

Madre: Perilous Journeys with a Spanish Noun

Liza Bakewell

Norton

\$23.95

Review by Yvette Benavides

MY SAN ANTONIO, *San Antonio Times*

Under Babel's long shadow, we still traverse the labyrinthine paths of ever-morphing language; What has been a mainstay over time in languages, however, is the inversion of what is sacred. How does that happen?

This is precisely the question that cultural anthropologist Liza Bakewell answers in her book "Madre: Perilous Journeys with a Spanish Noun."

Imbedded in idioms is that most sacred of words, madre or mother.

Bakewell was first introduced to madre and "madreismos" 22 years ago when she lived in Mexico City as a graduate student. She heard someone say "me vale madre" which means "it is worth a mother" --like it was a bad thing. She noticed, too, the many expressions with madre in them and that they were all negative.

In a phone interview from her home on the coast of Maine, Bakewell explains that two decades later, the word is much more out in the open. "Slang goes through its own cycles in the parlors and behind shut doors before it makes its way in the mainstream," she said.

Is this a cultural backlash for this word that signifies the most revered of people in a country where patriarchy and machismo reign supreme? "In a word," said Bakewell, "yes." "It's all over the world," she added. And the idiom never goes near the child's synonym for the word, "mama."

Exasperatingly enough, in Mexico we also hear the expression, "Que padre" to mean "how wonderful." Why do fathers fare better? Bakewell explains that "papa" and "mama" and "padre" and "madre" started out on equal footing, oh, some 100,000 years ago. There is evidence, she said, that those were the first words ever spoken.

Over time, these progenitors gave rise to other related concepts. The nasalized sounds in "mama" move to words like "home," but the staccato sound of "papa" links directly to words of importance, like "president" and "pope."

"There are deep roots to madre and padre and they begin at the phonetic level," said Bakewell. "But history, society, and culture play a role and channel the sound into categories." The rise of patriarchy privileges the padre over the madre.

Futhermore, the cult of motherhood in Mexico has been deeply rooted there for over 160 years. The occupation of the Church elevated the mother and motherhood in that society from its formerly low place. Mothers were put on a pedestal, and just like that, the sacred symbolism of mother led to the creation of slangs, idioms and profanities which imbed that word. "You get much more of a rise when you invert a sacred symbol," said Bakewell.

We see this in English, too, when on the school yard, some bully proclaims that our beloved mother wears army boots. Evidence of it exists, too, in the your-momma-is-so-ugly sparring on cable comedy shows.

But in Mexico, insists Bakewell, in Spanish, the madreismos "have come out of the closet." It's moved, she says, from the street and the bars where the "cuates" or buddies hang out to "within earshot" of everyone. No other country "seems to have the plethora of 'madreismos' Mexico does."

And what of the streets of the volatile Mexico today that we see depicted on the evening news? It is a violence that exists not just up and down the border of northern Mexico, but indeed throughout the country. Violence defines the place now, but so does fear for those who must subsist there.

Bakewell surmises that with the stress of life in Mexico comes the use of profanity. There is a direct correlation.

The mother is at the core of human relationships and “the entire nation is the mother of Mexico,” she added. “Madreismos are still the only really powerful expressions that get to everyone’s nerves and release the pressure,” and, she predicts, “the future with the rise in violence will simply help to preserve them.”

One of Bakewell’s goals in writing this book was to “write to everyone,” and she does that with aplomb. It’s safe to say that most people are fascinated with language in one way or another. The layers of poetic prose, anecdote and memories of her time in a Mexico she clearly admires and recalls fondly carry us along an endlessly fascinating understanding of knotty linguistic concepts.

Within her multidisciplinary exploration, she deftly creates a world in which the various points of view of history, literature, philology, biology, sociology and psychology bring to bear “this microcosm of this tiny little word with two syllables.”

“Within this one word, madre,” said Bakewell, “you have the whole world.” Que padre.

Yvette Benavides is a professor of English at Our Lady of the Lake University.

Liza Bakewell will have a reading and book signing at the Twig Book Shop on November 17 from 5 to 7 pm.