Celebrating Bilingualism

Bilingualism in Children's Books

The very content of children's literature often addresses language issues of concern to youngsters. Sometimes the references are to the importance of Spanish in children's lives. *My Diary from Here to There/Mi diario de aquí hasta allá*, by Amada Irma Pérez, reveals how one child moving from Mexico to the United States understands that Spanish is a part of who she is, that this language has allowed her to communicate with others, to express herself and to define herself. The young protagonist writes in her diary: "But what if we're not allowed to speak Spanish? What if I can't learn English?" (Perez 2002, 9).

Arturo, from Tony Johnston's *Any Small Goodness: A Novel of the Barrio*, also realizes how closely his identity is tied to his language when his teacher gives him an Anglicized name. "ANYWAY, first day of school, Miss Pringle, all chipper and bearing a rubbery-dolphin smile, says 'Class, this is Arthur Rodriguez.' Probably to make things easier on herself. Without asking. *Yo estuvo*. Like a used-up word on the chalkboard, Arturo's erased" (Johnston 2001, 9).

Some references to language in children's literature show the horrors Spanish-speaking youngsters have historically faced in the United States. In *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez*, author Kathleen Krull writes of Cesar's unhappiness in school during the Depression: "None of the thirty-five schools Cesar attended over the years seemed like a safe place, either. Once, after Cesar broke the rule about speaking English at all times, a teacher hung a sign on him that read, I AM A CLOWN. I SPEAK SPANISH." (Krull 2003, [16]) Gary Soto, author of *Cesar Chavez: A Hero for Everyone*, recounts a similar experience in his biography aimed at intermediate readers: "School was an unwelcoming place. He [Cesar Chavez] wasn't allowed to speak Spanish, the family's household language. In fact speaking it brought on punishment. All Cesar would remember of school was the whistling of the ruler as it came down on his wrist or knuckles" (Soto 2003, 8).

Still other books cover the responsibilities of young children who, knowing both Spanish and English, must translate for monolingual family members who are unable to negotiate in an English speaking world. In Susan Middleton Elya's *Home at Last*, Ana knows the cashier at the local grocery store is overcharging her mother, but he moves on to the next customer before Ana can step in and translate. Tony Johnston's *Uncle Rain Cloud*, a name Carlos gives his Uncle Tomás because he becomes so angry when he struggles with English, shows how Carlos must act as translator when Uncle Tomás goes to school for a conference. Both books bring out the frustrations of the monolingual adult as well as the awkwardness bilingual children encounter when helping them with the most basic of all communicative tools: speech. In these two books, both Ana's mother and Carlos's Uncle Tomás, begin taking English lessons as they learn the power of being bilingual.

Moreover, even when both parents are bilingual, children's literature outlines the awkwardness that can ensue in certain situations. Diego Escobár, who trains a guide dog for the blind in *Hello, Goodbye, I Love You*, understands his parents' wishes to speak Spanish, as well as the tension that can arise in certain situations when they don't use their English. "Maria Teresa and Ernesto Escobár did teach their children Spanish from childhood, but as Diego grew older and brought friends to his home, he asked his parents to speak to him in English. It seemed rude to Diego that his friends could not understand what he and his family were saying. His parents agreed, continuing to speak Spanish to each other, knowing that the children would one day be grateful" (Mueller 2003, 25).

Other books and poems celebrate that power of bilingualism. Think of how much the young protagonist in Alma Flor Ada's *I Love Saturdays y domingos* loves both sets of grandparents and the defining languages of each. Similarly, Aurora Levins Morales, in her poem "Child of the Am ericas," recognizes her own unique heritage:

> I am new. History made me. My first language was Spanglish.
> I was born at the crossroads
> and I am whole. (Levins Morales 2001, 128)
> *(Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Cricket Books.)*

However, poet Rane Arroyo best celebrates the beauty of bilingualism in her poem, "My Tongue Is Like a Map," as she concludes:

> Sometimes I would dream in English and Spanish.
> I was a millionaire each time I said yes and sí. (Arroyo 2001, [14])
> (Text copyright © 2001 Rane Arroyo. A poem from the collection, From Love to Mamá: a Tribute to Mothers. Permission arranged with Lee & Low Books)

Besides content, the very formats of children's literature recognize bilingualism. Books that contain natural, conversational elements of code switching; those that incorporate Spanglish; those that cover narratives in both Spanish and English; and the multitude of translated books, some from Spanish to English, others from English to Spanish, all acknowledge the rich language backgrounds of children patronizing our libraries.

Bilingualism in the United States

Ed Morales, in a 2003 article in *Críticas*, gives us a sense of the numbers: "The most recent census report reveals that over 34% of the U.S.'s 37.4 million Hispanics are under age 18. . . . It's estimated that by 2010, one out of every five children in the United States will be Hispanic" (21). For further analysis of these data, see "The Rise of the Second Generations: Changing Patterns in Hispanic Population Growth" from the Pew Hispanic Center: http://www.pewhispanic.org/site/docs/pdf/PHC%20Projections%20final.pdf.

Bilingualism in Texas

Behind every number is the face of a child rather than a mark on a template. In Texas, for example, compilations from the Census Bureau on the 2000 census (and as reported in the September 1, 2003 *Dallas Morning News*) indicate that 73% of Texas Latinos/Hispanics over the age of five are bilingual, which is defined by these data as those who speak a language other than English and speak English "very well," "well," or "not well." About a half a million of Latinos/Hispanics in Texas over the age of five speak no English. Moreover, almost 19% of this population speaks English only; children between the ages of five and seventeen comprise almost a third of this number.

Think of how these figures are reflected in children frequenting our libraries. Some, of all ages, will only know Spanish, as will their parents. Many will have Spanish as their first language and be in the process of acquiring English. Many will know only English. Others will be in that same situation, but have parents who want them to learn Spanish not only for economic reasons (often bilingual employees are valued more highly in the workplace than their monolingual counterparts) but also for social reasons, such as connecting with their culture or their families. There are also those non-

Latino/Hispanic children who speak only English but want to know Spanish for economic and social reasons, particularly as they interact with a wide variety of friends and schoolmates.

Clearly, librarians have opportunities to serve diverse populations with a multitude of needs. However, there is an additional, aesthetic component in celebrating bilingualism in our local libraries. Words are the tools of the librarian's trade. Those tools can be both practical and beautiful. One five year old monolingual English speaker, for example, believes the Spanish word *luna* is far preferable to the hardened sounds of *moon* and she now consistently refers to that satellite as *la luna*. Where did she learn this fabulous word? From a bilingual story time at her local library where the librarian read Margaret Wise Brown's *Buenas noches luna*. What a gift librarians can give. To again quote Rane Arroyo: "I was a millionaire each time I said yes and sí" (Arroyo 2001, [14]).