

LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES IN THE SCHOOLS: A Review of Materials

- RUNNER FOR THE KING*. By ROWENA BENNETT. (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1963.)
- MYSTERY OF THE INCA CAVE*. By LILLA M. WALTCH. (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1970.)
- OUR MEXICAN HERITAGE*. By GERTRUDE S. BROWN with the advice of DR. MANUEL GUERRA. (Lexington, Mass.: Ginn and Company, 1972.)
- SCHOLASTIC WORLD CULTURES PROGRAM: LATIN AMERICA*. By JAMES A. HUDSON. (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1972.)
- TODAY'S WORLD IN FOCUS*. (Lexington, Mass.: Ginn and Company.) *ARGENTINA AND CHILE*, by GEORGE I. BLANKSTEN (1969); *BRAZIL*, by KEMPTON E. WEBB (1970); *MEXICO*, by GEORGE I. SANCHEZ (1970); *PUERTO RICO*, by JOHN P. AUGELLI (1973).
- EXPLORING WORLD CULTURES*. By ESKO E. NEWHILL and AMBERTO LA PAGLIA. (Lexington, Mass.: Ginn and Company, 1974.)

Goals and objectives for Latin American classes in the public schools vary widely and require diverse media. For some, the purpose is to introduce students to Latin American studies, utilizing a brief time period to develop the unit. Other courses seek to survey the cultural area and then emphasize each country by a systematic study which focuses on their respective geography, history, people, economy, and contemporary conditions. World history or world cultural studies incorporate Latin America as a region. These courses utilize textbooks which provide a global perspective organized around such areas as the Middle East, Southeast Asia, India, China, the Soviet Union, and Latin America.

The great difficulty for the teacher is the appropriate selection of materials for the particular grade levels, and availability further limits the books from which to choose. Once a textbook is selected it is coordinated with audiovisual materials to supplement the content. In addition, the teacher must evaluate the materials for the reading level. It is a fact that students are reading at lower levels than in earlier years. Thirty percent of those students entering high school will, in all probability, be reading at two years below their academic grade. Readability becomes a vital criterion for text selection and thus must be a factor when preparing or writing a book. The reading levels of the books reviewed here were determined by systematic analyses and plotting on the readability graph developed by Edward Fry at the Rutgers University Reading Center, New Jersey (Edward Fry, *Reading Instruction for Classroom and Clinic* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972], p. 232).

The first three books are appropriate for elementary students. *Runner for the King* is a thrilling adventure story of an Inca runner who saves the empire. The

tale contains much factual material about the ancient Inca and unfolds in a manner that would excite interest in many fourth and fifth graders. *Mystery of the Inca Cave* describes the discovery of modern-day gold mine thieves in Peru by two North American teenagers interested in archaeology. This adventure, however, provides its readers with little understanding of present day or ancient Peru. While these are the small books of fiction that elementary students like to take home overnight, *Our Mexican Heritage* is a textbook in the truest sense of the word. Written especially for use in the Chicano classroom, it aims to provide these students with appreciation of their unique past. It is particularly valuable in its description of early Mexican heroes, but it seems strange that the history discussion virtually ends with Juárez—there is nothing about Díaz or the Mexican Revolution. There is, however, an excellent survey of southwestern history tying together the early background of this border area with today, making it indeed an excellent bridge to understanding for today's youth.

Scholastic World Cultures Program on Latin America aims to break down stereotypes and oversimplified views of Latin America. The program, appropriate for middle school or junior high, has a reading level of sixth to seventh grades. The text divides Latin America into Mexico (29 pages), Brazil (24 pages), the "European" countries (25 pages), the "Indian" countries (34 pages), Central America and the Caribbean (21 pages), and an epilogue on the U.S. and Latin America (3 pages). The thirty-two page pictorial essay, dedicated to the land, the people, the economy, and the culture, largely emphasizes the uniqueness, the "cuteness" of Latin America, with few pictures of large cities, modern industry, or the fine arts. The brief biographies of Latin American heroes are excellent though few in number. In addition to the text, the program comes with a Cultures Laboratory, actually a series of ditto masters for tests and classroom work, in which students are mostly asked to distinguish between fact, fiction, and opinion. There is also a teaching guide with discussion questions for each chapter and, for some, role-playing and workshop activities. There is evidently a film strip or slide series coded for the text, as a record, keyed to the frames, is included. On balance this is not a bad program, particularly for the teacher who has had no Latin American coursework. It is, however, all too brief to fully achieve its purpose.

