Amo, Amas, Amat...and all that

How to Become a Latin Lover

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Extract

INTRODUCTION

David Beckham did not study Latin at Chingford School in Essex. The subject had long been off the state school curriculum by the time he got there in the late 1980s. Still, when it comes to his body art, the footballer is a dedicated Latinist. Of the nine tattoos on his body, three are in Latin (and two of the others, "Victoria" and "Romeo", are Latin-inspired names).

On his left forearm, he has the tricky little expression, "*Ut Amem et Foveam*" – "That I might love and cherish" – which makes careful and correct use of the subjunctive.

On his right forearm, he has the number of the football shirt he wears – 7 – although he opts for the Roman numeral, VII. Under the VII, Beckham has had his Manchester tattooist, Louis Malloy, retained since the footballer's days at Manchester United, write "*Perfectio in Spiritu*" – "Perfection in Spirit".

When it comes to his body art,
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As I write, another sighting of a Latin celebrity tattoo has been made. On January 25th, 2006, the actress Angelina Jolie was seen passing through Heathrow Airport on the way to the economic summit at Davos, sporting a Latin tattoo on the lower slopes of her pregnant belly: "*Quod me nutrit me destruit*" – "What nourishes me destroys me."

As Miss Jolie is no doubt aware, the Latin on her tummy has echoes resonating back through the ages and through the pens of the greatest writers of all time. That's why she has the quote in Latin, and not in English or Swahili; for the same reason, she had it printed in a Gothic font – to give an impression of ancient wisdom.

The same desire for something old and high-brow means that Jacques Chirac wants to call his new European internet

search-engine (if it comes off) "*Quaero*" – meaning "I seek" in Latin – rather than "*Je cherche*". And that's why Beckham, who has no formal knowledge of the language, turns to Latin for the skin-based words and numbers that he, his wife and several Madrid-based PR girls have to stare at day and, more often, night.

The big reason is the poshness of Latin. Because classics had no practical use, it tended to gain cachet among those who could afford to dedicate their time to fine prose, poetry and history rather than money-making disciplines such as science or engineering. It flourished in Britain's public schools – and today proper teaching of it only really survives there and in grammar schools.

And, though Beckham may not be aware of the history of Latin in the British education system, he will be aware of the inherited baggage of poshness that comes with the language.

He'll have noticed it in the mottos of football clubs (Arsenal's is *Victoria Concordia Crescit* – not "Posh Spice goes by Concorde", but "Victory grows through Togetherness"). He might have noticed the classical influence behind the grouped Ionic columns that frame the pedimented porch of his mock-Queen Anne house, Beckingham Palace in Sawbridgeworth, Hertfordshire. He may have seen Latin, too, in dates on war memorials and in epitaphs on tombstones, and carved as inscriptions on the facades of ancient houses. Wherever

Beckham has seen Latin, its setting will have been grand, or attached to the portentous things in life: birth, death, scholarship boards. The setting will also have tended to be an old one, or one that wants to conjure up connotations of oldness.

The knowledge that Latin has survived in written, if not in spoken, form for 2,500 years gives "*Ut ameam et foveam*" an elemental force that just isn't there in "That I might love and cherish". And this is the accumulated power of the language. Beckham may not be able to read Latin, but he will recognise it when he hears it in everyday speech: RIP (*requiescat in pace);* i.e (*id est,* "that is"); per se (a favourite with footballers – "I'm not moving to Real Madrid for the money per se") and so on.

All of these terms are mental triggers, little tics – dotted through the English language and cropping up in solid form all over England – which give Latin what the Manchester United marketing director would call tremendous branding potential.

And so to the point of this book: to make the jump from a Manchester tattooist's knowledge of Latin to a level where you can understand most of those inscriptions on tombstones, and get real pleasure from reading bits of Horace and Catullus, is not difficult.

