Abstract: This article reports on the state of children’s literacy and literature in Guatemala based largely on first-hand observation, interviews, and conversations with writers, publishers, booksellers, and educators. Included is information on popular titles and authors. Attitudes toward reading and social issues are also discussed.

Key Words: literacy, Guatemala, children’s literature, Mayans, indigenous peoples, reading

Writers generally write for one major purpose—to be read. That which drives people to put on paper the thoughts that are in their heads is the need to share the ideas with another human being. Certainly, best-selling authors enjoy the serendipity of a wide readership and the satisfaction in knowing that their lonely endeavor is not in vain. But what about those authors whose work is not read by millions of people? Guatemalan writers, particularly those who write for children, are such as these, not because their writing is inferior, but because the illiteracy rate and the utter poverty of their country prohibit the art of reading as a natural pastime. Why, then, do they bother?

I visited Guatemala early in the summer of 1992 to learn more about the state of children’s literature there. I wanted to know what motivates the writers, publishers, booksellers, and educators in this field to work the miraculous feat of bringing literacy to a country in which only 2/3 of the population ever gets a primary education. A full 66% of the adult population in Guatemala cannot read, and the illiteracy rate is often as high as 81% in the rural areas (Melville and Lykes 536). The wealthy class is comprised of Latinos from Spanish descent or from mixed ancestry. These children generally attend private school from kindergarten through college. However, of the predominant Mayan population, most children attend school only through the second grade, or through the age of nine. In a study conducted by Bogin and MacVean, it was evident that Mayan parents (usually mothers) wanted their children to attend school to “learn to read and to learn ‘manners’” (571). Presumably, once the child passes first and second grades, he or she has gained sufficient literacy skills to function in a society which is 60% agrarian. After children reach the age of nine, they are more likely to be useful outside of school than in so that they may tend the younger children at home (of which there are likely to be several) and/or to assist the family’s finances by selling goods in a market or by begging on the street (Bogin and MacVean 511).

Not only are many Guatemalan children placed at a disadvantage because of their families’ economic needs; the act of surviving in a country that has been anything but politically stable serves a detrimental purpose for the cause of literacy as well. Survival becomes more crucial than reading in the face of guerilla attacks on individuals as well as on entire communities. The Mayan community, which comprises nearly 50% of
the entire population of Guatemala, has been particularly victimized by mass murders and tortures beyond description during the past thirty years of a state of insurgency. Thus, it is little wonder that the children often suffer from post-traumatic-stress syndrome (Melville and Lykes 535) which affects their physical, emotional and intellectual well-being. Although Mayan refugees, many now located in Mexico, are eager for education beyond the sixth grade (Melville and Lykes 546), the opportunities for schooling are minimal at best.

Interestingly, it appears that the majority of indigenous people who are literate are women and children (Green, Rick, and Nesman 320). And, because family loyalty is far more important than any other attribute in Guatemala, literacy is often shared, so that family members who can read allocate what they know, often by reading to others in the family or community who cannot read.

The universal power of story, however, remains strong, both in the Mayan and latino cultures of Guatemala. There are a fair number of books available in Spanish and many in English for those who have access to these languages and to the books themselves. And the Mayan tradition of storytelling is still alive and well. Even children who have been traumatized in guerilla warfare find healing in the sharing of their personal narratives with others. As Melville and Lykes point out, “children need contexts in which they can, as safely as possible, encounter their stories and come to better understand their reality” (541). According to Sexton, Mayan stories “are narrated to pass the time after a hard day’s work away from home, to keep mourners awake at night during wakes, to exchange information with and entertain a guest or a host, to educate listeners about the values and beliefs of the culture, to commemorate specific historical events, and to entertain both children and adults” (xxiv). Thus, stories are an integral part of the social tapestry.

