



The Genius of Language: Fifteen Writers Reflect on Their Mother Tongue

Wendy Lesser (Editor)

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Fifteen outstanding writers answered editor Wendy Lesser's call for original essays on the subject of language—the one they grew up with, and the English in which they write. Despite American assumptions about polite Chinese discourse, Amy Tan believes that there was nothing discreet about the Chinese language with which she grew up. Leonard Michaels spoke only Yiddish until he was five, and still found its traces in his English language writing. Belgian-born Luc Sante loved his French Tintin and his Sartre, but only in English could he find "words of one syllable" that evoke American bars and bus stops. And although Louis Begley writes novels in English and addresses family members in Polish, he still speaks French with his wife—the language of their courtship. As intimate as one's dreams, as private as a secret identity, these essays examine and reveal the writers' pride, pain, and pleasure in learning a new tongue, revisiting an old one, and reconciling the joys and frustrations of each.

The Genius of Language: Fifteen Writers Reflect on Their Mother Tongue Details

Date : Published July 12th 2005 by Anchor (first published 2004)

ISBN : 9781400033232

Author : Wendy Lesser (Editor)

Format : Paperback 241 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Humanities, Language, Writing, Essays, Linguistics



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Tasha Dhyani says

The way I see it, this book is basically a collection of love letters from these fifteen writers to their mother tongues. Most of them explain why they left them, some romanticize them longingly. There is one (my personal favorite) who tries to mediate between english and his mother tongue of spanish, as if if he chooses one over another, the unchosen gets jealous.

Roslyn says

4.5 (edited, as several sentences of the review were somehow cut off)

I very much enjoyed this collection of essays by writers who are either bilingual/multilingual, or who once spoke a language other than English and are now writing in English. For almost all of them (I'd say all, but it's a while since I read them so I can't be sure), their childhood language evokes a sense of home and belonging - in some cases, ambivalent feelings about home – each language comprising a whole way of thinking and feeling that is different from those of English. I loved reading the different ways in which each language brings something unique to the human experience, one that can't be replicated by any other. In some cases, writers felt that different languages expressed very different personal identities – or vice versa, that a particular sense of their selves could only be expressed in a particular language.

The essays inevitably involve interesting accounts of what it is like to grow up in a particular family with a particular language and in the specific culture that meant home for the writer. The essays were on Bangla, Chinese, Czech, Dutch, French, German, Gikuyu, Greek, Italian, Korean, Polish, Russian, Scots, Spanish and Yiddish. I wish I'd written this review up earlier as I can't recall many specific details, but I especially enjoyed the essay on Spanish, which was written as almost a kind of dance between English and Spanish. And as someone who grew up in a family that spoke both English and Yiddish, I found the Yiddish essay particularly interesting as well (despite the fact that some of the Yiddish examples aren't completely inaccurate – and its author does admit his sketch memory of the language). I would expect that in a group of writers some of whom no longer speak their first language much, there would be some errors in some of the examples of the languages discussed. What counts in this collection more than anything are the stories - stories about language that are personal, familial and communal.

Obviously there are some large cultural gaps in this list, with European-based languages predominating, and they do portray a very limited, personal view (which of course is also part of their attraction) but 15 essays still cover a lot of ground. I love reading about language and the connections between language and culture, and although I enjoyed some more than others, I found every single essay fascinating.

Ali says

Trudged slowly through some of these essays and blew delightfully through others. Mostly I loved the concept of the collection and the recurring ideas that linked them all together.

Benjamin Kass says

A few great essays but very uneven. "Older person complains about the world nowadays while describing banalities of lost childhood" happens more often than I wish it would (or would honestly expect an editor to allow). The writers who actually deal with language are the best; the worst tout supposed unique categories and air grudges.

Lemar says

An important collection of essays gathered by Wendy Lesser that relate to the experience of writing in English when it is not one's mother tongue. This brings out fascinating perspectives on writing in general and a fresh objectivity to the extent to which English informs what we read. Amy Tan and Gary Shteyngart contribute heartfelt pieces as the best known of the bunch but every single one is revealing. The essays are personal as the subject, dealt with honestly as they all are here, gets to the child and the emerging writer and their challenges and inspiration. I loved it.

Omaimah almazroee says

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Sunni says

This is a mixed bag of stories, some more interesting than others. I had higher expectations of the discussion of this subject; and I realized as soon as I read the editor's introduction that she probably did as well. I just think some of the writers missed the mark.