If you never learned Latin at school – no matter. If you did, all the better. You might think you've forgotten it. You haven't. If you spent even the tiniest part of your teenage years

learning dreary declensions and conjugations, the effort made to do so, and the young age at which you did it, means that a ghost of that knowledge is still there, tattooed to the back of your brain. Somewhere in your mind there still beat the old rhythms – *amo, amas, amat*; ablative absolutes; the future perfect; subjunctives.

As you go down the list, and the rules behind each idiom get a little more complicated, they may grow a little more faded, but all those rules need is a little memory boost, and they come flooding back. It will only take a quick trawl through this friendly Latin primer, with its reminders of a few of those declensions and conjugations, to bring the ghost to life. The joy that a little learning of Latin brings is immense.

Alexander Pope was quite wrong, by the way, when he said, "A little learning is a dangerous thing, drink deep or taste not the Pierian spring."

His miscalculation is particularly disappointing in somebody who certainly knew his classics, and would have known that Pieria was the place where, according to Hesiod, the Nine Muses were born – Clio, in charge of history; Urania, astronomy; Calliope, epic poetry; Melpomene, tragedies; Euterpe, harmony; Erato, lyric and love poetry; Terpsichore, dancing; Thalia, comedy; and Polyhymnia, music. All of these Muses are delightful subjects, of which a little knowledge can bring vast pleasure.

Okay, I do have to admit the Muses were Greek, like an awful lot of things absorbed by the Romans: tragedy, comedy, architecture; so many things in fact that Quintilian said with some relief, "*Satura quidem tota nostra est*" – "At least satire is completely ours."

But leave the Greek influences on Rome up to me. Wherever they are essential to our understanding, I will tie them in.

Satire: Peter Cook owed it all to Quintilian and the Romans

As for the power and beauty of Latin, this is perhaps best caught in the story of an English botanist on holiday in Rome a few springs ago. On a tour of the Colosseum (*colosseus, -a, -um* – colossal), the botanist saw a flower he'd never seen in Rome before. Puzzled, he started to look closely at the other flowers growing out of the flagstones of the old arena (from *harena, -ae, f.* – sand; i.e. the sand that was sprinkled in front

of the *auditorium, -i, n.* – "a place of audience") and the cracks in the stone seats of the terraces. The flowers weren't native to Rome, or even to Italy. The bemused botanist left the Colosseum to go and look at the patches of grass nearby – under the Arch of Titus, over the Capitoline Hill, and in the stadium (*stadium, -i, n.* – a running track). He couldn't find a trace of these exotic flowers outside the arena at all.

When he took the flowers back to his Cambridge laboratory, he found that they had come from precise, verifiable places: Libya and Tunisia mostly. The only feasible explanation he could come up with was that the flowers had grown from seeds that had lodged in the coats of lions brought from Africa to eat Roman prisoners in the Colosseum 2000 years ago. The seeds must have fallen off as the lions got stuck into some serious fighting with their Christian victims.

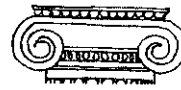
This story is a neat analogy for the evolution of Latin – an ancient language that travelled across the world, had seemingly died and yet still blossoms today in the oddest of places. Never mind the fact that most of the people who now come across the flowers of Latin haven't the faintest idea that those flowers have their roots in that language.

Architecture, Roman numerals, satire, comedy, the right use of particular words... Once you can link up the modern incarnation with its Latin root, the rewards are thrilling.

In his Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Line of Beauty*, Alan

Hollinghurst described those people who know all the big turning points in history as being able to look back at the world as an enfilade of rooms: Greece gives way to Rome... Rome to the Byzantine Empire... the Renaissance... the British Empire... America... and so on.

Knowing a bit of Latin is an invitation to the biggest room in the building, with a view down the corridor to all the succeeding ages. And you can get your hands on that invitation at any age. Alfred the Great, who knew how crucial it was to learn Latin to become a civilised man, took it up in his 30s.



