, and music from Latin America, Africa, and Asia. For more information, contact Roberto Delgado, rdelgado@lib.ucdavis.edu.

Wherever you are, may your holiday celebrations be filled with light! ☺

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