El libro de los saludos
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This is an intelligent, informative and witty exploration of the meanings different greetings have around the world. The author, who is an Italian linguist, has done a lot of research into the derivations and cultural meanings of words but she wears her learning lightly in a book that might be ideal for a ten year old, and would certainly be of interest to people of any age. Many parents will find it more fascinating than their children do, but thisis a book a child could grow into, taking different thingsfrom it at different times. What looks like a picture book contains a surprising amount of information on each page, including philosophical digressions and musings from the author. The chapters variously consider greetings that offerrespect, that enquire afterhealth and family, that are designed to show status, affection or subservience (for example 'ciao', which derives from eighteenth century Venetian and means "I'm you slave"). There are sidelines into the niceties of cheek-kissing - how many kisses and which cheek to start with - nose rubbing and its many variations around the world, hand-shaking, fist-bumping, dapping, and - in a nod to Covid - elbow bumping. It's fascinating to learn that "hello", once a way for boatmen to alert others to their presence, was popularised as a greeting to use on the phone by Thomas Edison (Alexander Bell would have preferred "Ahoy") and that the Chinese habitually greet one another by asking "have you eaten?". The deep spiritual significance of "Aloha" is explained as well asthe difficulty of choosing exactly the right angle for bowing in Japan, and how long a bow should last. We learn that the Onge people from Andaman define everything by smell, and therefore greet one another by asking "how is your nose?" We see how handshaking was encouraged by the Quakers and fistbumping by the Obamas. Among many interesting nuggets, it's a revelation that the expression "So long" was popularised by Walt Whitman in Leaves of Grass, and that it may derive from the Arabic greeting "Salaam".

I was impressed by the breadth of the author's sources and how naturally she includes findings from sociologists as well as philosophers and historians. For example she explains the seven different facial expressions identified by Paul Ekman in the 1970s and research by Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfelt into the significance of raising eyebrows - generally viewed as a positive gesture, except in Japan, where it is thought to be vulgar. It might seem ambitious to include sociological research in a picture book, but the author's lively and approachable style make these elements easily understood. She doesn't shy away from controversy, for example when discussing as the evolution of "Ave" to "Hail" and "Heil", "sadly associated with the Nazi era". Her tone is warm and conversational, speaking directly to the reader and including the odd personal observation from her own family, or recommendations, among other things, to read some Shakespeare: " when you get a chance, read his works. They contain all that we are and desire … but they also tell us about our madness, about evil, and our capacity for betrayal."

Olga Capdevila's illustrations are roughly drawn, childlike and delightfully irreverent. To illustrate

the lengthy greetings that are expected in Mali, for example she shows a traffic jam forming as one person enquires after the health of everyone in the other person's family. I loved the picture of a sausage dog quipping "So long." Pictures decoding the different kinds of nose greeting, or variations on dapping are useful, as well as visually appealing.

In the hands of this author and illustrator, what might have been an overly earnest endeavour becomes a really engaging and illuminating foray into the history and cultural expression of human relationships. A brief internet check suggests there's nothing quite like this book for English-speaking children at the moment. There have been books about greetings around the world, but they tended to be worthier and aimed at a younger age group. The recent success of books about unusual wordsin different languages suggests that this would appeal to adults looking for an interesting gift. Some small changes might be necessary, for example the section on elbow-bumping during Covid reads as current procedure. With any luck it will soon be relegated to past behaviour. Equally I'm not sure that Americans use "a military salute" to say hello as often as the author suggests, but these are small queries that would not present a challenge either to the translator or publisher. Following a trend of books about words and language, The Book of Greetings has potential to be really popular in British homes and classrooms. It's a strong candidate for translation.