Children’s Books and Segovian Culture: Literary Travels

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An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

In the spring of 2010, I studied abroad in the charming Spanish town of Segovia. I was amazed by the beauty of this historic city and greatly enjoyed passing a number of ancient monuments and structures each day. I experienced the true culture, however, in my interactions with my host family, who espoused a deep sense of pride in their city and their citizenship within it. This unique culture and sense of identity inspired me to write and illustrate a children’s book in Spanish. My book, *¿Quién Soy?*, follows a day in the life of a young Segovian girl as she searches for the answer to the age-old question, “Who am I?”

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The spring of 2010 found me living and studying in the small Spanish town of Segovia. The town boasts a variety of ancient monuments and a warm, welcoming population. I fell in love with the culture of this historic place. My experience was enhanced greatly by living with a host family, which allowed me to truly lead the life of a typical Segovian. I walked their streets to school each day, took in their stunning architecture and breathtaking views, and enjoyed typical Spanish dishes with my host family. I celebrated holidays with them, watched their television, and even got their take on international politics. For three months, I lived as a true Segovian. Interacting with my host family also allowed me to witness the deep sense of pride Segovians have for their town. Their identity is intrinsically tied to the city, and they are not afraid to let people know. It was the richness of their unique culture and pride in their historic town that inspired my Senior Honors Thesis, *Children’s Books and Segovian Culture: Literary Travels*.

As a Communication Studies and Spanish major, I decided the best way to creatively package Segovia’s culture while utilizing my skills would be to write and illustrate a children’s book in Spanish. The aim of children’s literature is “the edification and enjoyment of children,” (Morgenstern, 2001) and I knew that I could achieve both these goals with a story of Segovian culture and life. My book, *¿Quién Soy?*, follows a day in the life of a young Segovian girl as she searches for the answer to the age-old question, “Who am I?” In this endeavor, I aimed to represent not only the things in which Segovians take the most pride, such as their monuments, history, and famous dishes, but
also the aspects of Spanish life that are most commonplace to them yet unique to the rest of the world. The schedule of meals, daily customs, and family dynamics that I witnessed in my Spanish home are present in the story. My goal was to construct a narrative that would provide an educational opportunity by introducing life in Segovia to other Spanish-speaking children, and possibly English-speaking children, through the translated version, “Who Am I?”

I began my process by examining the concept of culture. I had already attributed all these items to Segovia’s culture – but what did that really mean? What makes up a place’s culture? Many parts of our culture are apparent, such as our food, rituals, music, and language, and these items certainly contribute to what sets groups and nations apart from one another. What is below the surface, however, is what gets at true culture. How we think, relate to one another, and view ourselves in the world is much more telling of what we are “all about.” Geert Hofstede, a leading cultural scholar, defines culture at this deeper level, relating it primarily to the values a group holds (Lustig & Koester, 2009). In the case of Segovia, the culture derives from its citizens’ deep sense of pride in their city’s heritage. They proudly, often times adamantly, label themselves not as Europeans, Spaniards, or Castilians, but rather, as Segovians. That in and of itself makes a strong statement about the town’s culture. Clearly, loyalty to one’s hometown is valued above all else.

This understanding of culture guided my choice of the book’s content. I wanted to tell the story of Segovian life at all levels. On the surface level, the reader learns about what people in this region often eat, their schedule of meals, and town rituals like the weekly outdoor market. Going a bit deeper, the reader gains exposure to some of the
history of Segovia as well as the famous sites. But the overarching theme of the book is the deepest level of culture, which shows what Segovians truly value. The moral of the story, if you will, is that being a Segovian is not just a fact about where one lives. It is a declaration of self. With these levels in mind, I generated the storyline of ¿Quién Soy? quite quickly and naturally. As I wrote, I realized that the story of the book is truly the story of my time in Segovia. I lived out and experienced each level of the town’s culture every day that I was there, and I wanted to show all this to the readers through this project, transporting them to this magical place.

