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How the Grinch got a Spanish accent



Andover writer brings Dr. Seuss to life for a new audience

By Russell Contreras, Globe Staff | December 15, 2005

To the typical New Englander, Yanitzia Canetti's accomplishments may seem obscure. The Cuban-born writer is a key figure in the world of Spanish-language literature, not in the world of Robert Frost or Jack Kerouac.

But for years now, the Andover resident has been quietly carving a niche that, in many ways, brings the two worlds together: She is a prolific translator of some of the most famous English-language children's books.

There's her translation "Jorge el curioso monta en bicicleta" ("Curious George Rides a Bike"). There's "Los osos Berenstain al rescate de la Navidad" ("The Berenstain Bears Save Christmas"). Then there are the Dr. Seuss classics: "El gato con sombrero regresa de nuevo" ("The Cat in the Hat Comes Back") and "¡Cómo el Grinch robó la Navidad!" ("How the Grinch Stole Christmas").

Those Dr. Seuss translations are some of her most popular works, she said. The images and the stories are the same as the original English version. And they are especially popular with Spanish-speaking children in the United States who are anxious to get to know more about American popular culture, she said. They are also helpful to children who will want to eventually read the English versions.

But of all her translations and writings, Canetti said Dr. Seuss was the hardest for her. Like the original English version, the Spanish translation has to rhyme and maintain the rhythmic pentameter that make the books so popular with children.

 [Globe writer Russell Contreras reads a portion of "How the Grinch Stole Christmas"](#)

 [Yanitzia Canetti reads a Spanish portion of "¡Cómo el Grinch robó la Navidad!"](#)

"Dr. Seuss is very crazy for me," Canetti said in Spanish while scanning through her Grinch book. "But I'm crazy, too."

Crazy or not, her translation talents have earned her a reputation among some of the top publishers, who seek her out for novels, textbooks, workbooks, and poetry.

"It's just incredible what this woman can do," said Teresa Mlawer, president of Lectorum Publications, the publisher of Dr. Seuss books in Spanish. "She has translated all the Dr. Seuss books for us, and if you know Dr. Seuss, you know how difficult that can be."

Lectorum Publications is a division of Scholastic publications.

"Yanitzia is one of those persons who will always grow," said Mlawer. "She's an incredibly creative person."

So sought after is Canetti that she now leads a Lawrence-based publishing company, Cambridge BrickHouse, which translates hundreds of books into Spanish each year. The company employs 32 people and operates out of a revamped mill.

"We do everything," said Canetti, 49. "Development books, education books."

Born in Havana, Canetti grew up surrounded by literature and books. A granddaughter of diplomats, Canetti learned early on that words were a means to escape. Throughout her life, Canetti said, she has used them to escape from her homeland, from love, and, sometimes, even from herself. [Continued...](#)

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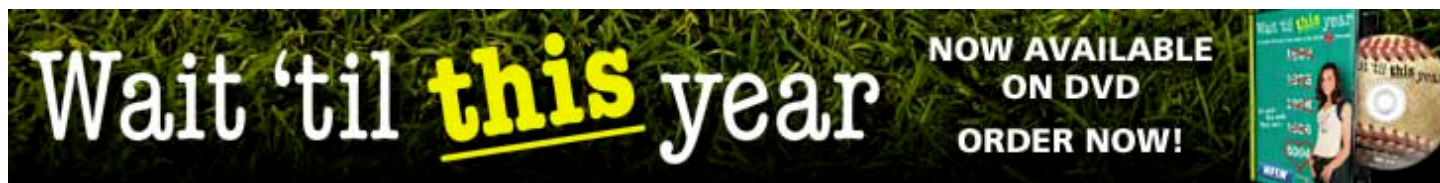
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"I was always writing," she said. "I write to imagine." That writing bug touched her as a 6-year-old in Havana. That's when she had her first poem -- one about a love for a teacher -- published. She hasn't been the same since.

At the University of Havana, Canetti focused on journalism. In graduate school, she turned her attention to linguistics and literature, eventually attaining a doctorate. Her years in Cuba earned her the reputation as a "writer's writer" after the publication of her first collection of short stories, "Secretos de Palacio." The more she published, the more literary awards she won.

In 1991, Canetti left Cuba for California to marry an American journalist. They later divorced, but it was in California that Canetti was introduced to the world of translations. At first, she worked for a publishing house in Beverly Hills. Afterward, she started doing contract work for Boston-based Houghton Mifflin Co.

Then James D. Chapman, a vice president and editorial director for Houghton Mifflin, invited Canetti to visit Boston.

Canetti fell in love with New England. "I was so fascinated," she remembered. "I came in autumn and I was sold. I said, 'I'm moving here.'"

[Globe writer Russell Contreras reads a portion of "How the Grinch Stole Christmas"](#)

[Yanitzia Canetti reads a Spanish portion of "¿Cómo el Grinch robó la Navidad!"](#)

Since then, Canetti has made Andover her home. She has produced more than 30 novels, children's books, collections of short stories, poetry, and translations. Canetti is known internationally for her works, "Al Otro Lado" and "Novelita Rosa."

All of those accomplishments are great, Canetti said, but not as important as her two children, Eros, 4, and Ares, 7. "I picked out their names," she said, smiling. Her boys, she noted proudly, are bilingual and can read both "¿Cómo el Grinch robó la Navidad!" and "How the Grinch Stole Christmas."

Cambridge BrickHouse is now opening satellite offices in Argentina, Mexico, and Spain, she said. Her clients include publishers in New York, Boston, and overseas.

When she's not attending to maternal or editorial duties, she is working on her next novel "wherever I can." It's a story about a middle-aged woman in Spain navigating through a fake world of plastic surgery and implants. "The world is my place," she said. "I write about everything."

She acknowledged a longing for Cuba. But Canetti said her writing soul can no longer survive there because of censorship on the Communist island.

"I can be more creative here." ■

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