

To Me (Coffee House), A Couple of Ways of Doing Things (a collaboration with Chuck Close), American Book Award winner *Aloud! Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe* (co-editor), and *Crossing State Lines: An American Renga* (co-editor).

Holman is a proponent of poetry-media collaborations: he produced five seasons of "Poetry Spots" for WNYC-TV, winning three Emmys, and his five-part PBS series, *The United States of Poetry*, which won an INPUT (International Public Television) Prize. He was the host of MTV's "Spoken Word Unplugged," appeared on "HBO Def Poetry Jam," and created the first major spoken word record label, Mouth Almighty/Mercury. In preparation for "Language Matters," he spent two months in West Africa filming the West African griot traditions, spending time with Toumani Diabate and Vieux Toure, and the Tuareg and Dogon tribes. He is co-director of the Endangered Language Alliance. After the show premieres on PBS, the plan is for Bob to tour the globe in support of local language activists.

Q & A WITH BOB HOLMAN

As a scholar, poet and leader of the spoken word movement, what inspired you the most to work on this documentary?

Poets have been using language rent-free for thousands of years. Now it's payback time. Poets are the protectors of language.

In the film you say, "words express our deepest wisdom." Why is this statement so relevant today?

One of my mentors was Walter Ong, a Jesuit priest who wrote "Orality and Literacy," He saw oral consciousness not as a precursor to writing, but a separate and equal consciousness. He once asked, "If the saying 'A picture is worth a thousand words' is true, why is it a saying?" As we move to digital consciousness, images seem to have assumed prime importance. But to process them, to understand them and contextualize them, to use them, you need Words. Words, it seems to me, are the sparks of consciousness itself.

Why is *Language Matters* important for people to see right now? What do you hope viewers will walk away with after seeing it?

Darwin said, "What can be more improving to a young naturalist than a journey in a distant country." But let's face it, now all we see are the same bland facade of chain restaurants and convenience stores—it's all the same Wal-Marts. We are being Pringleized. The extraordinary loss of language that we are going through now is the deepest signal we have of our troubled planet— it's an attack on the human soul. I hope our viewers see the loss of languages as akin to the loss of their own identities. One morning you wake up and there's a polar bear in the desert, looking for a glacier.

What was it like working with David Grubin?

David Grubin is a Zen Film Master. Working with a Master is not like learning how to breathe again, but it is like learning how to walk in a new way. Yes, language matters to me -- and thanks to David I now know that film is a language.

What did you learn from working on *Language Matters*?

Unlike all the other global crises—climate threats, species extinction—the Language crisis is one that can be solved simply. Speak your Mother tongue at home, respect your neighbor's culture, support governmental efforts to keep the planet alive and various in all its marvelous cultural diversity. If we all spoke only one language, the world would be flat. Give me the Mountains of Mandarin and the Rivers of Romanian, the Lakes of Laotian and the Deserts of Danish. Let the World speak!



ABOUT DAVID GRUBIN, *Producer and Director*

David Grubin is a director, writer, producer, and cinematographer who has produced over 100 films, ranging across history, art, poetry, and science, winning every award in the field of documentary television, including two Alfred I. Dupont awards, three George Foster Peabody prizes, five Writer's Guild prizes, and ten Emmys.

His biographies for the PBS series *American Experience* – *Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided*; *LBJ*; *Truman*; *TR: The Story of Theodore Roosevelt*; and *FDR* – have set the standard for television biography. His five-part series for PBS – *Healing And The Mind with Bill Moyers* – has won many awards, and the companion book, for which he was executive editor, rose to number one on *The New York Times* Best Sellers list, remaining on the list for 32 weeks. His award-winning independent feature film *Downtown Express* has been screened at festivals in America and abroad. His other films include: *The Buddha*, *The Trials of Robert Oppenheimer*, *The Jewish Americans*, *The Secret Life of the Brain*, *Young Doctor Freud*, *The Mysterious Human Heart*, and *Napoleon*.

