

MIZZOU

The magazine of
the Mizzou Alumni Association

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Around the Columns

Peden translates book into national prize

Surrounding the daybed in Margaret “Petch” Sayers Peden’s upstairs office are chunky Spanish-English dictionaries, stacks of manuscript drafts, nude paintings, Our Lady of Guadalupe artwork and lists of slang words used by drug addicts.

She’s in the middle of translating Chilean author Isabel Allende’s latest Spanish-language novel, which features a character who’s dependent on heroin, vodka and assorted pills. To accurately portray these scenes in English, Peden, BA ’48, MA ’63, PhD ’66, of Columbia must research the drug culture.



Margaret “Petch” Peden gets blissfully — and sometimes frustratingly — lost in her *Translations*. She won the 2010 Lewis Galantière Translation Prize for *Celestina*. Photo by Rob Hill

“Translating is a strange profession and a wonderful one,” says Peden, professor emerita of Spanish, who has converted 65 books from Spanish to English.

Her assignments introduce her to various professions, cultures, time periods and geographies. For her translation of Fernando de Rojas’ *Celestina*, she immersed herself in literature about 15th-century Spain. It took her a year to complete the book, originally written in 1499, about a procuress who restores women’s virginity. In October 2010, Peden’s *Celestina* won the 2010 Lewis Galantière Translation Prize, which the American Translators Association awards every other year to a book-length literary translation.

Although *Celestina* is considered the second most important book in Spanish literary history

behind Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Peden discovered that few people were familiar with the book and its morally corrupt protagonist.

"When I got the award, I was so pleased because it meant at least two or three people had looked at the book," she says with a laugh. "It's comic, deep, disturbing. It's a fine book, but no one knows it in English."

Peden chose to keep her translation as close as possible to the original Spanish version. Although some books, including a British version of *Celestina*, have been translated using contemporary language, she prefers to preserve the writer's voice and use real names for real places.

"Some translators change Calle Nueve to Ninth Street," she explains. "They send me into hysterics with that. One of my editors also wanted to change plaza to square, even though the story took place in Cuba. They don't have squares in Cuba; it doesn't make any sense."

However, Peden says she's careful not to pay too much attention to individual words; her translations come not from the words themselves but from what lies beneath them. That's why translating the beginning of a book is the most difficult.




"You can't hear the voices yet," she says. "I've done 17 books by Isabel [Allende], so I know her vocabulary. With *Celestina*, I didn't know, at first, how the people would sound."

And she couldn't consult with the author, which she does when possible. While translating one of Carlos Fuentes' novels, for example, she puzzled over why a woman was referring to her husband, who had just popped his pants' button, as "Pilon." She assumed it was a phallic reference, but Fuentes explained that it was a nod to the *Popeye* comic strip character Wimpy, who was called Pilon in Mexico. "If Carlos had not been alive, I never would have figured that one out," she says.

Peden, who grew up in West Plains, Mo., returned to Mizzou in the 1960s to earn a master's degree and says she "nearly fainted" due to the challenges. She could read, translate and write in Spanish, but she had never spoken a word of the language nor visited a Spanish-speaking country. By 1966, she was teaching Spanish at MU, and in 1968 she translated her first book, *The Norther* by Emilio Carballido.

Although she's nationally recognized for bringing Spanish stories to life in English, Peden sticks to mysteries in English when reading for pleasure. "I can't just read anything; my brain gets pretty tired," she says. "Mysteries, though, usually work out just fine in the end."

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Published by MIZZOU magazine, 109 Reynolds Alumni Center, Columbia, MO 65211 | Phone: 573-882-5916
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Last updated: Feb. 15, 2013