The four texts in *Today's World in Focus* were prepared for high school students. All of them were written by Latin Americanists and the quality of the work amply reflects this. Only one of them, however, is in the high school reading range. Webb's *Brazil* was plotted at the eighth to ninth grade level, while the other three have college level readability. This is not to say that the books are not useful; their length and presentation are most appropriate, but the reading level is simply above the average student. However, in the cases where Latin American studies classes draw advanced students, these would be most appropriate.

Webb's work shows his warmth and enthusiasm for the area. Naturally the sections devoted to geography are excellent, but those on the fine arts are also quite good, as is his discussion of modern Brazilian problems. Recipes, useful phrases in Portuguese, a glossary, dates, and the flag follow the text. Blanksten's *Argentina and Chile* reflects the author's primary interest—politics—particularly in the sections on Argentina. Sanchez's *Mexico* is written with great sympathy, re-

flecting the author's background and experiences. The text is particularly well balanced and geared to provide an appreciation not only of Mexico's past, but of her present and future. Dates, recipes, and a guide to speaking Spanish follow the text. Augelli's volume was written so that young people of Puerto Rican origin in this country might take greater pride in their heritage. Interestingly, only twenty-nine pages are devoted to Puerto Rico before the Spanish American War. The balance of the book is a discussion of Puerto Rico today. The author sees the United States as bearing "enormous responsibility for both much of the progress and many of the problems of contemporary Puerto Rico" (p. iv). He is to be congratulated for his even-handed discussion of the problems and privileges resulting from this special relationship. All four books contain excellent maps and photographs, special biographical sketches of heroes, and a bibliography which would be of much interest to the teacher.

Exploring World Cultures devotes seventy-four pages to Latin America. Unfortunately, its readability was beyond the twelfth grade and into the college level. As might be expected by the brevity of its coverage, the geographical sections are much too abbreviated and the history account is largely political. One wonders at the use of this book since it exceeds the high school readability level and its format almost totally precludes its use at the college level.

A conclusion drawn from this brief survey would indicate the need for books written for students at the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade levels. Books which appear to be for high school students may, in reality, be too advanced for them. Reading has become of paramount concern in the public schools yet reports of current research indicate that the reading level of high school students is dropping. If this is the case, then it is all the more imperative that Latin Americanists lend their scholarship and abilities to meeting a pressing need. High school students, especially those who are not the best readers, need reading materials that are more sophisticated in subject matter but written with a vocabulary that would allow the slow reader to comprehend. All too often the slow reader must gain his understanding of Latin America solely through audiovisual materials excluding the printed word.

In the "Report on the National Seminar" (to appear in a future issue of LARR), some comments are made about opening channels of communication between Latin Americanists, professional educators, and teachers. In addition to the seminar, many NDEA Center outreach programs have brought together Latin Americanists and educators with marvelous results, particularly the centers at Texas, with its *Handbook on Latin American Studies for Teachers*; Florida, with its work in values clarification and concept teaching; and UCLA, with its work in teaching strategies.

The situation reminds one of an incident in the life of the late Bennett Cerf. While at the beach one summer, his young son asked him for a history book. Cerf, then Random House publisher, discovered, much to his sorrow, that there were few if any such books available anywhere. The result was the appearance in 1950 of the Landmark Books published by Random House and written by quite reputable historians and journalists especially for those eight to fourteen years old.

Perhaps the time has come for us as Latin Americanists to recognize the similar need for books about Latin America written on a junior high-high school level. With the assistance of reading authorities, the task should not be too difficult and the results could only be rewarding.

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