

My Life: From Mexico City to Arizona to California
to San Diego

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It is indeed a great honor for me to be here at the 2009 Transborder Library Forum Preconference, presented by Serra Cooperative Library System, and funded by California State Library LSTA. I am especially grateful to the wonderful California librarians, who go out of their way to assist the reading and information needs of so many users—from the very young to energetic adolescents to busy professionals to eager-to-be involved seniors. Despite these difficult and trying economic times, librarians, with their characteristic patience and kindness, know exactly what to do to provide users with the right book, online resources, and other riches of the flowering technology of the Information Age.

From my native Mexico City where public libraries were almost nonexistent to today, I am still impressed with the compassion and generosity that librarians continue to demonstrate.

When I was growing up in Mexico City there was only one library in downtown Mexico City, yet children were not allowed even in the children's section. Nevertheless, books and reading were very much a part of my parents' lives. They went out of their way to provide their eight children with books. On each of our birthdays, we knew that our gift would be a special book—that we could keep or, if we wanted to, exchange.

Like my parents, many parents in Latin America still find it difficult to provide their children with books. The book publishing industry in Latin America is only a reflection of the lack of economic development south of the U.S. border. Books are expensive luxuries that most parents can't afford.

Mexico has problems similar to those of other Latin American countries. For many centuries there has existed in many Latin American countries a great economic inequality in large sectors of the population that has limited its development in many areas—most notably in the publishing industry.

In addition, there has been a long history of neglect of education in Mexico and other Latin American countries. Even now, it is highly unusual for any other than those from wealthy families to receive a privileged education and continue their higher education in European and American universities. Since the colonial period (1529-1820) and continuing after the independence to the Revolution of 1910, when the total population had reached 15,160,369, only 24 percent of the elementary school-age population was attending school.

It is interesting to note that even in the 1950s, several Mexican educators, such as Juana Manrique de Lara, wrote on the lack of books for children. She stated "It is a well-known fact that the literature for children in Spanish cannot compete with the literature for children in English, in either quantity or quality."

Notably, there are very few Latin American authors who have dedicated their talents to writing books for the enjoyment of children and adolescents. Even today,

there isn't a single author in any Spanish-speaking country who can live from his/her royalties. Sadly, Spain has the lowest literacy level in Western Europe. In 1996, the Fundación Germán Sánchez Ruipérez conducted a study to determine the cause of the low per capita reading levels in Spain. Interestingly, they concluded that, in contrast to many European countries that since the seventeenth century had achieved high literacy levels among their populations, Spain suffered a historical delay that is still apparent today. This delay is due to the late establishment of industrialization and literacy that inverted the logical order of introducing means of communication. In Spain, television with its widespread appeal was introduced before books and literacy. Whereas in the rest of Western Europe, the population was widely literate during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries prior to the introduction of television. Thus, Spain went from a feudal society to mass media. The statistics they report support their contentions: In Spain, 55% of the population don't read anything, while more than 90% state that they watch television every day.

Another important development that highlights the difference between the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking worlds, especially regarding library services to young readers, is the establishment of children's libraries. It is important to note that the first children's library in the United States was created in 1803 in Salisbury, Connecticut. The first children's library in the United Kingdom, the Library for Boys and Girls, opened in Nottingham, England, in 1881. Fifty-two years later, in 1933, the Universidad Popular in Cartagena opened a children's section, becoming the first children's library in Spain. In Mexico in the 1920s, José Vasconcelos, the then Minister of Education, created the Sala Cervantes, which is considered to be the first collection of children's books in Mexico. Most librarians and scholars in Mexico, however, consider the 1970s to be the first serious effort to provide library services to children.

I still remember Spain in the 1970s when every children's book manuscript had to be approved by "La Censura"—The Censor Board that examined all children's manuscripts and removed or suppressed what they considered objectionable before approving their publication.

This brings me to California in the 21st century. Through my work, of course, I am concerned about the reading needs and academic achievement of Latino youth. I am especially troubled by the dismal statistics. Sadly, only 60% of California's Latino students graduate from high school. And worse, six of the largest school districts, in Los Angeles and San Diego, graduate less than half of their Latino students.

Fortunately today, the current renaissance in books in Spanish and in English about Latinos is a source of joy and satisfaction to those of us who serve the reading needs of Latino young readers. In contrast to the situation that some of us still remember, Spanish-speaking young readers can now select from an increasing number of insightful, well-written books—that will entertain them, inform them, and enrich their lives in numerous ways.

Selection Criteria

From my days as a young professional in Mexico City, to my early years as a professor of reading and library science at Arizona State University, to my role as founding faculty and founding director of the Barahona Center for the Study of Books in Spanish for Children and Adolescents at California State University San Marcos, to my current role as director of the Isabel Schon International Center for Spanish Books for Youth at San Diego Public Library, I am convinced that the key to getting young people into the world of books and information is to offer them a wide selection of

books or electronic media that has a high potential for reader/viewer/user involvement or interest. My work—whether as an author of my *Recommended Books in Spanish* series or *The Best Books in English* series (published by Scarecrow) or in my literary columns in *Booklist* and other professional journals, or in the collection for the Isabel Schon Center, which is available through the Internet <www.isabelschoncenter.org>—, is to select the best books for young readers in Spanish and in English about Latinos. When I say the best, I consider the quality of art and writing, presentation of material and appeal to the intended audience. I only recommend books that I consider refreshing, imaginative, or illuminating that present new insights and knowledge.