Once my vision was clear, I could begin addressing the actual text of the book. Having worked in various capacities teaching young children, I knew that identifying the appropriate grade level for my book’s audience would entirely determine the complexity and vocabulary within the text. In order to achieve my vision without limiting my word choice too much, I chose a third grade level. According to the Indiana Department of Education (2010), students at a third grade reading level are able to read with accuracy and fluency, understand most prefixes, decode multi-syllable words, and use context clues to decipher or confirm a text’s meaning. This certainly gave me a starting point for my writing, but I knew I still needed to gain exposure to actual third grade reading material.

In a fortunate turn of events, I had the opportunity to tutor a third grade boy in reading this semester. Early on, I realized that our sessions would be a useful reference point for my writing. As we read stories and completed various activities, I was able to examine the types of words he was reading, albethey English words, and compare them to the ever-developing text of my book. As we read a Chronicles of Narnia storybook
called *Prince Caspian: This is Narnia* (2008), for example, I found that, although sentence structure and vocabulary remain relatively simple at this reading level, third graders can certainly sound out the occasional complex word. Just because a word may not already be in a third grader’s vocabulary, that does not mean that the child cannot work to read and understand the word. They are at an age where they are comfortable enough with reading that they can begin to read literature that challenges them to learn new words as they read. As I wrote, I found that simplification without oversimplification was key.

While this was all valuable information, I knew that writing in Spanish would present additional linguistic challenges. I was not sure if the same reading standards applied in another language. I decided to begin writing and later compare the text to the appropriate level of Spanish literature. As I began to write, I found that I did not need to simplify my writing as much as expected. I was humbled to realize just how minute my Spanish vocabulary is compared to my English one. While this made for a relatively natural writing process, the experience was rather humbling. After studying abroad and completing my Spanish major, I consider myself to be fluent in the language. The realization that a third grade level of writing, therefore, was not far from my natural speaking level, made me realize just how much more of the Spanish language there is for me to learn.

Once I completed the story, I wanted to confirm that it would indeed be appropriate for a Spanish-speaking third grader. As I searched for literature to reference, I found a number of Spanish-language third grade reading activities on the website of the Centro Escolar del Lago (2008), an historic Mexican school system. I knew that an
academic reference such as this one would provide the most accurate reading level. I compared the vocabulary and structure of these activities with what I had written, and I was surprised to find that my story was a bit simple in comparison. I decided to change a few words and phrases in my story to make them more complex. Again, it appeared I had underestimated the reading level.

Once the text of ¿Quién Soy? was complete, the next step was illustrations. While not something I have been able to utilize in my major areas of study, drawing has always been an interest of mine. Once I decided to write a children’s book for my thesis, I knew that this skill was something I wanted to highlight. As I began to contemplate my illustrations, I realized their importance. I thought back on books I had read as a child and remembered that the drawings were what set the tone and provided the visual representation of what was in my mind. In the case of my book, pictures would be critical as I introduced historic and architectural elements of Segovia. Without an accurate picture to look to, these portions of the story could fail to register with such young readers.

I knew that the style of illustrations I would attempt would be another important decision in my process. Given the fact that the story is based off of my own lived experience, I could not bring myself to fully subscribe to a cartoon-like style of illustration. These places are real, and I wanted to depict them as so. I did keep in mind that the book is meant for young children, so I did not attempt a completely lifelike representation of the people and buildings, which I imagined could render my book “boring” to a nine-year old. I sought to find a happy medium between cartoon and real-life and create illustrations that were accessible to children yet still true to life. As I
searched for this balance, I perused a number of children’s books for inspiration and eventually ran across a book called *Bink & Gollie* (2010). The book’s illustrations, by Tony Fucile, came very close to achieving the balance I sought. They were whimsical yet believable. I used them as an inspiration in my preliminary sketches, making changes as I saw fit to make the characters more life-like. In doing so, I believe I found that middle ground.

One technique I utilized in order to keep my illustrations from appearing too cartoonish was a sketch-like style. In addition to making the drawings more realistic, I also found that this technique helped to represent the sense of history Segovia possesses. The town has a worn beauty that I sought to capture in my illustrations. The ancient stones of the Roman aqueduct, for example, date back to around 800 AD. I could not imagine drawing the aqueduct as if it were a pristine structure with cleanly cut stones. And it is not just the monuments, but rather, a large portion of Segovia that dates back to this time period. I believe that the drawing style I exhibit keeps the city from looking too modern.

