

L A T I N L I V E S O N . . . A D I N F I N I T U M

The toga's out. Latin's in modern-day khaki now. Some of it's in denim, even leather! Cultural literacy still depends on Latin. But there is a popular, finger-snapping, street life to Latin that many people are not aware of. Pop-cultural literacy depends on Latin, too.

Latin pops up in some very unexpected places. When you see a T-shirt with the rock group White Snake on it, look for the name in Latin, *Serpens Albus*. Listen to ABBA's 1980 *Super Trouper* album. In the midst of the song "The Piper", the group sings, "*Sub luna saltamus*" (meaning, "We dance in the moonlight"). On her 1976 album, *Classical Barbra*, Barbra Streisand sings a song, in Latin, from Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. In the Broadway show *Evita*, the lyricist Tim Rice uses Latin in his opening "*Requiem*" and the hymn "*Salve Regina*". A big hit in Spain 1984 was a popularized version of the church hymn, *Pange lingua*, by Mocedades.

Pop music also includes references to Latin and Classics. In their song "If", the pop group Bread spoke of "the face that launched a thousand ships". The Police sang of Scylla and Charybdis in "Wrapped Around Your Finger". Iron Maiden has "Flight of Icarus". Van Halen produced an album called *MCMLXXXIV*. Ingwie Malmsteen with Rising Force plays "Icarus Dream Suite, Op. No. 4" and Shirley Bassey in "Never, Never, Never" sounds a lot like Catullus with love's eternal contradiction of *odi et amo* ("I hate and I love").

There is also consumer Latin. It gives us the image of a macho, decisive Julius Caesar with the motto on Marlboro cigarettes, *Veni, vidi, vici* ("I came, I saw, I conquered"). Pall Mall does it better with the backing, *In hoc signo vinces* ("By this sign you will conquer"), which was God's message to the Emperor Constantine in a vision. As if that were not enough, Pall Mall adds *Per aspera ad astra* ("Through difficulties to the stars"). Paul Newman sells his popcorn with *Nomen vide optima expecta* ("See my name, expect the best"). Always check the labels on wine bottles. They are notorious for Latin cliches.

The US dollar bill has three Latin expressions on it. Schools and universities express their essence in Latin, and the United States and Connecticut have Latin mottos. Even Bridgeport has a Latin motto: *Industria crescimus* ("We grow through industry").

Have you ever wondered how the British got "lb." from "pound"? You guessed it. Latin! *Libra*, abbreviated lb., means "scale" or "a measurement of weight". That's the same *Libra* in the astrological horoscope, another gathering place for Latin. While we're on the horoscope, have you noticed that Dodge, the car company, uses the names "Ram" and "Aries" (Latin for "ram") on different models in its line?

We have spotted a Benetton sweatshirt with *Arma virumque cano*; Shakespeare's stage directions *exit* and *exeunt*; the Wizard's incantations in *The Wizard of Oz* are in Latin.

A few of my favorites are the months September through December. *Septem* means "seven"; *octo* is "eight", and so on. So, in what month did the Romans originally start their year? March! "Take the bus" is from *omnibus*. That's the dative case and plural of *omnis* ("all"), meaning "for everyone". When *General Hospital* summons a doctor to the operating room in an emergency, the voice on the intercom says, "Come to the O.R., stat!" "Stat" comes from *statim*, which is Latin for "at once". Another item - a peninsula is a "pen + insula" ("almost" and "island"). Geography will be easier now.

Even with all this Latin around us, is anyone still teaching Latin? Is anyone still studying Latin? The stereotype of a Latin teacher as a tight-lipped, stern, rigid, uncaring perfectionist is losing its punch. In Derby, the current Teacher of the Year is a Latin teacher, Raymond Nalewajk. In 1987 a Latin teacher in Connecticut was a winner in the statewide Celebration of Excellence competition with a curriculum project entitled "The Bayeux Tapestry: 230 Feet of Technicolor Latin". The USA abounds with born-again Latin. The *World Press Review* reported in November 1986: "It is in the US that a real resurrection of Latin is taking place. The phenomenon dates back five years or so, and has rated a front-page story in the *New York Times*".

Latin ranks as the sixth most popular language among US students, based on actual enrollment (*US News and World Report*, 28 Dec. 1987). One reason for Latin's popularity is its importance to improve grades for University entrance. Today most people agree that Latin provides between 52 and 60 percent of our words. An additional insight into Latin's role in English comes from a recent examination of the words most frequently tested in US university entrance exams. It was found that 84 percent of them were derived from Latin. Not bad for a dead language!

"We are not sure where the name Quasimodo Sunday comes from", said the pastor of a church in Hartford, as reported in the *New York Times* last April. Latin strikes again! Or better yet, a lack of Latin strikes again! Several Sundays throughout the Christian year are named after the *incipit* (opening words) of the first hymns of the liturgy of the day. The hymn for the Sunday in question begins, *quasimodo geniti infantes* ("like newborn babes"). The Hunchback was found on the steps of Notre Dame on this Sunday.

Cultural literacy is suggested by a preliminary list in E.D. Hirsch's book, *Cultural Literacy*. This is a list compiled by three university professors and checked by 100 consultants. The book says it illustrates "the character and range of the knowledge literate Americans tend to share". Approximately 10 percent of this list is Latin-based. As I said, not bad for a dead language. Whether for cultural literacy or pop-cultural literacy, Latin is ubiquitous (*ubique* is "everywhere" in Latin). Catch the wave!

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Adapted from the *Classical Outlook* 67.3, Spring 1990.