

Language City: The Fight to Preserve Endangered Mother Tongues in New York

Ross Perlin

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In *Language City*, Ross Perlin argues that the quintessential New Yorker is neither an artist from Brooklyn nor a Wall Street banker, but a working-class multilingual immigrant living in Queens. His book weaves personal stories with history to demonstrate the urgency of preserving minority languages.

“Never before have cities like New York been so linguistically various, and they never may be again,” says Perlin, co-director of the Endangered Language Alliance. Seven hundred languages are spoken in New York. But do they need to be preserved? Perlin is a compelling advocate for fighting to protect rare languages, for reasons including children's enhanced development, the inherent cultural wisdom embodied by each language, and the issue of language justice: throughout history, the powerful have suppressed the voices of the powerless.

Language City's depth rivals a graduate class in the linguistic diversity of New York. Those with a lay interest in linguistics, geography, and history may find the discussion of syntax and pronunciation at times overwhelming. However, Perlin also introduces six individuals whom he considers to represent the archetypal New Yorker, and their personal stories have wide appeal. Rasmina, from Nepal, is the youngest Seke speaker residing in the US; Husniya, from Tajikistan, speaks Wakhi; Boris wants to bring Yiddish to life; Ibrahima is the ambassador of N'ko; Irwin composes poems in Nahuatl; and Karen is committed to bringing Lenape, Manhattan's original language, back home.

Language City concludes with Perlin asking whether cities will serve as temporary outposts for endangered languages or whether they can become sustainable sites of language diversity. There are challenges ahead, he knows: the ELA's budget is lacking, as is support from most levels of government. Still, Perlin urges attentiveness to these fading voices in hopes of nurturing a more respected, connected, and understood world.

CLAIRE O'BRIEN (January / February 2024)

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