

Acceptance Speech for the Ramon Llull Foundation Prize

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Civil authorities, ladies and gentlemen, friends. It may seem strange that I should be in the Catalan countries today and perhaps stranger still that I should be honored by the Ramon Llull Foundation for my efforts to promote Catalan culture internationally. Strange because I have no Catalan ancestors and no Catalan family. I am not a philologist obsessed by Romance languages. Twenty years ago, I didn't even know that Catalonia existed beyond the writings of George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway. And people always ask, so I will also add that I don't have a Catalan girlfriend.

So how did I come to appreciate Catalan language and culture? I suppose it is a simple love story.

It all began with the landscape. In 2001 I visited Catalonia with my family. My three-year-old son was hard to please, but he loved trains and so we traveled from Casserres to Montserrat three times in seven days. There, beneath the stone towers that billow like clouds, he reveled in the funiculars and I in the mountain and the monastery and the impenetrable gaze of the Black Virgin of Montserrat.

With time my passion spread: The Romanesque jewels of the meadows of Urgell, the highlands behind Riudarenes in the Selva, the stony inlets of Llafranc and Calalla de Parafugell, the austere face of Puigsacalm, the smooth floor of the Vall d'en Bas, and the never-ending variation of the Eixample.

The Catalan language provided exoticism and challenge. There are sounds here which are difficult to find in other languages and hard still to master for a non-native speaker. A friend once gave me an hour-long lesson in how to say the *ll* while we drove across the Selva. Now I relish words like *Llobregat*, *Jonqueres*, *caldre*, and *escallivar*, which has no easy translation. I am intrigued by the differences between the words *torrent*, *rec*, and *riera*, because they all translate as *stream* in English. I enjoy phrases like "*em sap greu*" and "*no em fa res*" and "*Déu n'hi do,*" and I delight in being able to pronounce names like Mallol Codony, Eulàlia Reguant, Joan Amades I Gelats, and even Maria Carme Junyent Figueres.

I take solace in the fact that the language is a challenge for many Catalans. A friend in her early twenties recently looked something up online for me, explaining how much she loved Optimot.

In time I also came to admire the artists of the Paisos Catalans. And I don't mean Picasso, Tapies, Miró, or Gaudí, though of course I appreciate their work. No, I came to admire the everyday artists who keep Catalan culture alive. I admire how you cook: from *pa de pages* and more fine wine than one person could ever taste. *Tumbet* and *trampó*. *Suquet* in any form. *Mar i muntanya de l'avia*. Rice with mushrooms. Red shrimp from Palamos and smoked rice from the Delta de Ebro. I admire how you find raw materials for the kitchen in the very local landscape.

I admire the thousands of *castellers* who press the flesh to share the values of strength, equilibrium, valor, and good sense—and the fact that they practice three days a week. I am grateful to the stone masons of Mallorca who taught me their craft. I admire the *catifaires* who spend hours to make ephemeral art out of flowers. I admire the parents who take their children to lessons so they can play the accordion, the *gralla*, the violin, or the piano. Or dance *sardanes* or giants or devils or beasts. I admire your festival bonfires as it speaks to your passion for your own culture and your unflagging efforts to keep it alive. I admire the culture of associationism and the fact that hundreds of thousands of Catalans actively collaborate keep popular culture alive. As the saying goes, "*Entre tots, ho farem tots*" (Among us all, we will do everything).

You seem to know that nothing important is ever accomplished alone. I want to thank several people who supported me in this work. First, my thanks go to Meritxell Martín i Pardo: many years ago, she was the first person to explain to me what it meant to be Catalan, and more recently she has been my research partner. I want to thank my team at the Smithsonian, especially Cristina Diaz-Carrera, Pablo Molinero, Pablo Giori, Elisa Hough, Lluís Puig, David Ibáñez, Francesc Pena, Xavier Vila, and Andrew Davis. Finally I want to recognize the technical teams that produce the Festival, the great professionals of the Office of Popular Culture of the Generalitat of Catalonia, and to the good people of the Ramon Llull Institute. *Entre tots, ho vam fer tot* (among us all, we did do it all).

However, most of all, I want to thank all the Catalans who fight to keep their language and culture alive. Receiving this recognition is one of the great honors of my life, and I dedicate this prize to you.