

FRANKFURT BOOK FAIR 2010 - SPECIAL GUEST = ARGENTINA

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The Frankfurt Book Fair coincides each October, at least approximately, with the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature, and this time round, 2010 saw a full house for Latin America, with the Fair from 6 to 10 October dedicated to Argentina and Peru's Mario Vargas Llosa lifting a much-accoladed Nobel on the second day. Both events, indeed, have, as I see it, in their different ways helped boost the already strong credibility of Latin American literature and culture on the world stage. Vargas Llosa's Literature Nobel was the 11th for the Spanish language, the 6th for Latin America, the first for Peru and the first for any Hispanophone author since the 1990 award to Mexico's Octavio Paz. Peru became the sixth Spanish-speaking country to be honoured with the prize, joining Spain (5), Chile (2), Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico: the whole country celebrated on the streets, « as if we'd won the World Cup »!. In Spain, *El País* featured 'Nobel Vargas Llosa' as the day's banner headline, devoting its lead editorial and a sixteen-page special to the award. It was front-page news too in the German and Italian press, and even in the *International Herald Tribune*. A few days later, Latin America's international profile was further raised by the rescue of the 33 miners in Chile and the praise it generated worldwide.

The Spanish-speaking presence in Frankfurt was impressive, with Argentina obviously at centre stage, but with strong representation too from Spain, Mexico, Chile, Peru, Venezuela and elsewhere. The main Spanish publishers and numerous Spanish university presses were out in force, Catalonia and Galicia included. Mexico was represented by the Fondo de Cultura Económica and the Centro de Promoción del Libro Mexicano. The Peruvian stand seemed, alas, uninterested in improvising a Nobel tie-in, but on the last day it was possible to buy hardback omnibus editions of Vargas Llosa's works, from the stand of the Spanish publisher Círculo de Lectores. The new Nobel laureate is not exactly an admirer of the present government in Venezuela, but notable nonetheless on that country's stand was the collection of classic works offered by the Venezuelan Book Distribution Foundation (Fundación Distribuidora Venezolana del Libro) at prices accessible to the people (a literary equivalent of Venezuela's successful 'Sistema' for classical music) – as proven by the same books being sold here in Europe for a mere 5 euros. By contrast and although a few titles were given away (including an English/Spanish bilingual anthology of Argentinian poetry), the great majority of the Argentinian books on display were not for sale at any point during the Fair.

Despite this, overall the Argentinian presence was powerful and convincing, with maximum use of graphic design to attract and impress. The logos – « Argentina, Cultura en Movimiento » (« Argentina, Culture in Movement ») and « 200 Años – Bicentenario Argentino » (« 200 Years – Argentinian Bicentennial ») ably exploited the national colours, blue, white and yellow; the fair's main restaurant served up *puchero* (stew) and other Argentinian dishes; the Argentinian pavilion made maximum use of visual impact in foregrounding the country's writers and culture; the unfolding sequence of lectures and round

tables on Argentinian themes was backed up by a graphic slideshow with cartoons, cityscapes, dinosaurs (a national treasure) and more. Among the lectures may specially be mentioned that by Maria Kodama, Jorge Luis Borges' widow, who held the audience spellbound with both her official subject of « Borges and Iceland » and her reminiscences of the great writer. Vargas Llosa had received the announcement of his long-delayed Nobel with a rider as to whether he should take a prize that Borges never got (www.perfil.com/contenidos/2010/10/07/noticia_0020.html) - a remark which, relayed to Maria Kodama by a member of the audience, was embraced by her as a « noble gesture ».

Meanwhile, Argentina's strong performance in Frankfurt points up the undoubted vitality and energy of the Spanish language and its cultures, as stronger competitors than most to the real, if sometimes exaggerated, dangers of 'Anglo-Saxon' cultural hegemony and the dominance of English. Here, though, I would end on a cautionary note. Much of the Argentinian publicity material at the Fair was not in Spanish at all, or indeed German, but in English – an English, unfortunately, obviously lacking any native-speaker input in drafting or revision and suffering from all the vagueness and approximateness that tends to characterise much non-native English. Given away was a special edition of *Eñe*, the cultural supplement of the Buenos Aires newspaper *Clarín*, full of potentially valuable information on subjects like Borges and the tango, but consisting of made-in-Argentina translations into English (even a retro-translation of an interview with Harold Bloom) of such fuzziness as to make the texts certainly unquotable and probably unusable for any academic purpose. If, as the evidence of the Fair suggests, Spanish has the potential to compete with English, its speakers will need a better mastery of the competitor's language, if only to know what they are up against. For the rest, the slogan in the wake of Frankfurt, fortified by the felicitous coincidence of Vargas Llosa's Nobel, can only be: ¡adelante!

Frankfurt Book Fair – official site: www.buchmesse.de/en/fbf/

Another view of the Fair (in Spanish) – www.elpais.com/articulo/portada/Monografico/Francfort/mit/Vargas/elpepuculbab/20101016/elpbabpor_35/Tes - Manuel Rodríguez Rivero, “Monográfico de Fráncfort (*mit* Vargas)”, *El País* (internacional, supl. Babelia), 16-X-2010, p. 18

Vargas Llosa's Nobel – English: Radhika Jones, ‘Vargas Llosa: Nobel Goes for Well-Known Name’, *Time*, 7-X-2010, www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,2024149,00.html

Spanish: Juan Cruz, “Zavalita gana el Nobel ”, *El País* (internacional), 8-X-2010, p. 46 y siguientes - www.elpais.com/especial/mario-vargas-llosa/ (title of Web version = “Zavalita conquista el Nobel”)

‘Vargas Llosa: "Me avergüenza recibir el Nobel que no recibió Borges"’, *PERFIL* (Buenos Aires), 7-X-2010, www.perfil.com/contenidos/2010/10/07/noticia_0020.html

