<u>In the Land of Invented Languages: Esperanto Rock Stars, Klingon Poets, Loglan Lovers, and the Mad Dreamers who Tried to Build a Perfect Language</u>. Arika Okrent. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2009. 342pp. $26.00. ISBN 978-0-385-52788-0.

At first glance, Arika Okrent's *In the Land of Invented Languages* (*ILIL*) seems a long overdue gift to conlang (constructed language) enthusiasts and their burgeoning field. Till now, only Umberto Eco's *Search for the Perfect Language* (1995) and Marina Yaguello's *Lunatic Lovers of Language* (1991) have provided anything like detailed surveys, and while Eco ignored what he calls "fictitious languages," Yaguello's treatment is primarily of the earliest examples. Reportedly five years in the making, *ILIL* makes for a chic-looking volume, its jacket offering a "lively, informative, insightful examination of artificial languages" written by a young PhD who herself holds a first-level certification in Klingon. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes difficult to tell whether *ILIL* is a wolf in sheep's clothing or the opposite. Its original subtitle (changed to <u>Adventures in Linguistic Creativity, Madness, and Genius</u> in the 2010 paperback edition), wacky artwork, and endorsement reviews make it clear that *ILIL* is intended to provide a cheeky look at a quirky subject, and in that respect, at least, it fully delivers. Written in the first-person, *ILIL* offers a combination of anecdotes, research, and assessments, loosely arranged and presented as a single line of inquiry. Witty, opinionated, and occasionally vulgar, the book is intended above all to amuse, frequently through mockery, and should be approached with caution by anyone with an earnest regard for its subject matter.

Through twenty-six chapters, *ILIL* considers the phenomenon of deliberate language creation, especially the creation of languages intended to improve upon natural ones. It is a process Okrent entitles "The History of Failure" in Chapter Two, a rubric that also sums up her thesis and orients her treatment of the language inventors themselves. The appendices to *ILIL* list some 500 such languages and their designers, as well as a small number of sample passages and resources. For the most part, however, *ILIL* is dedicated to exploring only six of them, and the emphasis of its treatment is on the humorously tragic. Ranging from John Wilkins (Philosophical Language) through William Bliss (Blissymbolics) to John Brown (Loglan), *ILIL* details the eccentricities, neuroses, and missteps of artificial language's "mad dreamers" over the last 350 years or so, encouraging the reader not only to see them all as failures, but also to wonder whether the failure lay with the language or the inventor. Technical analysis of the languages is secondary; they are assessed primarily in the context of the inventors' own claims and intentions, such as L. L. Zamenhof's desire that Esperanto become a lingua franca of peace, and Suzette Haden Elgin's wish for Láadan to express a distinctly female experience. Interspersed amidst the various biographies are some interesting factoids, including the existence of "native" Esperanto speakers (those taught from infancy by fluent parents), and Winston Churchill's advocacy for Basic English.

Serving as a tour bus of sorts about the land of invented languages is Okrent's own study of Klingon, anecdotes about which begin and end the book. The choice seems calculated, as the innermost chapters reveal she is actually more studied and proficient in Esperanto. Taking care to announce that she is not a follower of the *Star Trek* franchise, Okrent justifies the choice of languages thus:

> …the lessons the Klingon phenomenon can teach us about how language does and doesn't work (trust me on this), can be fully appreciated only in the context of the long, strange history of language invention, a history that encompasses more than nine hundred languages created over the last nine hundred years, a history of

human ambition, ingenuity, and struggle that, in a way, culminates with Klingon (10).

