

Latin Alive and Well: An Introductory Text. By P.L. CHAMBERS. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. Pp. xv + 350. Paper, \$24.95. ISBN 978-0-8061-3816-5.

The title of this book sounds slightly defensive, as if the author had heard the phrase “dead language” too often. Readers should not be faulted, therefore, for expecting a markedly innovative approach to teaching and learning basic Latin. What they receive instead is a highly traditional grammar-translation textbook, very similar to Wheelock’s. This is not a bad book; it simply does not offer much that is not presented equally well elsewhere.

There are certainly a few innovations. Learning objectives are boxed off at the start of every chapter, giving the teacher and student a concrete idea of what is to come. Some material that is scattered in other books is presented here in a single chapter. By Chapter V, the student has been introduced to the present indicative of all conjugations; the present, imperfect and future indicative of *sum*; and first- and second-declension nouns and adjectives. Perfect, imperfect and future tenses for all four conjugations are each presented within a single chapter. This is a sensible decision, since imperfect and perfect endings are the same for all regular verbs, and it does students no favor to let them believe that all future tense verbs end in *-bō, -bis, -bit, -bimus, -bitis* and *-bunt*, only to have them find out otherwise when they learn the third and fourth conjugations. The method of teaching the present tense of the third conjugation is also clever, since it avoids the pitfall students often experience when they reach this conjugation. If they have previously been told to drop *-re* from the infinitive and add *-ō, -s, -t, -mus, -tis* and *-nt*, they may become confused when that suddenly will not work. Instead, they are told here to “Find the verbal stem by **dropping the last three letters of the Infinitive**” [boldface is original] and then add the endings *-ō, -is, -it, -imus, -itis* and *-unt* (p. 29). The six tenses of the indicative active are introduced quickly, in the first third of the book. The five declensions are all presented by Chapter XIX (of 36). Covering so much material so quickly inevitably leads to important topics being put off a long time, for example comparative and superlative adjectives (Chapters XXIV and XXV). There is an even longer wait for adverb comparison (Chapter XXIX). The oddest postponement, however, is numbers, which are relegated to the penultimate chapter. Why should students of Latin wait so long for numbers, something those learning modern languages typically cover early on?

The readings are initially presented Wheelock-style, as “Sentence Translations” consisting of sentences created by the author (*Fortuna patriae est magna*) and / or snippets adapted from ancient authors (*Puel-*

la poetam non amat. Vale, puella! –Catullus). Beginning in Chapter V, Chambers adds connected passages (“Text Translation”). The choice of material for the latter is very traditional: first the story of Aeneas adapted from Vergil, and then passages adapted from Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita*. These include a version of Livy’s Preface, which represents a very challenging reading for Chapter VIII of a beginner’s text. Later chapters contain readings from authors such as Caesar (particularly his invasion of Britain), Cicero, Seneca, Nepos, Martial and Horace. Chambers also throws in the occasional *Latin for All Occasions*-type quotation (*Est bonum esse rex!* —Mel Brooks). In addition, the Text Translations contain two “fun” passages, one on “Procurator Nihil Nihil Septem” (p. 86) and one on “Bella Stellarum” (p. 213). The book could have used more of these, since many of the other sentences and readings may not be intrinsically engaging even to more mature college students. A passionate and enthusiastic teacher can make the material interesting, but it would be nice not to have to do so much of the author’s work for her.

There are some exercises apart from readings; these tend to be “write out the declension/conjugation of...,” “write the ____ forms of ____” or other short-answer activities requiring plugging in a form or two. Only occasionally does the student write Latin of his/her own creation that is not a direct translation. At the end of the chapter on present subjunctive formation, there is an assignment to “Write a tombstone inscription in Latin including at least six of the following grammatical constructions...” (p. 204). Had the book included more such exercises, the student might gain a better feel for Latin as a *language*, not a puzzle that one either translates into English or translates English into. Nor does it help that the book’s cultural information is scanty. There is no systematic presentation of Roman daily life, mythology, Roman history after the death of Romulus or even the history of Roman literature. There are a few visuals, in a welcome contrast to Wheelock’s text, but they are infrequent and sometimes random. Barocci’s *Aeneas, Anchises, and Ascanius Fleeing Troy* is reproduced at the start of a chapter containing a reading on Aeneas, but other shots of Roman ruins, such as the Curia or the Colosseum, seem haphazardly placed. The most effective visual aid is a series of cute drawings of a goldfish in a bowl that accompanies the chapter on prepositions (p. 54).

Among the Sentence Translations is this one by the French philosopher René Boylesve, which the author quotes in English in her “Note to the Student” on p. xi: “*Memoriā teneamus nos non discere Latinam linguam ut declinemus verba et in investigationibus splendeamus sed ut hac linguā penetremus in regnum ... cogitationis humanae.* We do receive

some glimpses into the *cogitatio humana* of the Romans in this text, but all too often we are left with the impression that the be-all and end-all of Latin study is indeed *ut declinemus verba (et nomina et adiectiva)*.

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