

THE BOOK REVIEW

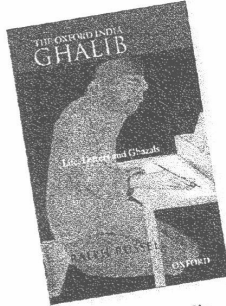
CHILDREN'S BOOKS SPECIAL

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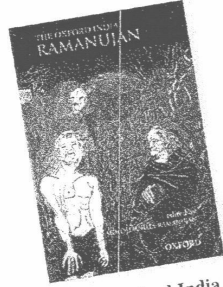
/OLUME XXVII NUMBER 11 NOVEMBER 2003



Announcing the Oxford India Collection



The Oxford India Ghalib
Iqbal and Ghalib
Ralph Russell



The Oxford India Ramanujan
A. K. Ramanujan (1929-1993)
Molly Daniels-Ramanujan (editor)



The Oxford India Premchand
Premchand (1880-1936)
David Rubin, Alok Rai & Christopher R. King



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Books for Children

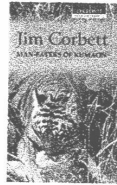
The Jim Corbett Collection



The Jim Corbett Omnibus



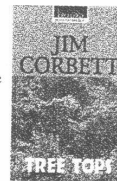
The Second Jim Corbett Omnibus



Man-Eaters of Kumaon



Jungle Lore



Tree Tops

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Primer



Book 1



Book 2



Book 3



Book 4



Book 5



Book 6



Book 7



Book 8

Best Sellers for Children



Sukanta Chaudhuri & Sankha Ghosh, (eds):
The Oxford Tagore Translations:
Selected Writings for Children



Gowri Ramnarayan
Past Forward: Six Artists in
Search of their Childhood (OIP)



Sukanta Chaudhuri (editor):
The Oxford Tagore Translations:
Selected Short Stories (OIP)

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Subscription Rates 2002 (New)	239 Vasant Enclave	Tele+Fax: 95 124 2355500 (from Delhi)
Single Issue: Rs. 40.00	New Delhi 110057	0124-235 5500
Annual Subscription (12 Issues)		Website: www.thebookreviewindia.org
Individual: Rs. 400.00 / \$50.00 / £35.00		email: thebookreview@hotmail.com
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Readers Please Note

The review of *Guerilla* by Manushyaputran carried in The Book Review (October 2003) was translated from Tamil by G. Muthukrishnan, a senior official in the Army Headquarters, New Delhi.

Stolen Childhood in South Asia

Amiya Kumar Bagchi

CHILD LABOUR AND THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION IN SOUTH ASIA:
NEEDS VERSUS RIGHTS?

Edited by Naila Kabeer, Geetha B. Nambissan and Ramya Subrahmanian
Sage Publications, Delhi, 2003, pp. 412, Rs. 365.00

It has come to be accepted that the concept of childhood is socially constructed. How long a person is considered to be a child, in what ways a child can be considered different from an adult, what is supposed to be the responsibility of the parents or other guardians or the surrounding society towards the child—the questions themselves and answers to them are specific to class, community, historical setting and many other factors that have been documented and discussed in the literature. (In many cases children may have a very different view of themselves from adults or interviewers investigating their condition). I have read narratives of Puritan parents in early United States who prayed to God to beg forgiveness for the many sins committed by their daughter who died at the age of five. On the other side, we see in India millions of children who can themselves hardly walk taking care of younger siblings or cousins. We know that in many business families boys were taught to look after the shops and the monetary transactions when they were only ten or eleven years old.

But there are certain aspects of nurture that can damage or empower children all their life, and these are the aspects that dogmatic relativists would find hard to ignore without showing themselves to be morally obtuse. A child's physical and cognitive ability can be severely damaged by malnutrition and by an adverse disease environment. The child has to bear the consequences of such damage through her adult life. It can impair her working and earning ability and prevent her from functioning as a fully empowered member of society.