PROSECCO AND PISTACHIO – OR HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

My favourite guidebook is called *Venice for Pleasure* by J.G. Links. That is exactly what it does – shows you all the pleasure of Venice without any of the "Oh God, I ought to go to the Accademia at some stage and hoist in four million Tintorettos; but, Christ, I'd prefer a pistachio ice cream and a glass of prosecco."

J.G. Links's plan was not to show you the ice creams and proseccos (*siccus, -a, -um, adj.* – dry). He said you could find a café yourself; there are plenty of perfectly good ones all over Venice. The same went for the four million Tintorettos: you could get a high-brow *Blue Guide* yourself, full of dates and architectural glossaries. His plan instead was to take you for a lovely walk around the highlights and obscure golden corners of Venice, leaving you to do all the Tintorettos if and when you felt mentally strong enough.

Well, that's sort of the plan in this book. It would be vain to say that reading it will be as pleasant as walking round St Mark's Square after a pistachio ice cream and three glasses of prosecco. Lovely as Latin is, learning it is not all pleasure. As Molesworth, the heroically lazy schoolboy hero of Geoffrey Willans and Ronald Searle's 1950s book, says, "Actually, it is quite easy to be topp (sic) in lat. you just have to work."

Still, the point of this book is to make learning Latin as pleasurable as possible, allowing you to gently pick up (cf. split infinitives, p.125) the rudiments without feeling like an eleven-year-old faced with a long summer evening full of conjugations and declensions to memorise all over again.

All that daunting stuff is here: principal parts, locatives, ablative absolutes. And you *can* sit down and learn it all on long summer evenings if you want. But I've tried to make this a book you can read straight through, with the conjugations and declensions etc (*et cetera* – and the rest) sectioned off in boxes to be learned as you come across them, or later, or not at all.

Although I've used all those nightmareish expressions like conditional clauses and subjunctives, I've also called them things like "woulda/shoulda/coulda" words. Call it dumbing down if you like. If you think you're clever, just convert these patronising expressions back into conditional clauses and subjunctives or whatever. If you're happy being

dumb, stick to the easy expressions.

I've also included some little chunks on Roman architecture and literature, but they really are little. There simply wasn't room here to do justice to Roman roads, underfloor heating and their million other contributions to modern civilisation.

Throughout the book, I have dropped in bits of vocabulary, marked **VOCAB.** In a slightly irritating way, to drum things in, I've also put in brackets the Latin derivation (*derivo, -are* – I derive) of certain words and explained Latin idioms that have crept into the language unexplained, i.e., when I write "i.e." I'll put (*id est* – that is) after it, when I use it for the first time.

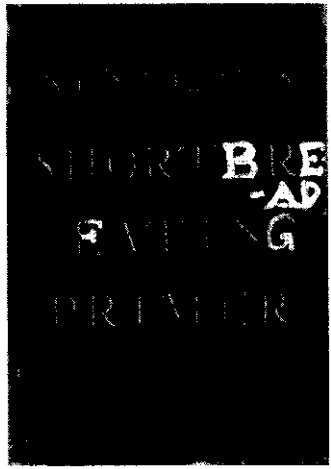
But you don't have to work that hard. This book doesn't have all the declensions and conjugations that you'll ever need; for that you can go to the Latin equivalent of the Blue Guide, *Kennedy's Latin Primer.*

Eating Shortbread on the Banks of Lake Geneva

My father likes to tell the story of the great fortunes made by the writers of Latin and Greek grammar books. There may never have been that many people doing Latin or Greek at any one particular time but every one of them needed a Lewis and Short dictionary and a Kennedy's *Shorter Latin Primer.* The

Primer was the *vademecum* (literally "go-with-me" – a crucial book you take everywhere with you) of the Latin-learning boy. And it was normally boys; it's still the case that more boys than girls tend to learn Latin and at an earlier age.

