

An Introduction to the New B-C Novella Series

In the last five years, the field of teaching Latin has experienced a phenomenon new to this modern period of teaching: novellas. The more than seventy novellas published recently attest to a new kind of focus in teaching and learning the Latin language: the goal, with noted effects, of putting in front of students stories that are understandable at their current level of work and contain content that they find engaging, we might even say, alluring. Writers of these novellas have aimed their work at every level of student from the absolute beginner to those who have three to five years of study behind them. And the effects? Students develop the ability to actually read and understand Latin stories through Latin itself without the need or burden of attempting to translate in order to understand. Through the efficacy of understandable and engaging stories, students have almost from the beginning the experience of the language in the language itself.

Out of the earliest conversations about the *Encounter Latin* novellas, the publisher and the authors made a most valuable commitment to four things that have become the framework of the series. These commitments are to work within a limited, high-frequency vocabulary, to align the novellas with the reading proficiency guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), to write these stories in a way that is comprehensible to readers within a given proficiency level, and to create stories that students of the twenty-first century might find compelling. To that end, authors are making use of the Dickinson College Core Latin vocabulary, which is a high-frequency list (top one thousand) of Latin words found in authors of the classical period. I cannot state strongly enough how important it is for Latin teachers to familiarize themselves with the ACTFL reading proficiency descriptions for the Novice and Intermediate levels (which are the levels attainable in a four-year program). Each level is subdivided into low, mid, and high ranges, creating six gradations of reading proficiency. The word “intermediate” has been used in varying ways over the decades by Latin teachers, often without any firm basis for what each has meant by it. The ACTFL guides clearly articulate what students can do at each of the six gradations of proficiency. The novellas in this series are framed by those articulations. It is important to note that these novellas do not follow any sort of a grammar syllabus. With the commitment to a limited vocabulary and writing that is comprehensible at the indicated proficiency level, authors have been free to use whatever grammar is needed to tell a compelling story. This may seem difficult to some teachers at first, but strikingly, when this approach is used, students do not find it difficult, and that is the primary focus.

The novella that you hold in your hands, *Augury Is for the Birds* by Emma Vanderpool, is what the publisher is calling their Level A novella. Vanderpool limited this novella to 144 unique words with a total text of about two thousand words. Vanderpool crafted this novella, as the Level A indicates, for the Novice Low to Novice Mid reading proficiency. A reader at this reading proficiency level will be able to recognize high-frequency words in a context that strongly supports those words used both singly and in short phrases and sentences. This novice reader requires a great deal of repetition, which supports meaning, and may be helped by the use of true cognates. The use of cognates is, however, a bit of a gamble since it depends largely on the reader’s first language. My own experience is that students whose first language is Spanish or Romanian (with strong communities of both in my region of the country) recognize true cognates far more quickly than speakers of English. Teachers of Latin who have been using the ALIRA

Latin Reading Proficiency test (co-produced by the American Classical League and ACTFL and based on the reading proficiency guides) find that students consistently score at the Novice Mid to High range by the end of the first year of Latin in US programs where students meet daily for Latin. That gives a helpful marker for this novella: it is appropriate for use in the first year of Latin (and beyond).

Vanderpool has not only written a novella within these parameters of vocabulary and proficiency, but she has risen to the challenge of writing in a way that is both consistent with classical Latin and is understandable to students in this proficiency range. Vanderpool has written about Roman religion, about augury, something that many of us love to teach our students about, but she has done it using the particular powers of storytelling. This is no lecture on Roman culture and history. It is a story, but as a story it invites the reader into a landscape, a time, a setting, and a particular set of relationships and influences into which, hopefully, the readers will lose themselves, forget for a moment that they live in another time and that they are reading in another language. We call this experience “getting into the flow,” and when that happens, all kinds of reading magic are possible. When “the flow” happens, language acquisition increases with what seems like no effort, and in this case, the rich culture and history that we love to lecture about has been delivered in a way that students simply will not forget. To the contrary, they very likely will emerge from the novella eager to have more conversations about this thing called augury and all the connections that we are able to make to it for our time.

This novella and those in the *Encounter Latin* series can be used in a number of ways. While space here does not allow for even an outline of potential lesson plans, I am happy to suggest four potential uses and three examples of what that may look like in a Latin classroom.

1. Sustained Silent Reading (SSR): We know that there are two forms of input that enable learners to acquire a new language: listening and reading. While both of those are necessary for students to make progress, reading is slightly more effective than listening. Regardless of the rest of the shape and design of a Latin program, having regularly scheduled periods of SSR with material that is appropriate (with vocabulary that is 90–95 percent known by students; comprehensible and compelling) is a real boost for student progress in the language. Teachers may plan SSR on almost any schedule, once a week, twice a week, for a portion of a period (helpful especially on block schedules), or for an entire class period. Whatever plan a teacher chooses, SSR in a Latin classroom provides time for students to read Latin stories at the appropriate level independently. This independent reading enriches and supports all the other work that students may do in collaboration with their teacher and deeply enhances the effects of the novella mentioned above.

Another variation of SSR is the degree to which the teacher gives students choice in their reading. There may be local constraints on how much material a teacher can provide for choice, but the appeal of material that is not only understandable but also engaging is enhanced when students have choice. This form of SSR where students may choose between a number of appropriate level novellas is often referred to as FVR—free, voluntary reading. When appropriate material is introduced for this independent period of reading, and students come to expect that it is a regular part of their Latin learning, they will settle into the routine and even complain if it is, for whatever reason, interrupted.

