

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15

GLOSSARY

albóndigas soup – Meatball soup with vegetables such as squash and corn and often seasoned with oregano and mint.

árnica – Anti-inflammatory herb, often used as a salve on sprains and as an antiseptic wash for skin rashes. The dried flowers are packaged and sold in Latino markets.

Aztlán – Present Southwest U.S. lands, believed to be where the Mexicas migrated from. They journeyed south to found Tenochtitlan, or contemporary Mexico City.

babas – Expression, literally meaning drool or slime, describing the viscous discharge from a nopal pad, or leaf.

cardón – Tallest of the cacti and less spiny than the saguaro. They are native to Mexico's state of Baja California.

emplasto – Homemade poultice. A curative salve often wrapped in fabric and placed on the body.

espina (pl-s) – Thorns.

hiervabuena – Mint leaves brewed for tea.

jabón del perro – Bar of dog soap used in Mexican folk medicine for human baldness.

jaqueca – Migraine headache with a pre-warning visual aura and blurred vision, giving the inflicted nausea and a low tolerance for light.

Lake Texcoco – Ancient lake discovered by the Mexicas where today's Mexico City is built.

Mexica (pl-s) – Original ancient people of the Valley of Mexico.

nopal (pl-es) – Cactus, *Opuntia ficus-indica*, with its numerous thorny pads prized in Mexican cuisine and medicine. Nopales have iconic significance in Mexican history, literature, art, and music.

penca (pl-s) – Thick cactus pad. It is edible when removed of its numerous needles.

ruda – Herb, also called rue. It is highly aromatic and is used as a poultice to relieve leg cramps and earaches and as a germicide for wounds.

té de limon – Fragrant and calming tea brewed from lemon balm leaves.

tuna (pl-s) – Sweet, colorful cactus fruit.

vida cotidiana – Everyday life.

Photos on page 15: Top: A self-portrait by Vibiana Aparicio-Chamberlin, a Los Angeles artist and writer who routinely engages in phone *charlas* – casual conversations – with fellow artist Luis Becerra. The two friends first met long ago while teaching art to children at Olvera Street, a historic 18th-century Mexican American plaza celebrated as the birthplace of Los Angeles. Bottom: A self-portrait by Luis Becerra, a Los Angeles artist whose murals are displayed in the city. Becerra and fellow artist Vibiana Aparicio-Chamberlin often talk by phone, drawing mutual inspiration from their conversations. Images provided by Vibiana Aparicio-Chamberlin.

TALKING TO THE READER OVER YOUR SHOULDER

BY DANNY HEITMAN

Robert Graves is best known for *I, Claudius*, his 1934 novel about imperial Rome that inspired a long-running drama on public TV. To a lesser extent, Graves is also celebrated for *The Reader Over Your Shoulder*, a book about the writing craft he coauthored with Alan Hodge and published in 1943.

The Reader Over Your Shoulder contains a wealth of valuable advice about how to write well, which is why it's still in print today. But even if you never pick up a copy for yourself, the title of *The Reader Over Your Shoulder* has already given you a wise insight about how to write effectively. It points to a key principle – namely, that any writer should think, in a tangible way, about the person who will be reading what's written.

Here's how the authors of *The Reader Over Your Shoulder* put it: “We suggest that whenever anyone sits down to write he should imagine a crowd of his prospective readers . . . looking over his shoulder. They will be asking such questions as: ‘What does this sentence mean?’ ‘Why do you trouble to tell me that again?’ ‘Why have you chosen such a ridiculous metaphor?’ ‘Must I really read this long, limping sentence?’ ‘Haven't you got your ideas muddled here?’ By anticipating and listing as many questions of this sort as possible, the writer will discover certain tests of intelligibility to which

he may regularly submit his work before he sends it off to the printer.”

The idea that writing should be done with the reader in mind is so basic that one might wonder why Graves and Hodge bothered to point it out. In actual practice, though, it's easy to forget that in most instances, we're supposed to be writing not just for ourselves, but others.

Writing is often done alone, which can tempt us to regard it more broadly as a solo act. But ultimately, most writing is a conversation between writer and reader. To write well, we should start with a clear idea of who that reader might be. This is important because different kinds of readers will need different things from us.

As a high school newspaper editor a lifetime ago, I wrote a passionately argued editorial about passenger rail policy, a topic I'd spotted in a news magazine that seemed like just the kind of smart subject a true journalist should embrace. What I'd overlooked was my audience, a campus full of teenagers whose interest in the fortunes of Amtrak was nil. To make that arcane issue compelling, I would have needed a hook that made it more directly relevant to my adolescent readers.

In my eagerness to sound like an important writer, I had forgotten the reader over my shoulder. Any good writer ignores that visitor at his peril.



Forum editor **DANNY HEITMAN** has written about the writing craft for numerous publications, including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he's taught writing

to university students.