

the reader's shelf

Edited by Nancy Pearl

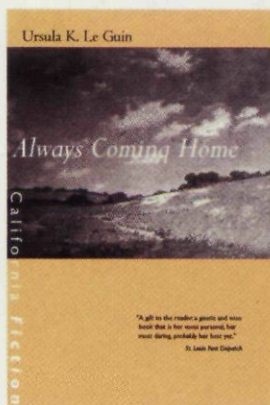
Speaking in Tongues: Literary Languages

Ever since Jonathan Swift's Lilliputians first saw Gulliver and exclaimed, "Hekinah Degul!" authors have used imaginary languages to add a sense of realism to their work. Some of the more familiar constructed languages (conlangs, for short) are those created by J.R.R. Tolkien for *The Lord of the Rings*. But conlangs aren't all elves and dwarves. A number of authors have used constructed languages to give their stories depth and intellectually stimulating plot twists and to address mature themes. The titles featured here all use language as an integral part of the plot.

Barry Longyear's Nebula and Hugo Award-winning short story "Enemy Mine," which inspired the 1985 film starring Dennis Quaid and Louis Gossett Jr., begins with Willis Davidge marooned on an uncharted planet with his sworn enemy the Drac Jeriba Shigan. It is part of a trio of stories, collected in **THE ENEMY PAPERS** (iUniverse. 2005. ISBN 0-595-34875-0. pap. \$31.95), which charts the war between Dracs and humans. The volume also includes a Drac-English dictionary and the Drac "bible," the Talman.

Anthony Burgess's **A CLOCKWORK ORANGE** (Norton. 1995. ISBN 0-393-31283-6. pap. \$13.95) is a masterpiece of conlang fiction. Burgess constructed the teen "slanguage" of Nadsat using a brilliant combination of Russian, Cockney English, and other languages. The reader learns Nadsat as the story progresses, allowing the violent world of Alex and his droogs to unfold, literally, in their own words.

In Harry Harrison's **WEST OF EDEN** (iBooks. 2000. ISBN 0-7434-0013-5. pap. \$16), dinosaurs have evolved into intelligent beings known as Yilané. But their old cities are dying, and they must colonize a new land across the ocean to survive. On an expedition, they find the land already occupied by humans and capture a child. The boy Kerrick must learn to live among the reptiles, where one misunderstanding can mean the difference between life and death. The story



Bilingual fiction: the dialect of Kesh, women's secret speech

continues in **WINTER IN EDEN** (iBooks. 2001. ISBN 0-7434-1291-5. pap. \$16) and **RETURN TO EDEN** (iBooks. 2001. ISBN 0-7434-2374-7. pap. \$16).

For those who think conlangs are only used in science fiction and fantasy, Václav Havel's play *Vyrzumení* (available in English as *The Memorandum* in **THE GARDEN PARTY AND OTHER PLAYS** (Grove Pr. 1994. ISBN 0-8021-3307-X. pap. \$14) revolves around a synthetic language called Ptydepe. It is extremely complex and absurd (no one can pronounce it correctly) and is being introduced so bureaucrats can express themselves precisely.

I NEVER PROMISED YOU A ROSE GARDEN (NAL: Penguin Putnam. 2004. ISBN 0-451-21120-0. pap. \$13.95) by Joanne Greenberg is a semiautobiographical novel about a girl caught up in a fantasy world of her own making in an attempt to deal with a traumatic past. The gods of Yr speak to her in Yri, a few words and phrases of which are included in the book.

Ursula K. Le Guin describes her **ALWAYS COMING HOME** (Univ. of California. 2001. ISBN 0-520-22735-2. pap. \$19.95) as "an archaeology of the future." Kesh, a country existing in a future northern California, is brought to brilliant life in this work of fiction, poetry, drama, artwork, and music. Le Guin includes extensive notes on the language of Kesh, including its alphabet and pronunciation.



Suzette Haden Elgin's **NATIVE TONGUE** (Feminist Pr. 2000. ISBN 1-55861-246-7. pap. \$14.95) portrays a 22nd-century state in which women have been reduced to property. They are expected to give birth to translators adept at communicating with the numerous alien races that populate the universe. When the women are unable to perform this function, they retire to the Barren House. But the women of the house aren't just waiting to die;

they are secretly creating a language by and for women to liberate their minds from the patriarchal domination of the language of men. The story continues in **THE JUDAS ROSE** (Feminist Pr. 2001. ISBN 1-55861-403-6. pap. \$15.95) and **EARTHSONG** (Feminist Pr. 2002. ISBN 1-55861-404-4. pap. \$15.95).

The polar opposite of Elgin's feminist language is Klingon, the warrior tongue of *Star Trek*. One of the more intriguing intersections of fantasy and reality in the world of conlangs is the Klingon "translation" of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. **THE KLINGON HAMLET: THE RESTORED KLINGON VERSION** (S. & S. 2000. ISBN 0-671-03578-9. pap. \$11.95) is the Bard's complete play, lovingly restored to its "original" version by a team of translators. The project grew out of a line from the film *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*: "You haven't heard Shakespeare until you've heard it in the original Klingon." Take a look at this book, and you'll never see the melancholy Dane in quite the same way. "taH pagh, taHbe'." That is, indeed, the question.

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