2. Enrichment and Differentiation: How individual teachers conceive of enrichment and differentiation will depend largely on how the rest of their program is framed. The times will still come, however, in which they need and want materials to put into the hands of students who are ready for something more. Very often we forget that “something more” can simply mean something different. Teachers can become frustrated when they see that some in their class seem to pick things up very quickly and grow bored or that some students seem to be bored all the time while lagging behind. Putting the appropriate level novella in their hands can be the “something different” that they need. Enrichment can look like what some students do while others receive remediation or receive extra time for assessments. Differentiation can look like a variety of things that we ask a student to do with a novella. It could be to read two pages and consider how the artwork involved reflects what they have read. It could be to read an entire chapter and imagine how the next chapter unfolds. It could be to draw additional artwork for a chapter. In the best sense of differentiation, it may well look like all of those things happening at once in the same classroom.

3. Supplementation: For this use of the novella, I have in mind that regardless of what else drives and frames one’s Latin program, a novella of appropriate material can become some of the variety that the human brain craves. Latin programs are framed and driven by textbooks, by themes, by grammar syllabuses, by the adapted works of chosen authors, and by established vocabulary lists. A novella can be used to break up what otherwise becomes the monotony of the program—whatever that is. What I have in mind by supplementation is not, “if we finish the textbook (or units, or district curriculum), we will read a novella.” I mean interrupting whatever that program is in order to read the novella. And I don’t mean interrupt the program until the novella is finished but rather use the novella as an unexpected surprise, variety for the brain, interspersed all through the year.

4. Curriculum Content: It is becoming more common for Latin teachers to abandon textbooks (for a variety of reasons). As they look to high-frequency vocabulary lists and themes that allow them to work with all of the national standards (Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Community), they would do well to consider making novellas appropriate to the level a featured part of what they do. These novellas have made the commitment to high-frequency vocabulary. They are written creatively in order to be compelling to students in the twenty-first century, and they engage the reader in the culture and history of classical Rome with a deep sensitivity to the multicultural reality of ancient Rome that our materials for far too long have ignored.

For the last two possibilities, supplementation and curriculum content, I will suggest, in briefest form, three ways that teachers may structure the use of this novella. We should think of these as three approaches to novella usage in addition to SSR. In other words, a teacher may have established times for SSR. Beyond that, the teacher may plan lessons in the following three ways, and these three approaches are not exclusive of one another. In fact, it is my common practice to make use of all three at all levels of Latin.

1. Read and Draw: This is a slow, introductory approach to the story in which the teacher and students read the story aloud together. They take small “bites” of the text together and then in one way or another create drawings to illustrate what they have read and understood. The

drawings can be done in several ways: with whiteboards and markers, paper and pencil, computerized devices and drawing software, individually or in groups (one person drawing and the others suggesting details). Drawings may be labeled with Latin words and phrases from the story, given captions taken from the story, or both. An entire chapter can be turned into a four-, six-, or eight-frame cartoon. An entire chapter can be turned into a one-scene drawing that attempts to capture all the detail of the chapter. The Read and Draw approach can be made as short or as long (lasting several days) as the teacher determines is useful to student progress.

2. Read and Discuss: As a follow-up to Read and Draw, or without it depending on the needs of students, the teacher and students read portions of a story/chapter together and then in Latin have simple conversations about what they have just read. At lower proficiency levels, those questions can be yes/no questions and questions that explore basic details: *quis?*, *quid?*, *ubi?* As students seem ready, one may venture with the word *cur?* and its natural response *quod*. It is in the middle of such Read and Discuss sessions that teachers will see an ideal moment arise in which they may extend the material of the storyline into the personal stories of students. At that moment, the discussion becomes Personal Questions and Answers—still kept at the right level for the proficiency. Perhaps the class has just read that a character *non vult augur esse*. Before turning to the historical and cultural issues of the book, the teacher might ask several students in turn, *visne magister/ra esse (medicus/a, advocatus/a, coquus/a, faber/ra, machinarius/a)?*, and see where that will lead before returning to the storyline and discussion. (NB: I have created some feminine forms of words that don't exist in classical Latin. I have followed conventions for doing so. I strongly believe that we must do this to make it clear that chefs, teachers, and auto mechanics can be jobs that anyone is drawn to. That is a major feature of personalizing conversation in a language—it is only personal if it describes the people in the room). It does not matter that these words for modern jobs are not in the students' current vocabulary list. They will be drawn to the opportunity to speak about themselves before going on with a description of the character in the book.

3. Read and Write: When and only when students seem to have a strong grasp of a chapter or segment of a novella, it is appropriate to ask them to write about it in Latin (noting that writing in a second language always lags behind the reading proficiency). At lower proficiency levels, the writing can be a simple summary. Teachers can give students time to write, in Latin, about the characters and events of the appointed segment of the story. The time may be limited or not, but I find that students at all levels do better at this when they do not feel the pressure of time (so what may seem to the teacher as a ten to fifteen minute task may go much better for everyone in the room if they are given thirty minutes to do it, without announcing the time frame). In any regard, Read and Write is an approach to take at the end of a process, not at the beginning. It is most fruitful when the teacher has a sense that everyone is truly understanding the reading and has engaged with it already through drawings and class discussion. What to do with the writings (as in assessment) is a full and long consideration that we cannot do here, but suffice it to say that this writing does not require the teacher's scrutiny for error correction, but can be a helpful way of checking in to see that students are understanding what they are reading.

I am pleased to be able to introduce this first of several novellas in the B-C series that will only enhance and enrich the material through comprehensible and compelling novellas that Latin teachers have to draw on—novellas that did not exist even five years ago. These are not

novellas that simply recast or adapt ancient authors. The authors who are creating them are seeking to invite the two worlds—ancient and modern—to see each other and to value the full scope of humanity that has always been there but has not always been seen or heard. If these novellas contribute more fully to that conversation, as I think they will, then there has never been a better time to teach and learn Latin.

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