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McCulture

Americans have developed an admirable fondness for books, food, and music that preprocess other cultures. But for all our enthusiasm, have we lost our taste for the truly foreign?

BY AVIYA KUSHNER

As a child, I lived in a house where we spoke only Hebrew. I remember relatives from the American side of the family complaining about my parents' language policy when they visited our house in New York. "She'll suffer if she doesn't speak English at home," one worried. "She won't be able to write well enough to get into college." But something unexpected happened as my Israeli mother sang the Psalms to my siblings and me while we bathed: Empires fell. The Berlin Wall literally came down. Droves of immigrants and refugees—huddled masses who had long yearned to be free—changed London, Berlin, Tel Aviv, and New York. India rose, China skyrocketed, and four young Israelis invented instant messaging. Bilingual kids like me, toting odd foods at lunch and speaking with their mothers in something unintelligible, were suddenly not the problem, but the glittering future.

I did learn to write in English well enough to get into college. So did an entire generation of bilingual writers who discovered that another language rumbling in their ears was an advantage on the page, a double richness. For a third of the 21 writers on *Granta*'s 2007 Best Young American Novelists list, English is a second language.

It's not just in the literary world where attitudes have changed. A name Americans have a hard time pronouncing, like Aviya, used to be a problem. I was urged to take a nickname to make things easier, by well-meaning dorm neighbors and even people I interviewed over the years, who asked if they could "call you something else." No one says that anymore. Instead, I get asked what *Aviya* means. With the election of a man named Barack Obama to the presidency, a man who introduced himself to the country at the 2004 Democratic convention with a speech about having an unusual name and a dual background, a new kind of translator is moving to the forefront of American culture. It is now cool to be half.

In areas ranging from politics to food to music to literature, suddenly we want to hear as much as possible from people who grew up in two worlds at once. The trend is especially noticeable in literature, where plenty of the best new writing in English seems to meld two languages and two ways of thought—the farther apart and more exotic, and the more seamlessly combined, the better. Obama himself has written a border-crossing memoir that leaps from Hawaii to Kenya to Chicago.

If a collection of stories about China written in English gains attention, or a memoir about growing up half-

Aviya Kushner is the author of the forthcoming book *And There Was Evening. And There Was Morning*, about the experience of reading the Bible in English after a lifetime of reading it in Hebrew. She writes about literature for *The Jerusalem Post*, and her essays have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *Poets & Writers*, and *Harvard Review*. The daughter of an Israeli mother and an American father, she teaches in the nonfiction writing program at Columbia College Chicago.