In terms of reading material, however, there is little for Mayan children to read in their native language. A few books are accessible that are mainly reprints of Mayan codices, written in hieroglyphics, which contain passages of the sacred book, the Popol Vuh (Saravia). These glyphs are written within a phonological and grammatical system which combines sounds, ideas, and syllables. While there is a move afoot among modern Mayans to bring the role of writing back into fashion in Mayan culture, the progress is slow. Most indigenous people would rather try to move up the social ladder in their education by learning Spanish and English. If the social ladder isn’t their goal, then many Mayans fail to see the need for reading and writing at all. The current literacy movement involves re-educating people about the need for writing to restore the traditional Mayan culture and to bring back stories that were destroyed after the Conquest. While many stories have been kept alive via the oral storytelling tradition, and others have been translated into other written languages, few have been preserved in Mayan glyphs. The Mayan Academy of Language, in conjunction with interested citizens and educators, is working to educate children in bilingual classes which use Spanish and indigenous languages and to help to unify the linguistic problems inherent in a language with as many dialects as Mayan. Perhaps most important to the movement is the aspect of handing down the Mayan cultures to future generations. In spite of the Conquistadors’ attempts to destroy Mayan literature, particularly in the infamous book burnings of the late 1500s, Mayan writing has enjoyed a longevity, if not popularity, which points out the tenacity of the Mayan cultures to endure.

Early Mayans wrote with pen and ink on folded bark. The Mayan terms for “read” and “write” are often closely related to each other in context, attesting to the long-standing history of the importance of reading and writing in these cultures. One connotation of the concept of “reading” involves “a sense of looking,” as if one were to look at a piece of paper covered with words (Tedlock 217).

It is evident, then, that reading, writing,
and storytelling are and have been important to both the Latino and the indigenous peoples of Guatemala. However, the abject poverty and the volatile political situation have put dampers on the spread of literacy and have muted the people’s desires to read, especially for something as luxurious as a pastime activity. As one Guatemalan publisher put it, people do not go into the publishing business there to make money, because very few books are sold. Rather, the motivating factor is the love of books (León Castillo, interview). This is particularly true in children’s book publishing; therefore, most companies produce textbooks because there is very little market for children’s trade literature.

Currently, there are no bookstores that cater only to children’s books in Guatemala. In Guatemala City, where most of the publishing houses are located, there are several rather large, well-stocked bookstores which carry fairly sizeable numbers of children’s textbooks and trade books. For example, scattered throughout the city are several satellite stores of the Piedra Santa publishing company which carry educational materials including books, maps, globes, and research material. They also offer trade books which are often translations of Western classics or books which have been transplanted from other Spanish-speaking countries. For instance, Tianquis de nombres (Ortiz), published in Mexico, is about a cockroach who tries to give everyone new names with disastrous results. Cuentos para vivir en paz (Gem mell) is a collection of stories about peace published by UNICEF in an effort to promote international understanding.

There are also a number of books carried by Piedra Santa that were written by Oralia Díaz, the wife of one of the company’s owners, which, along with a few other titles, include retellings of folklore and realistic stories that are meant to teach a lesson. Díaz is rather prolific and has published the following titles: Los conejitos de don Julio, a fantasy story with talking rabbits, based on the people and animals on the Piedra Santa family farm; El origen del maíz blanco, a creation myth about the origin of white corn; Martín y las piñatas, a story of a boy who learns to share; El gato diablo, a story with strong religious overtones of a little girl who learns to obey; Cuando los perros auwu, a ghostly tale about the power of dogs’ songs; El jardinero, a dream fantasy about a garden that is also written in play form at the end of the book; El sapito hablador, an animal fantasy about a toad who learns not to gossip; and Mamá Cuá-cuá, a story about a mother duck and her ducklings that is also dramatized. Her stories are strongly indicative of the majority of children’s books available in Guatemala in that they are didactic and moralistic in theme and tone. The stories are obviously meant to leave an impression on young minds.

Barbuchir by Daniel Armas has been a best seller for years in Guatemala and remains Piedra Santa’s pride and joy.

