Mais Oui! Deepening Story and Character with Foreign Language

Sam "SR" Staley

www.samuelrstaley.com

e. sam@srstaley.com

Presented to 17th Annual Florida Writers Conference

Florida Writers Association

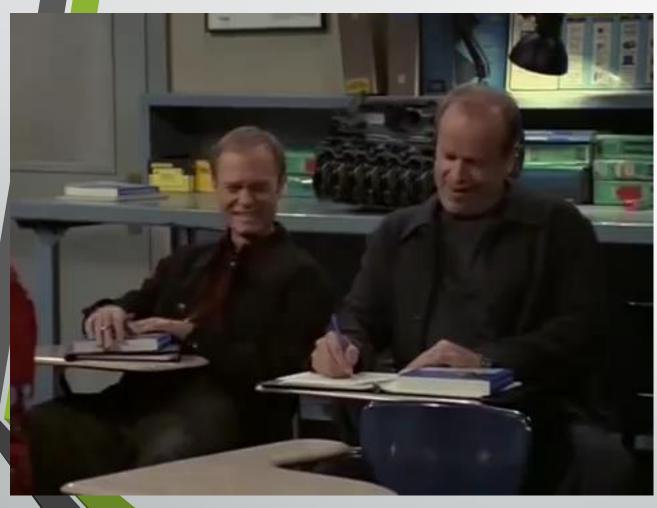
Orlando, Florida

October 21, 2018

Do we underestimate the role of foreign language in everyday life?



Story and Foreign Language



- How important is French to this scene?
 - Would this scene be as funny without French?
 - Why French, and not Spanish? Or Latin?
- What do the references to French tell us about the characters?
- How does foreign language enhance the scene?
 - What are the sources of tension and conflict?

www.samuelrstaley.com, blog.srstaley.com

The Art of Foreign Language

Benefits

- Multiculturalism
- Distinguishes characters
 - Adds dimensions to personality
 - Provides backstory
 - Culturally separates groups (Renegade)
- Engages reader imaginations
- Transports readers to new places
- A minefield of conflict and tension (Trevor Noah)

Risks

- Meanings of words vary
 - Les copains vs Mes copains
- Sentence structure varies
 - Formal vs informal voice
 - Chinese & tenses
- Languages are not the same from region to region
 - French vs Canadian French vs Creole
- "Cultural appropriation"

A little foreign language goes a long way

- "Señor Smith, would you like your room key?"
- "No, thank you, I think we will eat first."
- "Bueno, Señor Smith, would you like a recommendation?"
- "Yes, gracias, thank you. What do you suggest?"
- "Miguel's is very popular."
- George looked at the form and signed on the line agreeing to the charges. "Was denken Sie?"
- "Nein," Vivian responded.
- George breathed in, shook his head, and let out a long, steady exhale. "Where can we get a good steak?"
 - "Si, Señor Smith. Ruth's Chris is one block from the hotel."

www.samuelrstaley.com, blog.srstaley.com

- Where does this scene take place?
 What do we know about the setting?
 [setting]
- What is happening? [plot]
- How many characters are in this scene? [character]
- What do we know about the characters? What are their roles?
- What is the source of tension/conflict in this scene? [story]
- What role does foreign language play?

Florida Writers Association, October 21, 2018

Create a Scene 1

French

- oui (yes)
- non (no)
- merci (thank you)
- aujourd'hui (today)
- bon nuit (good night)
- bienvenue (welcome)
- laissez (leave)

Spanish

- Si (yes)
- Non (no)
- Gracias (thank you)
- Bueno (good)
- Ahora (now)
- Bienvenido (you are welcome)
- salir (get out)

German

- Ja (yes)
- Nein (no)
- Danke (thank you)
- Gut (good)
- Jetzt (now)
- Bitte schön (you are welcome)
- raus hier (get out of here)

Create a Scene 2

Calusa Vocabulary

cacique – chief kuhpe – assemble

lete – run

 $\tilde{n}o$ – war $ma\acute{s}u$ – build

ñoka – Warrior *maśuhoma* – house of prayer

ri – house mayai – on the other side

ra – fierce $\tilde{n}o$ – stop, rest, lie down

kuči – destroy *śahka* – tree

śeha – to examine

śera – watch over/guard

śihpi – harpoon

tepe - join

wíši – water

ka – the, this

How to get started...

Start simple

- Single words, then layer in phrases.
- Begin with a language with which you are most familiar

Google translate is a good place to start

- Reverse translations are essential
- Check dialects
- Use multiple sources to check translations

Actively solicit help from native foreign language speakers

- Personal friends
- Ethnic restaurants
- University and high school foreign language programs

Closing Thoughts...

- Foreign language is a window into different cultures
- Foreign languages can add complexity to characters
- Foreign characters create new sources of tension and conflict to propel plot
- Readers are eager to be taken someplace different and exotic
- Start slow and build your capacity

