Book review: Lost in translation, by Eva Hoffman

Language, culture, and perception viewed through the prism of the immigrant experience.

Philip H. D. SMITH. Published: December 27, 2000 Last updated: December 2, 2015

Lost in Translation

Author: Eva Hoffman

Year: 1991

Format: Paperback 288 page


ISBN: 0749390700 (0-7493-9070-0)

The 'translation' of the title is used in both its meanings.

Eva Hoffman tells the story of her family's move from Poland to Canada in the late 1950s. The book's multi-layered narrative deals with childhood, parting, and identity. Ms Hoffman's experience with changing languages will have interpreters nodding in recognition.

What happens to language when a person changes country? The author vividly describes the loss of language, from everyday words, the ability to hold an audience of friends with a story. An outgoing, garrulous person is reduced to monosyllabic watcher.

It is not only language that changes, but also the cultural references and markers: "Because I don't know the background, I don't always grasp the foreground".

Language, culture, and perception are viewed through the prism of the immigrant experience. These are issues that most interpreters have encountered, albeit in diluted and ultimately non-threatening form. When we learned our languages we all experienced a degree of the dislocation so eloquently described.

And the book is funny. The incomer's descriptions of the baffling "semiotics of dating" in early 1960s Canada, the discovery of "health as effort", the political naivety of North America.

In short, a book that deserves a place in every interpreter's knapsack.