By the time *ILIL* reaches J.R.R. Tolkien and the artistic conlangs in the final chapter, the emphasis is no longer on failure—Quenya, Klingon, and P@x'áãokxáã were not intended to be spoken in the primary world, and so cannot be considered flops. Instead, the stress switches entirely to weirdness, characterizing Tolkien's linguistic creativity more as an embarrassing obsession than a passion, and, of course, shooting the small handful of Klingon-speaking fish in a barrel. *ILIL* ends with Okrent realizing she has a kind of sympathy for conlangers, but it sounds apologetic, and more than a little extorted by the expertise she witnesses at a language creation conference in 2007. "I'm not a language creation artist," she writes. "But I *can* still be a language creation art appreciator, which itself takes a certain amount of work and background knowledge" (290).

Though the casual attitude of *ILIL* provides much insurance against serious criticism, there are still areas where the book may be considered flawed. At the forefront is its haphazard treatment of language itself, something owed primarily to Okrent's conflicted style of presentation. Though clearly an expert on language—or aspects of it—the author portrays herself as an outsider looking in, effectively trying to elevate a journalistic candor and immunity upon a scholar's authority and insight. The result is something more cannibalistic than informative, especially with its constant emphasis on the social awkwardness of the people involved. *ILIL* often reads like a book of researched gossip, and therein seems a reflex of Simon Winchester's two best-selling telltales on the Oxford English Dictionary and its compilers, *The Professor and the Madman* (1998) and *The Meaning of Everything* (2003).

In addition to a rather disjointed structure (many chapters appear to have been written to stand alone as articles), *ILIL*'s focus seems capricious. Treatment of its material flits among technical, historical, and theoretical elements, and strewn throughout are Okrent's opinionated soliloquies. Just when *ILIL* is poised to establish a truly interesting context for its analyses, such as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in Chapter 18, it reverts to cheek—as if, so to speak, to save face. The book doesn't firmly distinguish among constructed languages, reconstructed languages, auxiliary languages, revived languages, private languages, universal languages, and fictional languages (not to mention the difference between fictive and discursive uses of language). When Chapter 11 juxtaposes a consideration of Esperanto's failure with Modern Hebrew's success, the comparison seems one of apples and oranges, just as it is when the revival of Hebrew is compared with efforts to promote Irish, Hawaiian, and Maori (languages which, unlike Hebrew, have never ceased to be spoken in the vernacular). The author would have found a better denominator in Revived Cornish, whose movement is replete with the sort of schismatic infighting *ILIL* most enjoys. Also ignored are mythical and spiritual claims for language, some of which conflict with *ILIL*'s chronology. The poem *Alvíssmál* in the Old Norse–Icelandic *Edda* comes to mind, which is at least twelve hundred years old, and appears to present words from the languages of elves, dwarfs, the various races of gods, and men. There is also the Enochian language, reportedly revealed by an angel to John Dee and Edward Kelley in 1581 and used for occult purposes since. Are these 'invented' languages? *ILIL* does not mention them. The inventedness of natural languages is also overlooked (consider standardization, neologism, and terminology, as well as the influences of poetic usage and translation). Furthermore, Okrent is mistaken when she claims there are no languages or writing systems in the world that use imagistic symbolism (184); speakers of Naxi, a Tibeto-Berman language, employ such a script in documenting their ancient stories.

Though *ILIL* claims that artistic (including fictional-world) conlangs represent the final phase of the invented language movement, its treatment is a mere postscript to the rest of the book, and includes no theoretical content. Borges's *Ficciones* goes unmentioned, and the information on Tolkien is tired, amateurish, and misleading (the bibliography lists only Humphrey Carpenter's biography). "*The Lord of the Rings* trilogy" is presented as the end-all of Tolkien's linguistic labours, and Okrent alludes only to the languages of the Elves. No attention is given to the massive and longstanding scholarly tradition separating interest in the languages of Middle-earth from the *Star Trek* fandom that upholds Klingon, nor does *ILIL* touch upon any of the reasons why conlangs have become an indispensable feature of secondary worlds. Where every fantasy and sci-fi franchise now comes with its own language(s), this disregard on the part of the author is inexcusable, and simply means the land of invented languages is left waiting for a more dedicated gazetteer.