The result of all this, I believe, is an artful and endearing children’s book that communicates all I hoped it would. It highlights many of the unique aspects of Segovia’s culture while placing great emphasis on the pride its citizens take in the town and their intrinsic connection to it. In doing so, *¿Quién Soy?* demonstrates what culture truly is, beyond its conventional definition. My illustrations help to emphasize the history and realness of the town and its contents. I believe I achieved my goal of taking the reader on a cultural journey through Segovia, and I believe I achieved the goal of children’s literature, which is to educate and entertain.
The evolution of my project was a learning process for me. Reflecting on my time abroad was an emotional endeavor that made me appreciate the experience all the more. As I researched the idea of culture and analyzed my experience through that lens, I gained a deeper understanding of the richness of the town’s culture and what made it seem so special to me while I was there. Next, carefully writing based on the third grade reading level was a balancing act I had never done before. I certainly respect what authors of children’s books are able to accomplish given their linguistic constraints. What may seem to be the simplest form of writing to an outsider is actually quite difficult. Doing so in a second language is an entirely new challenge. I have interacted with many English-speaking third graders, and was once one myself, but I can’t say the same for Spanish. With a little research, however, I found that portion of the project to be simpler than expected. And finally, illustrating a book was an altogether new experience. Simply being good at drawing was not enough; I needed to draw in a deliberate style that set the appropriate tone for the story. Gaining inspiration from other illustrators and identifying what I wanted my style to communicate about Segovia allowed me to find that perfect illustrative style.

While the challenges this project presented were unlike any I had experienced before, I found I was able to utilize the skills developed through my majors to complete the project. Most obviously, my background in the Spanish language was utilized in the writing and altering of the text. Majoring in Communication Studies, I have taken multiple classes centered on the idea of culture, which provided a foundation for my entire project. Another skill I developed in Communication Studies is scholarly resourcefulness. I have learned that the answers to questions can normally be found with
a little research and that backing up claims with sources will only enhance my understanding of the topic and strengthen my argument. I believe this added research allowed me to perfect my vision for the project, my writing of the text, and my illustrations. Finally, the writing skills I have honed through both majors certainly allowed me to complete this project. I see now how the skills I have developed throughout my four years can be applied to something as unexpected as a children’s book.
References


¿Quién Soy?

Stephanie Walsh
Era un lunes normal en Segovia, España, cuando una muchacha se despertó con una pregunta. Nunca había pensado en ésta y quería saber la respuesta.
Durante su desayuno de cereales y zumo de naranja, preguntó a su madre, "Mamá, ¿quién soy?"
Su madre, esbozando una sonrisa, le contestó, 
"¿Quién eres? Eres mi niña bella, Claudia."
Claudia no quedó satisfecha.
"Sí, pero ¿quién soy?"
"Pregúntame otra vez esta tarde," respondió su madre.
Confundida, Claudia salió para la escuela.
Andaba por las calles, viendo los sitios famosos del pueblo pequeño.

Contempló el acueducto romano, grande y majestuoso...
Se maravilló con la muralla antigua que protegió Segovia durante la Época Medieval...
Durante la escuela, Claudia aprendió sobre Juan Bravo, el héroes militar de Segovia.
Al salir de las clases, Claudia fue al mercado en la Plaza Mayor con sus amigos.

Compraron dulces de los gitanos.
En la plaza, vieron la magnífica catedral gótica de Segovia.
Claudia había perdido la noción del tiempo y miró su reloj; de repente, se dio cuenta Claudia que casi era el tiempo de la comida.

Se despidió de sus amigos y veloz se fue a casa.
Claudia llegó a su apartamento a las tres en punto – justo a tiempo para compartir la comida con sus padres.