Longstanding debate: “Real” Spanish vs. Castilian vs. Mexican Spanish

To argue about “correct” Spanish is like debating the superiority of American English vs. British English vs. Canadian English vs. Australian English vs. regional American English, as well as variants of dialect spoken by Texans, New Yorkers, or Midwesterners. It is important to remember that linguists define “correct” language as what educated, careful, monolingual, native speakers usually use.

Although there are some general differences that distinguish the Spanish of Hispano-America from that of Spain, it is important to stress the homogeneity of the Spanish language. An educated Spanish speaker has no problem communicating in Madrid, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Havana or Miami because of the strong resemblance among the national variants.

My advice to librarians: Select high-quality books in Spanish regardless of their country of origin. Concentrate on selecting distinguished books—books that can appeal to a wide variety of young readers’ interests, backgrounds, and ages; books that provide Spanish-speaking children with a sense of wonder and satisfaction that is enjoyed by young readers everywhere.

The issue of “correct” Spanish leads to Mexican Spanish, which I believe is the preferred Spanish variant to use in selecting Spanish-language books in the United States. More than 65% of the Latinos in the United States are of Mexican origin. Hispanic linguists generally agree that the morphosyntax of Mexican Spanish is very standard and highly similar to that of Castile. There are more than 100 million Mexicans in Mexico and the country has geopolitical importance, which results in the prevalence of Mexican Spanish being spoken on television and radio programs, and used on cellular phones.

What about bilingual books?

For many years I have been frustrated by the high demand for bilingual books in the United States. I know that, especially now, these titles are extremely popular and that speaking Spanish is seen as a highly desirable skill. Many librarians and teachers believe that they are acquiring two-for-the-price-of-one when settling on bilingual books. Parents feel good about teaching their children two languages. English-language reviewers, with a rudimentary knowledge of the Spanish language, persist in recommending them.

Despite the books’ popularity, librarians, teachers, and parents should be aware that most bilingual books show a complete disrespect for the Spanish language. Whereas English texts are carefully written and edited, most Spanish texts are literal interpretations with inappropriate expressions, mangled grammar, or ambiguous sentences that do not reflect the beauty, rhythm, and spirit of the Spanish language. It is important to remember that children enjoy and respond to beautifully written books with artfully chosen words in a fresh natural style—a characteristic seldom seen in bilingual books.

Original works vs. translations

We should offer Latino children a wide selection of books—noteworthy titles written by Spanish-speaking authors that reflect the cultural background, environment, thoughts, needs, and feelings of Spanish speakers as well as outstanding Spanish renditions of popular English-language books such as the Harry Potter series and Dr. Seuss titles and classic stories written by Maurice Sendak. These books are not only commercial successes, but are well loved by children around the world.

In addition to the traditional criteria for selecting fiction—vigorous plots, memorable characters, imaginative use of language—selectors should be aware of important deficiencies of many children’s books about Latinos, both in English and in Spanish. Many stories aren’t focused on the feelings, experiences, and thoughts of a young narrator-protagonist. Many authors do not stay true to the child’s viewpoint, adding intrusive adult voice-overs with pleas for good behavior or other such messages.

While there may be other concerns regarding the selection of books for Latino children, the ultimate goal should always be to provide them with entertaining reading, both in English and in Spanish.

Differences between the Isabel Schon Center and the Barahona Center

As many of you know, I retired from the Barahona Center at Cal State San Marcos in December 2008. I would like to highlight the most important difference between the Barahona Center, a Center for the Study of Books in Spanish for Children and Adolescents. As an academic center, the main purpose was to serve as a resource center of books in Spanish and in English about Latinos. Hence, the Barahona Center collection includes both recommended and not recommended books up to 2007. The Barahona Center’s collection is no longer receiving/cataloging books nor is the Web site being updated—it includes titles up to 2007.

I want to share with you my feelings about my new home, the Isabel Schon International Center for Spanish Books for Youth at San Diego Public Library. I am absolutely delighted to be doing what I always wanted to do and I want to publicly acknowledge the support I’ve received from my wonderful new colleagues: Deborah Barrow, Library Director; Bruce Johnson, Deputy Director; Douglas Spence, Central Supervisor; Brian Ruark, Technology Supervisor; Jay Hill, San Diego Public Library Foundation Executive Director; Rina Pérez, Youth Services Coordinator and Rita Glick, Branch Manager, Serra Mesa-Kearny Mesa Branch Public Library

The Isabel Schon Center is a circulating library that promotes literacy and reading. It ensures broad access to high-quality books for children and adolescents in Spanish and in English about Latino people and culture by:

- Reviewing books published in the United States and internationally,
- Collecting recommended and award-winning books,
- Cataloging materials in an online searchable database
<www.isabelschoncenter.org>.

It is important to note that only recommended titles are added to the Center’s collection and become part of the searchable database accessible through the San Diego Public Library’s Web site at www.isabelschoncenter.org. And, yes, thanks to the

outstanding work of the San Diego Public Library staff, the Schon Center's Web site is updated weekly and the materials are catalogued in a timely manner.

As I see it, our task is to ignore long-standing myths and arbitrary doctrines that continue to discourage Spanish-speaking and Latino youth from the pleasure of books, reading and online resources and to concentrate on our wonderful mission of providing young people with access to high-quality books, audio and video, including blogs, social networking sites, Wikipedia and PC games, that appeal to the universal likes, wishes, dreams, and aspirations of children and young adults everywhere. We need to provide them with the tools and materials to become critical readers, analytical thinkers and well-informed citizens.