Mirvan Ereon says

As a polyglot and lover of languages, I found this book very useful, insightful and wonderful. This book featured different writers and I discovered a lot of new writers which I will be willing to read and explore. Some of the writers who contributed to this book are Amy Tan and Ngugi wo Thiong O, both my favorites. This book is best read when one wants to have some time reading a good informative book because it will give you a lot to learn and discover about languages in general, as well as glimpse a writer's mind, especially non-native writers either writing in English or translated into English. This is a gem worth having!

E says

Ultimately lacking specific information on bilingualism or universal truth on multi-cultural identities, the collection seems to be for entertainment's sake. Some were rather entertaining - Papandrou, Tan, and Shteyngart's musings flowed. Other authors struck me as too discordant, trying unsuccessfully to merge the cerebral with the sentimental. The book was thus less entertaining than I had hoped.

Ashley says

I love reading about how writers feel about writing, and I love learning about the structure and culture of different languages. However, the essays in this book were rather boring; very few of them made me really excited about language or words. Standouts were the essays "Circus Biped" by the Dutch writer Bert Keizer and "The Mother Tongue Between Two Slices of Rye" by Gary Shteyngart. Other than these, the essays were in this collection were rather bland and disappointing.

scherzo? says

30.3B prefix "re-" in title

Jon Stout says

Wendy Lesser has put together fifteen essays about ESL, that is, about authors who have come to write in English after originally having grown up with different mother tongues. Though these writers have found English liberating (or useful), they inevitably are formed by their first language, and bring something new to their acquired language, in a kind of struggle. As someone who learned Spanish as a teenager. I am fascinated by the creative struggle of two different languages in one speaker.

The mother tongues create a world of their own. Amy Tan examines why Chinese does not have words for "yes" or "no," a fact which seems to challenge logic. "Ask, 'Have you stopped beating your wife?' and the answer refers directly to the proposition being asserted or denied: stopped already, still have not, never beat, have no wife." Rather than indirection or equivocation, there is precision.

Ha-yun Jung says about Korean, that it avoids use of the first person singular pronoun. The collective "we" is used, or the passive voice ("Mistakes were made.") or the subjunctive, ("A cookie would be nice.") Perhaps this shows a healthy deference to the good of society. But Ha-yun Jung says that English was the language in which she first kept a personal diary, and recorded the personal feelings of her "I" in response to a difficult childhood.

Ariel Dorfman, a Chilean writer, speaks of his Spanish self and his English self as having almost independent existences, despite their being the same person. He finds that each language struggles to express things in its own way, and that each one grows independently, with a life of its own. I love the idea that, even when I have not spoken Spanish for a while, it is still growing and living within me. I need to help it grow.

Miranda says

This book is my dream book. I love good writing and I love the topic of language. So here was the perfect blend. I especially loved the essay on Spanish. Maybe it's because I'm currently trying to learn Spanish. But it was the author's personification of his two languages that I loved the most. And he also wrote it in a very unorthodox style, using footnotes that often took up more of the page than the actual text. Amy Tan's essay was engaging as well. It had similarities with her "Mother Tongue" tribute to language and her mother, but it was more culturally specific. I read this during Independent Reading time, and didn't read every single essay. So it's a text that I would go back to, dipping in from time to time.

Jennifer says

A hit-or-miss collection, the brilliant premise of which is only occasionally adhered to by its fifteen contributors. Amy Tan and Ariel Dorfman both knock it out of the park, but many of the other essays are simply ruminations on the childhoods or difficult family lives of the writer, which could be interesting, but aren't exactly to the point. Several of the authors start off well before sliding into digressions which they then forcibly drag back on track in the final paragraphs, as if realizing that they were supposed to be headed somewhere specific but hadn't quite managed to make it. The reader's experience is thus much as if they were in a car whose driver, whilst going 75 miles an hour, suddenly realized he was about to miss his turn and swung the wheel hard to the right, and leaves you feeling bumped, jolted, and a little disgruntled.

Sara says

Loved reading about the authors' very diverse journeys in, around, and through their various languages into (and sometimes back out of) English. I would recommend this to anyone who loves language and identity or is at all bilingual. Wish I could make all my past students read it. The essays read more like stories, so even though it's non-fiction they pull you in.