The only children’s magazine produced in Guatemala, Chiquirín, was published by Piedra Santa. Now available only in back issues because production was stopped due to low sales, Chiquirín is a curious mixture of Guatemalan and North American cultures. In one issue, Superman is featured, and in another, the French children’s book character, Babar, takes the spotlight.

Also available at the Piedra Santa bookstores are English and bilingual titles. El juego de la pelota/The Ball Game (Franco) is an English text about an Aztec game, called poc-a-toc, that was also played by Mayans. And Diseños mayas (Turner) is a bilingual coloring book designed to teach young readers about hieroglyphics and Mayan artistic patterns.

Young adult fiction, folklore collections, joke books, books about children’s literature, and poetry collections can also be purchased at Piedra Santa stores.

The Vista Hermosa bookstore in Guatemala City offers selections in English and Spanish; however, most of the store’s offerings are in the English language. For wealthy Latinos, it is considered very prestigious to be fluent in English, or at least to be able to read English texts. Helen Brose, who owns the store and runs a small pub-
lishing business, said that some of her best-selling books were those by Judy Blume and Beverly Cleary, as well as the Babysitter Club and Sweet Valley High series books. Television tie-in books are also popular there. Of the store’s Spanish holdings, most are retellings of English books (including a lot of Walt Disney stories) and books published in Spain, reflecting a distinctly Western culture. Por la calle (Berridge) is one of a series of books from Spain featuring latino families doing daily routines. Bright colors and large print make these stories eye-catching and accessible for young readers. ¿Quieres contar? (Dijs) is a colorful book with illustrations of multiracial children published by the enormously popular Editorial Norma press in Colombia. This entertaining pop-up book is well-made, as is the pop-up Una visita a la casa embajada (Walley). Animales (Sánchez), published in Spain and designed by Ricardo Sánchez, is an interactive strip book designed to teach children to match animals’ heads, bodies, and legs. Finally, Hora de comer (Pienkowski), also published by Editorial Norma, is a translated version of Jan Pienkowski’s popular toy book.

The Ministry of Education publishes a number of textbooks for children, including concept books and retellings of folk tales. These books are available at minimal cost at a small outlet store across from the National Palace, and are generally poorly constructed with few illustrations. Jgando y cantando (Tinoco) is a book of poems and prayers meant to “enrich the souls of children” (n.p.), and El venado (Flores) is another collection of stories and poems used to teach literature, manners, and vocabulary, and to “educate children’s minds and hearts” (n.p.). The latter book is specifically meant for students in the fifth grade.

In smaller, more “touristy” towns such as Antigua and Panajachel, the bookstores offer far fewer children’s books, but these are generally of a very high quality. Many of these are beautifully illustrated picture books, all in Spanish, which are visually appealing and sell well to the tourist trade.

There are very few English titles sold outside of Guatemala City because the economy cannot sustain a bilingual market. Again, most of the books are Western translations or are Spanish originals imported from Spain, Mexico, or Editorial Norma. The best-selling Serendipity series from North America is represented in Antigua by Folinguchi (Cosgrove) and is published in Mexico. Cuentos y leyendas de amor para niños (deCuello), Cuentos de lugares encantados (Bello), and Cuentos picarescos para niños de América Latina (Peña) are all beautifully bound books printed in Brazil. The stories are copyrighted by various publishers throughout Latin America, including Piedra Santa. In each book, there is at least one story from Guatemala, but other Latin American countries are also represented.

The selection of children’s books becomes increasingly scarce the farther one ventures into the countryside. In such small towns as Chiquimula, the only “bookstores” are actually part of neighborhood variety stores, much like the Ben Franklin stores found in the United States. The children’s books that are sold there are cheaply made paperbacks that are generally educational in nature. As always, the ever-present Walt Disney books and notebook covers abound.