With its distinctive psychedelic, bleached-blue cover picture of the Colosseum and its ancient-looking font – as if a Roman sculptor had just finished carving it into a tablet – the *Primer* was a popular target for graffiti. With a few deft Tipp-Ex strokes, it was quickly transformed by a million schoolboys into Kennedy's *Shortbread Eating Primer.* Boys bought multiple copies because primers got so heavily mutilated and were often stolen because they were so vital.



The book of books, written by the Shrewsbury headmaster, Benjamin Hall Kennedy, in 1875, revised by Sir James Mountford, Liverpool University's Professor of Latin, in 1930, and customised by me, aged ten

Anyway, so my father's story goes, the money made by the schoolmasters every year out of a fresh generation of eight-year-olds, and a staler generation of nine-year-old graffiti artists who had to replace their copies, was so vast that the masters decamped en masse to live in tax exile in vast, deep-eaved chalets by Lake Geneva. If you took a walk by a Swiss lake in the 1930s – the peak time for the writing of Latin grammar books – you could hardly fail to bump into knots of bespectacled millionaires swapping gags about ablative absolutes and rogue gerundives. Here, footling around in a rowing boat in the shallows of Lake Geneva, was Benjamin Hall Kennedy, the original writer of the *Primer*, in deep conversation over cognate accusatives with the man who revised it in 1930, Sir James Mountford. There was Liddell, deep in conversation over a gluhwein with Scott about the correct Greek word for the most terrible of Athenian punishments – "to stuff a radish up the fundament" (*raphanidosis*, by the way).

Even if my father's story exaggerates the takings for classics grammar books, it does uphold one basic truth: that those books have been in print for 70 years or more, a lot longer than plenty of books about living languages.

In 2004, Kennedy's *Primer* entered its 78th impression, and that was just of Sir James Mountford's 1962 edition. The original B.H. Kennedy edition went through dozens of further impressions. And the reason why they went through so many

is that everything is there: every conjugation, declension, locative and correlative pronoun. There was no need for a new book.

So, as J.G. Links says in his guidebook, by all means keep a copy of the dry masterpieces to hand – in his case, the *Blue Guide*; in our case, the *Primer*.

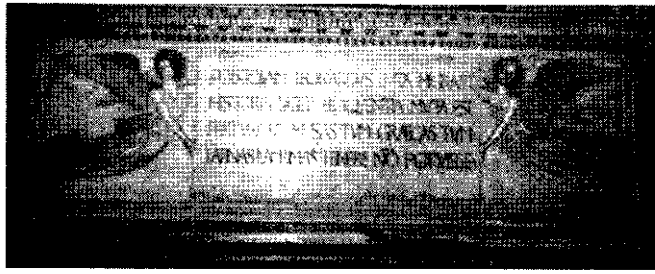
The idea here is rather to give you a pleasurable breeze through the main principles of Latin without bringing on the blood, sweat and tears. Take in what follows and you should be able to negotiate all Latin sentences. This book has the crucial declensions and conjugations you need to know to build a skeleton of Latin knowledge on which Kennedy can fit the flesh.

The two books should complement each other and, if they do and popular success follows and little boys find it within their hearts to mutilate this book, I hope there's still space besides the shores of Lake Geneva to squeeze in another chalet.

In brief, if you already know the bare bones of Latin, by the time you've finished this book your dormant knowledge (*dormio, dormire* – I sleep) will have woken up.

And, if you have no knowledge, dormant or otherwise, you'll have the basics, which should mean you'll at least be able to translate this, the simple Latin – but all the more moving for that – of Leonardo Bruni's epitaph in the church of Santa Croce in Florence. (Bruni, by the way, was an eminent

Florentine humanist and classicist (1369-1444), best known for his Latin history of Florence, *Historiarum Florentinarum Libri XII*).



The inscription on Bruni's tomb in Santa Croce, Florence

Postquam Leonardus e vita migravit
Historia luget; eloquentia muta est
Ferturque musas tum Graecas tum
Latinas lacrimas tenere non potuisse.

The translation is given on the last page of this book. Don't cheat by looking now.