Grubin has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, has been a Montgomery Fellow at Dartmouth College, and is the recipient of an honorary doctorate from his alma mater, Hamilton College. A former chairman of the board of The Film Forum, he is currently a member of the executive committee of the Society of American Historians, and sits on the board at Poets House. Grubin has taught documentary film producing in Columbia University's Graduate Film Program, and has lectured on filmmaking across the country.

Q & A WITH DAVID GRUBIN

Why did you decide to make this documentary? What inspired you?

Bob Holman brought me to the story. He's an inspiring guy—although it really didn't take much convincing once I understood that the world's languages were fast disappearing, that we lose a language every 2 weeks— I was ready to go. This was a crisis that people needed to know about. But more, language is at the core of our humanity, and I knew that the documentary would allow us to explore profound and important human territory.

You have a very strong connection to poetry, yet you decided to be a documentary filmmaker. What led you on this path?

At the risk of sounding mystical – writing poems is a calling, and so is making films. I'm called to poems as a reader, but to films as a maker. From the moment I saw my first verité documentary film (it was "Primary"), I felt that this is something I can learn to do. And as soon as I began working in the film world I felt at home, even though I was just pulling cables around and loading film into cameras.

What were some of your challenges and highlights in making *Language Matters*?

*The aesthetic challenge was to make a film about language and keep it visually interesting. Then there was the sheer scope of the project: making *Language Matters* took us around the world and filming in far flung locations is always demanding: flying into the Australian outback to film the last speaker of Armurdak, for example, proved to be quite an*

adventure. Filming with WS Merwin held an entirely different kind of excitement. Merwin is one of our greatest living poets. At 87 years old, he's spent his life thinking about words and what their loss means.

At the end of the film, you show a globe illustrating all of the different languages that are on the verge of extinction. How did you decide on the three you featured and why?

There are thousands of languages in danger. We didn't want to trot from one to another until they blended into one cacophonous noise. Instead, we chose three languages that would be emblematic of different aspects of the crisis: Aboriginal languages, which are fast disappearing; Hawaiian, where the struggle by language activists to preserve it hangs in the balance; and Welsh, which has made a remarkable comeback from the brink of extinction. This way, we could not only explore what is lost when languages die, but what it takes to save them.

What was it like working with Bob Holman?

Going into this film, we shared a love of poetry, and a commitment to the importance of preserving the marvelous variety of the world's languages, but the two of us had different ways of working. Bob is a poet who is brilliant at improvising on his feet. As a producer-director, I had to plan meticulously, draw up a detailed road map, and then be prepared to throw the map away and allow Bob to follow his instincts and his passions. As long as we had that map, Bob could leave the main road, and we could find our way back. We complemented each other well. Bob's got a terrific sense of humor, and people instantly trust him. A producer-director couldn't ask for more.

What are your plans and hopes for Language Matters?

Pretty simple. We want Language Matters to help get the word out, collaborating with communities of endangered language speakers to help tell their story.

For other biographies of participants in the film visit languagemattersfilm.com.

LINKS TO RELEVANT ARTICLES ABOUT ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

New York Times, Sam Roberts, [Listening To \(and Saving\) the World's Languages](#)

Huffington Post, K. David Harrison [Two Traditional Languages Evade Extinction With the Internet](#)

The Atlantic, Rose Evelev, [Saving Languages Through Korean Soap Operas](#)

Los Angeles Times, John M. Glionna, [For Navajo Nation, Candidate Stirs Questions about Saving Dying Language](#)



Credits:

Director/Producer/Writer: David Grubin; Executive Producers: David Grubin and Bob Holman; Executive Producer for PIC: Leanne K. Ferrer; Conceived by: Bob Holman; Editor: Deborah Peretz; Cinematography: James Callanan and Bob Richman; Director of Motion Graphics: Brian Oakes; Associate Producer: Oliver Grubin.

Funders Credits:

Language Matters is a co-production of David Grubin Productions Inc. and Pacific Islanders in Communications. Produced in association with The Endangered Language Alliance. Major funding provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities with additional funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, the National Endowment for the Arts, and philanthropic individuals.

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