In the rural areas, no bookstores are to be found, although books have been placed in the schools by such gracious donors as Hofstra University, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (which donated over 700 pounds of books in 1991), the Nassau Reading Council from New York, and private Guatemalan foundations such as the Pediatrics Foundation and the Education Foundation (Morales, personal interview).

There are also mini-libraries that have been established by publisher Oscar de León Castillo, who, according to his calculations, has given over $2,000.00 worth of books to peasant villages, establishing “Oscar de León Castillo libraries” which include both children’s and adult books (interview). The father of Oscar de León was a prominent teacher in Guatemala, and he received his education at the University of Pennsylvania. Before his death, he was instrumen-
tal in increasing the professional stance of teachers in his country, and he left behind a legacy of poetry and prose which his son continues to publish in books for children, many of which are distributed to the mini-libraries. *Recopilación de poetas escolares* (León Castillo) is a collection of such work which includes poetry by other Guatemalan writers as well. The book is intended to be a textbook for common themes that are studied in school. Oscar de León Castillo himself writes for children, and many of his pieces are published in his book *Cuentos para patajos*.

Oscar de León Castillo’s offerings are unique in that he is attempting to bring authentic Guatemalan stories to the Guatemalan people. The graded poems and stories in *Lecturitas* (León Castillo) have distinctly Guatemalan settings and characters. *Los cuentos del tío Toño* (Rosales) are small books for small hands with stories akin to North American Uncle Remus stories. What is more, there are stories to act out in *Cuentos para ser contados* (Rosales), and riddles to tell in *Adivina* (A. Castillo).

In contrast, it was evident in my visits to bookstores throughout the country that there were very few books actually published in Guatemala, and that those books that were readily available were strongly indicative of Western and westernized latino cultures. There were no books to be found in a Mayan language, except for a facsimile of a codex of the *Popol Vuh* (Saravia), nor were there any pieces of realistic fiction that portrayed indigenous families. The only Mayan stories were retellings of ancient tales which were translated by people in the dominant culture. This state of affairs speaks volumes about the lack of validity possible for indigenous children in the reading material provided for them. Further, it points to the importance of the current move toward higher levels of literacy for Mayans and toward a resurgence of writing in Mayan dialects beyond the limited scope of the Wickliffe translators.

Oscar de León Castillo is a man with a mission who hopes to bring the joy of reading to all Guatemalans by providing them with quality stories about their own cultures. In an interview conducted on June 18, 1992, he said that the textbooks he used to publish were too didactic and not much fun to read. Children who *could* read chose not to in favor of radio, television, or outdoor activities. Therefore, his more recent offerings are more literary and use more metaphorical language (i.e., “his teeth were like ears of corn,” and “the river licking at you like a dog”) to help children picture the images. He also stated that there are few illustrations in his children’s books because he wants children to use their imagination more, and “see” the stories in their minds without the benefit of visual aids. When Oscar de León Castillo talks about giving books away to children in the rural areas his large face beams as he describes these little ones hugging the books to their bodies, even though they cannot read. More than likely, one or two people in the community are literate, and they in turn read the stories to the entire village, over and over again, until the stories are memorized.

Obviously the lack of accessible books is a major dilemma in Guatemala. Aside from the limited number of bookstores, there are few libraries in the country, and the libraries that do exist are rarely used. According to Helen Brose, the concept of borrowing books is strange to Guatemalans, although librarians *do* have the problem of people stealing the libraries’ holdings! The upper class does not like to read books that other people have used, and the lower class cannot read the books. The holdings of the National Library are therefore mainly for museum-type purposes rather than for use as a lending institution.

The situation is no better in the public schools, where there are few libraries and where teachers often have to use one book to teach sixty children. María Morales, president of the newly formed Guatemalan Reading Council, told me that while teachers there are becoming more interested in using whole language practices (involving the use of literature across the curriculum and integrating instruction of reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills) in their
classrooms, their efforts are hampered by a severe lack of funds to buy books. There are few books and no teachers' guides available, so teachers often improvise by having the children write their own books. This technique gets literature by young authors into the hands of young readers and provides a classroom of sixty children with sixty books in no time.

