

## Josep Miquel Sobrer

*Professor of Spanish and Portuguese and  
Acting Chairperson, Department of Spanish and Portuguese*

Josep Miquel Sobrer, a native of Barcelona, known to his wide circle of colleagues, friends, and acquaintances as “Pep,” may be the first (only?) Catalan that some in his Midwestern milieu have ever met. His devotion to his city and region of origin has informed many aspects of a career that has been, nevertheless, anything but provincial.

Pep moved to Indiana in 1982 as an assistant professor from the University of Michigan, having earned his Licenciante degree from the University of Barcelona and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Oregon. He replaced retiring professor Josep Roca-Pons, who had founded the study of Catalan linguistics, literature, and culture in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and had been for decades their sole representative at IU, as well as one of the few in the United States. Catalonia, in northeastern Spain, speaks a language closer to the Occitan of southern France than to Castilian Spanish; its culture has been distinct from the rest of Spain’s virtually since Roman times. And since the country’s democratization after 1975, it has become one of the most vibrant and attractive regions of Europe. Pep’s teaching, scholarship, and service have expanded the place that IU Bloomington occupies on the map of Catalan studies in the United States. He was a founding member, and eventually president, of the North American Catalan Society, and co-edited its learned journal, *Catalan Review*. He wrote the “Catalan Literature” entry in the online *Encyclopedia Britannica*. His frequent invitations to lecture at universities here and abroad have likewise helped to increase IU’s visibility in the field.

Starting out as a medievalist, Pep published two books on early Catalan literature: *L’èpica de la realitat (The Epic of Reality)*, on the fourteenth-century chronicles of Bernat Desclot and Ramon Muntaner, and *La doble soledat d’Ausias March (The Double Solitude of Ausias March)*, on a fifteenth-century Valencian poet. Later he turned to more modern figures, such as the twentieth-century poet J. V. Foix. He has also reached beyond the typical scholarly audience by introducing his native region to readers of English. In 1992, the year that Barcelona hosted the Olympic Games, Pep edited, introduced, and translated selections from contemporary Catalan authors in *Catalonia: A Self-Portrait*. He has translated into English works by some of his favorite authors, including Foix, Pere Calders (short stories), and Mercè Rodoreda (the novel *A Broken Mirror*); these projects have been a counterpart to his many translations of English and American literature into Catalan, by such disparate writers as John Donne, Ian Fleming, H. G. Wells, Sylvia Plath, and Mervyn Peake.

As the only professional translator in the department, Pep has been especially successful in teaching The Craft of Translation. But he was always one of our most popular teachers, no matter what the subject: students uniformly praised his enthusiasm, breadth of knowledge, originality, and sense of humor. In addition to the full Catalan curriculum,

he has taught many graduate and undergraduate courses in Spanish literature, and served twice as director of graduate studies. During Pep's two separate terms as department chair, colleagues were grateful for his positive outlook, sense of fairness, and gift for averting tension with an unexpected sally or a joke.

Pep has enjoyed a parallel career as a creative writer and commentator. He has published, among many other pieces, a collection of prose poems inspired by the Tarot, *El llibre dels oracles* (and its English translation, *The Book of Oracles*), and a book of essays about America for a Catalan readership, *Desfer les Amèriques (Deconstructing the Americas)*. For two years he was a community columnist for the Bloomington *Herald-Times*, sharing with local readers his wry, insider/outsider perspective on current events, the university, and the city. In the same spirit he writes and presents on WFHB's Spanish radio program, *Hola Bloomington*, a regular segment called "Cinco minutos de soledad" ("Five Minutes of Solitude").

Both on his own and through his wife, Francesca ("Fresca"), an actress, director, and drama teacher at Bloomington High School North, Pep has been active in the local musical and theater scene. His short play *Expecting* was staged by the Bloomington Playwrights Project in 2007. He has collaborated with musical groups on works that have been performed locally: he wrote *Las cuerdas del titiritero (The Puppeteer's Strings)*, a libretto based on works by Cervantes, presented at the Waldron by El Fénix de los Ingenios, and he reconstructed lost poetic stanzas for the Baroque opera *La púrpura de la rosa* by Calderón, which was produced not only at the Bloomington Early Music Festival but also in Madrid and Geneva. Pep sang for many years in the choir of the Unitarian Universalist Church, and has been an assiduous student first of the piano and now of the clarinet. In what is sure to be an active and sociable retirement, he will continue to develop his creative gifts of writing and music, and will also take every opportunity to spend time in Catalonia in the company of Fresca and their son, Miró.

~Consuelo López-Morillas