

*"I wanted something that would require the sort of devotion that I had willingly given to editorial work, something that would be fun and meaningful."*

## Loving Latin

An accomplished editor leaves the biz and finds an unlikely new passion

BY ANN PATTY

I began learning Latin six years ago, as I was approaching the age of 60. My baffled friends understood making the effort to learn a language that would facilitate foreign travel—French, Italian, even Hindi. But Latin? No one anywhere speaks it, and it's notoriously difficult. To my friends it seemed a lot of effort for something "useless."



© JUDY LEE HARTNETT

Which is part of why I wanted to learn it. After I stopped working as an editor at Harcourt, I found myself living in the country, surrounded by the silent woods, with too much time on my hands, and no outside sources of structure or discipline. I wanted to embark on a new endeavor, one that would be more than a hobby, that might lead to a new life, even though I didn't know what that life might look like. I wanted something that would require the sort of devotion that I had willingly given to editorial work, something that would be fun and meaningful.

I discovered a new life in Latin. I had missed the conviviality of sales conferences and BEAs, and I found it anew in Bidua Latina (Latin-speaking weekends) and Conventicula Latin (week-long Latin speaking retreats). I began offering Latin classes to teenagers at my local library. And I wrote a book about my romance with Latin.

There are many reasons to learn Latin. Here's my list:

1. Because it's eccentric.
2. Because it uses the same sort of analytical skill that math does, but rather than equations, you end up with poetry.
3. Because it's not simply goal oriented.
4. Because it's a challenge.
5. Because it opens up a completely different time and culture.
6. Because it is gymnastics for the mind.
7. Because it is both elegantly compact and wildly errant.
8. Because the only knowledge that is useless is knowledge you lack.
9. Because you can understand all the magic spells in Harry Potter.
10. Because *de gustibus non disputandum est*.
11. Because it improves your memory.
12. Because it is the home base of English.

13. Because you can translate all those Latin phrases writers throw into their books and articles.
14. Because it allows you to join a conversation that's been ongoing for thousands of years.
15. Because it inspires love as well as exasperation.
16. Because you can understand medical terminology.
17. Because learning to parse verbs and nouns helps you parse other questions.
18. Because it is a gateway into many other modern languages.
19. Because it improves speaking and writing skills.
20. Because it is constantly amazing.

21. Because you can read some great literature in the original language.
22. Because it builds your vocabulary.
23. Because, like all parents, it is something to be reckoned with.
24. Because it helps you understand Western history and culture.
25. Because you will know the difference between e.g. and i.e.
26. Because orators crib from the great Latin rhetoricians all the time.
27. Because it helps you make connections between disparate concepts.
28. Because it teaches you to order your thoughts in a fundamentally different way.
29. Because communicating with the dead is important.
30. Because it is ubiquitous and immortal.
31. Because you will learn about ancient mythology, gods, and goddesses.
32. Because you can't understand where we are without understanding where we've been.
33. Because you will be able to decipher legal terms.
34. Because you will get to know the original Dead White Men on their own terms.
35. Because you will be able to decipher botanical terms.
36. Because you can use it to create new nomenclature for sexual persuasions.
37. Because you will know which of the credits on John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* are fake, and which are real Latin.
38. Because you can scatter Latin phrases into your conversations.
39. Because your friends will think you are crazy in an interesting way.
40. Because it just might change your life. ■

*Ann Patty, the founder of Poseidon Press, was an executive editor at Crown and Harcourt. Living with a Dead Language: My Romance with Latin (Viking, June) is her first book.*

TO SUBMIT AN ESSAY FOR THE SOAPBOX COLUMN, EMAIL SOAPBOX@PUBLISHERSWEEKLY.COM.