I learned another interesting facet of teaching while I was shopping one day. A teacher I met in the Piedra Santa bookstore told me that she was buying a book for her class. When I asked her how she intended to use it, she said she would copy it for her entire class. She was glad that Guatemala is open to loose interpretations of copyright laws!

Many children have never owned a book, and because of the lack of a library system, have no access to books outside of school. Books are expensive in Guatemala, other than the dime store books which are still exorbitant for much of the population, and so book-buying is a luxury for the more well-to-do latinos. Teachers who are attempting to make learning more enjoyable and meaningful by using literature and newspapers have certainly got their work cut out for them. It is nearly impossible in such a situation.

To add to the difficulties, there are few writers for children in Guatemala, because, as Oscar de León Castillo stated, no one wants to write on "children’s levels" (interview). Writing, especially for children, is anything but a lucrative business, not only because of the illiteracy rate, but also because there are so few publishers and a dearth of marketing and communication strategies. Helen Brose told me that many authors produce the books themselves, and then take their work to shops or distributors. However, unless authors have a number of good contacts, their books "just die" (Brose, interview), and this, unfortunately, happens frequently.

Some authors who are already established as writers in the adult market sell their stories for publishers to adapt for children (Oscar de León Castillo mentioned one such author, Sagarmenaga, who publishes with his firm). Further, publishers glean much of their material from folklore and Bible stories which the publishers themselves or staff writers then retell for publication.

Because of the rather low-key nature of authorship in Guatemala, it is rare to find the sort of "favored author" status that many school children in the United States bestow upon popular writers. Authors do not visit the schools much, nor do children write to their favorite authors. Certainly, the concept of a children's author as a celebrity figure is foreign there. Ann Cameron, a popular author from New York who now lives in Panajachel, was asked to visit a local private school. But when she arrived, she found that the school's personnel had forgotten that she was coming and hadn't prepared the children for her visit. This rather lackadaisical attitude is typical in Guatemala; fortunately Cameron was not offended and made the best of her time at the school (Cameron, interview).

Perhaps the reason for the state of near oblivion for many writers has to do with affairs in Latin American literature as a whole over the past two centuries. Traditionally, Latin American artists have received little or no support from the government or the public (Franco 12). While some inroads were made in the mid-1800s which helped to pave the way for national bodies of literature and thus elevate the status of indigenous and latino artists, it remains the norm for artists to produce work which will express and promote particular political and social movements. Artists and books fall in and out of public favor rapidly there (Brose, interview), and personal artistic expressions are subordinated in favor of those that keep "alive the vision of a more just and humane form of society" (Franco 311). Many of these social visions stem from the folklore derived from Mayan, Spanish, Portuguese, and African sources. The voices of these early storytellers can still be heard in their call for humans to remain close to the land and to the traditional ways of the culture, and in the concept that one's happi-
ness and well-being is dependent upon the caprice of divine spirits (De Onis ix).

Yet there is a curious dichotomy, a sort of flirting with the ancient traditions while scorning them at the same time. This rather patronizing view of indigenous people and their stories keeps the social status of latinos and Mayans intact. The recent upsurge of interest in folk art may help the cause of Mayan literature along somewhat (Brose, interview); however, it is unlikely that latinos will easily allow indigenous voices to be heard very strongly. Mayans have accommodated themselves to the Catholic Spanish culture since the Conquest, but they have remained true to their original belief systems and traditions to a great degree. The social tensions that have been building there have yet to be played out, but it is almost certain that children's books will be a large part of the enculturation of the people, as they have been in any society that has produced even a small body of children's literature (Norton 227). At the present time, the latino culture remains at the forefront in the images presented in children's books, but the Mayan people are becoming more literate, and thus more vocal in their presentation of themselves to the public. It is possible and, hopefully, probable that a truly reflective body of children's literature will begin to grow in Guatemala.

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