“¡Mmmm... huele bien!” gritó Claudia. “Es tu comida preferida,” respondió su padre, “Judiones de la Granja.”
Se sentaron para gozar el plato tradicional de Segovia. A Claudia le encantaba la sopa, especialmente las judías blancas y el chorizo.
De repente, recordó lo que había preguntado a su madre por la mañana. "Mamá, ¿me vas a decir por fin quién soy?"
“En un momento,” dijo su madre, “Primero, cuéntame tu día.”
“Pues, andaba a la escuela...”
“¿Y que viste?” interrumpió su madre.

Lo normal... el acueducto, la muralla, todo lo de Segovia,” respondió Claudia, pensando en los sitios de su pueblo magnífico.
"¿Y después?" preguntó su madre.

"Pues, aprendimos sobre Juan Bravo. ¿Sabes que él fue el líder de los Comuneros en la Guerra de las Comunidades de Castilla?"

"Sí, lo sé," dijo su madre con una sonrisa.
“¿Y que hiciste después? Casi no llegabas a tiempo para la comida,” dijo su madre.
“Ay, fui al mercado en la Plaza Mayor. ¡Compré una palmera de un gitano, y vi la catedral! ¡Es tan grande!”
“Muy bien, Claudia. Lo has pasado bien hoy.”
"Sí. ¿Ahora me puedes decir quién soy?" preguntó Claudia.
"¡Ya me has dado la respuesta, hija!" respondió su madre.
"¿Cómo?"

"¿No lo ves? Hija, la respuesta es simple: Eres una Segoviana."
Cuando se fue a la cama para una siesta, Claudia pensaba en lo que había dicho su madre. Y cuando se quedó dormida, sonreía, porque finalmente sabía quién era.
Who am I?

Stephanie Walsh
It was a normal Monday in Segovia, Spain when a little girl woke up with a question. She had never thought of this question, and she wanted to know the answer.
During her breakfast of cereal and orange juice, she asked her mother, "Mommy, who am I?"
Her mother laughed,
"Who are you? You are my beautiful daughter, Claudia."
But Claudia was not satisfied.

"Yeah, but who am I?"
"Ask me again this afternoon," responded her mom.
Confused, Claudia left for school.
She walked through the streets, looking at the famous sites of the small town.

She saw the Roman aqueduct, large and majestic...
She marvelled at the ancient wall that protected Segovia during the medieval age...
During school, Claudia learned about Juan Bravo, the military hero of Segovia.
After school, Claudia went to the market in the Plaza Mayor with her friends.

They bought treats from the gypsies.
In the plaza, they saw Segovia’s magnificent Gothic cathedral.
Claudia had lost track of time and looked at her watch; suddenly, she realized that it was almost time for lunch.

She said goodbye to her friends and quickly headed home.
Claudia arrived at home at three o’clock exactly – just in time to share lunch with her parents.

"Mmmm... it smells good!" shouted Claudia. "It’s your favorite food," responded her father, "Judiones de la Granja."
They sat to enjoy the traditional Segovian dish. Claudia loved the soup, especially the white beans and chorizo.
Suddenly, she remembered what she had asked her mother that morning. "Mom, are you finally going to tell me who I am?"
"In a moment," said her mother, "First, tell me about your day."
"Well, I walked to school..."
"And what did you see?" interrupted her mother.

"The usual... the aqueduct, the old wall, all of Segovia," responded Claudia, thinking about the sites in her wonderful town.
"And after?" asked her mother.

"Well, we learned about Juan Bravo. Do you know that he was the leader of the Comuneros in the Castilian War of the Communities?"

"Yes, I know," said her mother, with a smile.
“And what did you do after school? You almost didn’t arrive on time for lunch,” said her mother.
“Oh, I went to the market in the Plaza Mayor. I bought a palmera from a gypsy, and I saw the cathedral! It is so big!”
“Very good, Claudia. You have had a good day today.”
“Yeah. Now are you going to tell me who I am?” asked Claudia.
“You have already given me the answer, sweetie!” responded her mother.
“What?”

“Don’t you see it?
The answer is simple:
You are a Segoviana.”
When she went to bed for a nap, Claudia thought about what her mother had said. And as she fell asleep, she smiled, because she finally knew who she was.