



**Interview with  
Ed Nawotka, Publishers Weekly**

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KENNEALLY: A top seller for Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, the Miami-based Spanish-language division of the US big five publisher, is a book for the entire family filled with gripping tales of good battling evil. *La Biblia*, the Bible in Spanish, is perennially popular and available in dozens of editions from PRH GE.

Welcome to CCC's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

Sales of the Bible and other Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial Spanish-language religion titles have climbed towards the heavens in recent years. That success reflects growing demand in the US market for all types of Spanish-language books.

*Publishers Weekly* international editor Ed Nawotka follows the state of Spanish-language publishing in the US. He joins me now. Welcome back to the program, Ed.

NAWOTKA: Thanks for having me, Chris.

KENNEALLY: According to the US government Census Bureau, Spanish is the most common non-English language heard in US homes and is spoken by more than 41 million people. Yet Spanish speakers in America are hardly a monolithic bloc. Ed Nawotka, what important cultural and linguistic distinctions do publishers need to recognize when they approach the Spanish-language market?

NAWOTKA: There's an X every time you approach a Spanish market, that X being where they're from, is it a first, second generation of immigrants, whether they were native born to the US, how much they use English in their home and then outside of their home. For example, people who live in Miami can function entirely in Spanish if they'd like. Parts of Texas, California have this. Particularly with children's books, you have sometimes younger children who are being taught either exclusively in English or Spanish, or they might have access to bilingual education, which is becoming more and more prevalent across the US. We're seeing that all over the country now. Places like Bentonville, Arkansas, and Durham, North Carolina, have large communities of Spanish speakers.

KENNEALLY: You reported that 2023 was a record-breaking year for children's books at Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, driven in part by a program in the Chicago



Public Schools to purchase titles in Spanish that support a new curriculum. What makes publishing children's books in Spanish challenging?

NAWOTKA: Chicago is a perfect example of a large city that has a large, diverse Spanish-speaking community. And they also want to make sure to expose not just the native or immigrant families who are using Spanish at home, but they also want to expose all the other communities to bilingual education in Spanish because of its prominence and predominance throughout the United States.

One of the areas in which Penguin Random House's young readers imprints are publishing is they're taking books from their other lines of children's books and translating them into Spanish, and it might not have anything to do with the Latinx cultural identity. I think that that's something that you're seeing more and more of is books from the trade that are maybe Anglo being translated directly into Spanish for a bilingual reader or just a Spanish-speaking reader.

KENNEALLY: MakeMake, a digital library platform for Spanish-language books, entered the US market in 2020 during the pandemic. Their books are now available in schools and public libraries around the country. A shortage of Spanish-speaking teachers and librarians, though, means the service faces unusual limitations.

NAWOTKA: We hear this a lot from librarians – they're serving a community of Spanish-speaking readers, but they themselves don't speak Spanish.

MakeMake, just for background, is a Colombian-based digital library that sources material from small and medium-sized publishers across Latin America for resale or for distribution in the US. This is a very unique catalog that serves a very broad range of South American and North American readers.

Increasingly in parts of the United States, you're seeing a lot of immigration from Venezuela in particular as well as Colombia as well as Central America. It's all been in the headlines. MakeMake serves this type of audience. But the person who has to help, for example, a new immigrant from Venezuela with a family to access this at their public library – and they're in 18 public library systems across the United States – that librarian may not speak any Spanish. So they have to know how the system works, how to access it, how to sign people up, while not actually speaking Spanish. It's a unique challenge, and we hear this from all parts of the publishing value chain that they're often selling books to Spanish speakers – the people selling books to Spanish speakers or working with Spanish speakers do not themselves speak fluent Spanish.



KENNEALLY: Silvia Matute, who's president and CEO of Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, told you, Ed Nawotka, that their catalog is a hybrid model. What she meant is that it combines titles imported from Spanish and South American subsidiaries as well as so-called native publishing. Are there any indicators on which side is more successful in Spanish in the US, the local work or the imports?

NAWOTKA: Well, I think that any publisher would tell you that they would like to take more pride in their local work, because it's the work that they themselves are commissioning, that they themselves are fostering. That really is the genuine work of any publisher is to discover and nurture creative writers and to then find audiences for that. That's the real satisfaction.

Silvia Matute, who runs Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, which is Penguin Random House's Spanish-language subsidiary in the United States, explained to me that they have a backlist catalog from Latin America and Spain of about 3,000 titles. They curate about 1,200 of those a year to either distribute in the United States through importation or to print in the United States and then distribute, and then they have their own local list – which now, my understanding is it accounts for about 40% of their overall sales, and that's a significantly smaller list. So by proportion, one can presume that the local list is selling more in quantity. But the backlist, or the imported and distributed titles from Latin America and Spain, are more of a long seller, what we used to call the long tail,

KENNEALLY: Ed Nawotka, what accounts for the popularity of religion titles in US Spanish-language catalogs?

NAWOTKA: I think you have an audience that many presume will be either Catholic – primarily Catholic – or Christian. They're coming with a tradition of religious observance of Catholicism or Christianity. Increasingly in Latin America, you're also seeing a lot of evangelicals. It's the fastest-growing religion in South America.

Certainly, coming out of the pandemic, we have two wars that are in our news every day, certainly other wars going on around the world. You're seeing a lot of economic stress in communities, particularly from Central America and the immigrant communities. They're finding things, like all of us, to have a lot of stress. And it lends itself towards people seeking a bit more depth in their spiritual practice.

KENNEALLY: HarperCollins is publisher of the forthcoming memoir by Pope Francis. In the US, sales in Spanish are expected to account for 20% of the total. The pope's book is unusual in many ways, you've reported, Ed Nawotka. Pope Francis, for example, is a native Spanish speaker, yet he wrote the book in Italian.



NAWOTKA: Exactly. I think increasingly, you're going to see it more common that a book is itself translated from multiple languages before it gets into English.

In this case, the pope's book – though the pope is Argentine, a native Spanish speaker, he did write the book in Italian. Yes, the book was translated first into English, but also translated from Italian into Spanish as well. So I think it's an interesting process.

Mind you, when the book was translated from Italian into Spanish, that Spanish, because the process happened in Spain, was itself adjusted and readjusted for the North American reader.

KENNEALLY: *Publishers Weekly* international editor Ed Nawotka, thanks so much for speaking with me today.

NAWOTKA: Thanks a lot, Chris. I'm happy to be here, and I appreciate the conversation.

KENNEALLY: That's all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts. You can also find Velocity of Content on YouTube as part of the CCC channel. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for joining me.

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