



THE BABEL MESSAGE

In a celebration of linguistic diversity, author Keith Kahn-Harris used the lockdown to investigate the warning messages found inside Kinder Surprise eggs.

Words by Keith Kahn-Harris. Photo by David Reeve.

When I was younger and imagined what my life would look like in the weeks leading up to my 50th birthday, I didn't envisage celebrating the publication of a book I'd written on the warning messages inside Kinder Surprise eggs. But then, I also didn't imagine that the final years of my forties would be spent under the shadow of a global pandemic.

Like many others, I responded to the pandemic by searching for new distractions. Work and my daily constitutional around Alexandra Palace were simply not enough. While my wife made use of her sourdough starter, I searched for a more quixotic project. I found it by revisiting a talk I had given in 2017 at the Boring Conference which I later recorded for the BBC Boring Talks podcast series.

My talk celebrated the tiny piece of paper found inside Kinder eggs on which the warning not to give the toy to children under three (as "small parts might be swallowed or inhaled") is translated into 34 languages. I've always loved this Lilliputian linguistic treasury that showcases such rarely seen delights as Georgian and Albanian. In my talk though, I pointed out what wasn't on the sheet and showed off translations of the warning message in tongues as varied as Irish and Biblical Hebrew.

In the spring of 2020, I escaped the confines of my home by reaching out to translators around the world. Soon the translat-

ed warning messages started flooding in - from Afrikaans to Zulu, from Basque to Braille. Each and every one was a miniature delight.

Initially, I had commissioned the translations with no particular aim in mind. But over time I began to see a book in it. My last two books - on denial and on antisemitism - were pretty heavy in tone and subject matter. I wanted to write something joyful and celebratory. And the diversity of human language is indeed something to celebrate.

I guess the biggest surprise was that my agent found a publisher who felt the same way. I wrote *The Babel Message: A Love Letter to Language* during the dark days of the winter lockdown. It will be in the shops soon - delivery problems permitting in these uncertain times. Yet while I hope my book will find readers, to some extent its purpose has already been fulfilled: finding a source of obsession, wonder and hope during one of the bleakest periods of my life. ■

The Babel Message: A Love Letter to Language is published by Icon Books.

