

Opinion **Fiction**

The pleasures of bilingual reading

Younger people seem more open to reading in translation — or in a second language — and it's changing their world view

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Could younger readers take book publishing into a more multilingual future? At a literary festival in Kerala recently, I chatted with teens who were buying fiction in English translation, ranging from books by the Korean writer Bora Chung (translated by Anton Hur) to German author Kerstin Gier's Ruby Red series (translated by Anthea Bell). One of them summed up her approach: "How does it matter if a book is translated, or written originally in English, so long as the story is entertaining? I am used to reading in two languages anyway, Malayalam and English."

Conversations I've had with Asian publishers, from as far afield as Singapore, Tokyo and Delhi, appear to echo a trend: that younger readers in their teens and twenties seem more open to reading translations or learning a second language.

Research bears out these impressions. A recent [survey conducted by Nielsen for the Booker Prize Foundation](#) highlighted that readers of translated fiction in the UK are significantly younger than expected. Readers between the ages of 24-35 drive the sales of translated fiction, compared with readers of fiction, where the largest group of book buyers are between the ages of 60-84. And a [2021 report from the National Literacy Trust](#) added another interesting finding: that young readers who are bilingual or multilingual spend more of their free time reading books than children who grow up learning only one language.

The struggle for languages is the struggle for the recovery of the soul of Africa

About 43 per cent of the world is functionally bilingual, according to the Journal of Neurolinguistics, although some studies suggest higher figures. For many of these people, their bilingualism is more the outcome of historical shifts — from colonialism to migration and forced displacement — than choice, often complicating their relationship with

language. In a recent interview, the great Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, who made a choice to write in Kikuyu, his mother tongue, explained: “I’m not against English, but I’m against the hierarchy of languages . . . The struggle for languages is the struggle for the recovery of the soul of Africa.”

Yet bilingualism can be the source of great pleasure too. I grew up in a home where friends and family shifted easily between Bengali and English, with excursions into Hindi and Oriya. In this swirl of Indian languages, English became both neutral ground and a bridge to far off lands. The delight I felt at being able to access the world’s writers through English, swinging back to the comfort of Bengali, was like moving from a summer house to a winter cottage. Today, like many bilinguals, I have different reading selves, reading far less non-fiction in Bengali, turning to poetry and big fat novels instead, seeking enjoyment rather than edification in my mother tongue.

The Bengali-American writer Jhumpa Lahiri’s linguistic memoir *In Other Words* (2015) gives insights into the possibility of setting aside the burdens of language by choosing a third, neither mother tongue nor colonial legacy. Returning to the US after a year in Rome, she felt “more than ever that I am a writer without a definitive language, without origin, without definition”. Learning Italian, a language with which she had no direct connection, offered her a sense of liberation.

For the poet Rhina P Espailat, learning English was a furtive pleasure. Born in the Dominican Republic in 1932, she grew up in New York after her family was exiled by the dictator Trujillo's regime. In her wonderful poem "Bilingual / Bilingüe", she writes of her father's attempts to hold on to his mother tongue in an alien land: "English outside this door, Spanish inside," / he said, "y basta." But who can divide / the world, the word (mundo y palabra) from / any child?" Espailat read smuggled English books late at night in bed, "until my tongue (mi lengua) learned to run / where his stumbled."

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Perhaps this generation of young adults are more enthusiastic about translations and reading in several languages because they absorb online influences from all over the world. Unicef conducted a remarkable survey in 2021, interviewing 21,000 people across 21 countries for [The Changing Childhood Project](#). A key finding: 15-24 year-olds were twice as likely as older people to identify as a global citizen. They are, as the study notes, "born into a more digital, interconnected and diverse reality", and that reflects in their

curiosity about language as well.

Bilingual readers have much to gain. Dr Viorica Marian, of Northwestern's Bilingualism and Psycholinguistics Research Lab, and author of *The Power of Language* put it simply at a recent talk: "When you learn another language, you learn another way of being in the world, another way of thinking, and you tend to be less likely to demonise those people."

It isn't always easy living between languages. I spent most of the summer reading and writing in English, and felt the Bengali side of me start to fray from disuse. But when it returns, it opens up an untranslatable world of *kalbaisakhis* (summer storms that come in from the Bay of Bengal) and *addas* (a gathering over chai, with the expectation of lively conversation). If you live between languages, as this generation has discovered, you will always have more than one home to claim.

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