In case of a nutritionally damaged child, the problem starts in the womb. If the mother is herself badly malnourished, or is a drug addict or an alcoholic or is suffering from an infectious disease such as tuberculosis and AIDS, the child may be born with a low birthweight, or with the symptoms of drug addiction or with an HIV infection, which may develop into AIDS in the fullness of time. If a low-birthweight child does not get adequate nutrition during the first five years of her life or even later, it can impair her physical growth and her cognitive ability, so that even with apparently similar educational facilities the child will perform worse than children without nutritional deprivation. The effects of short-term malnutrition or a debilitating disease from which the child has recovered fully can be made up if the child gets adequate nutrition later, but those of long-term malnutrition or repeated illness in an adverse disease environment cannot be generally made up through later growth spurts. The poor and the disadvantaged sections of population are generally not lucky enough to be offered the opportunity to overcome the effects of early malnutrition or experience of infectious diseases later in life. If a child grows up to be an illiterate and sickly mother, she will pass on her disabilities to her child in turn, unless the state and society can decisively intervene to improve the nutritional and educational environment of the mother and the child. Thus the child's rights and the mother's rights to whatever renders them into beings with the capacity to realize their potential as free members of *homo sapiens* are inextricably linked with each other.

The above sketch would at once indicate that the need or the right of the child to education and the right of the mother to a decent living are intimately related. Policy-makers routinely formulate their policies without taking explicit account of this link. Even in this book, which contains several thoughtful articles, the significance of this link is not always grasped by the authors. Most of the authors talk of the parents' responsibility to see that the child does not grow up illiterate. The fact of the matter is that in many poor families, a significant proportion of the fathers abandon their wives and children, and legally or illegally cohabit with other women, whom

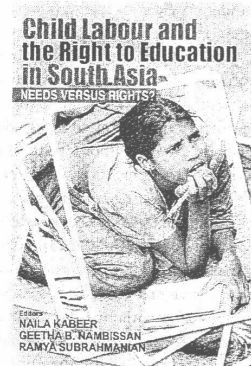
they might abandon in turn. Even in the cases of men in better circumstances, the mothers are rarely allowed to have a major voice in the upbringing of their children. But in case of accidents or mishaps, it is the mothers who are expected to bear the principal burden of adjustment. Thus in case of fixing guilt or responsibility, in many cases, the word 'parents' could have been substituted by the word 'fathers' or other adult males acting as the head of the families concerned.

Poverty or social exclusion in South Asia not only damns a

majority of children of poor families to scant education or no education at all; it also condemns them to a coerced acceptance in their adulthood of their socially constructed status as second-class citizens. If children are sent out to earn a pittance to support themselves or their families, it is because in most cases the parents do not see an alternative that they can afford; in many cases it is also because the families have never seen anybody in a situation similar to theirs improve their condition through education; children may not be sent to school because there are no schools to send them to, or because nominally existing schools have absentee teachers or teachers who habitually neglect or insult children from poor families.

Gita Nambissan in her contribution vividly brings out how an Adivasi or Dalit child is often deprived of access to schooling even when the state is supposed to provide a school for them. She cites a case narrated by P. Sainath in his justly famous book on official treatment of droughts in India, in a typical Adivasi-inhabited area of Jharkhand: 'In Adro, deep in the hilly areas of Boarjor block, the schoolmaster ... has not shown up for two years. It takes a fourteen-kilometre walk across awkward terrain to reach the school, now being used to stock *tendu* leaves and corn.... Malto (*the headmaster*) left two years ago taking the attendance register with him (*in order to mark attendance at his house and collect his monthly salary*). When angry villagers ... went to scold him, Malto had cases of attempted murder, assault and battery filed against them'. Similar stories could be narrated about many other blocks of India.

There is an apparent conflict in this book between the perspective of those who regard the right of the child to education as a non-negotiable issue and those who regard it as a need which can be traded off with other needs, according to the context or circumstances of the children and the families they come from. But such a conflict is illusory in a situation in which the parents, or rather the mothers, with the best will in the world cannot send their children to school, because there are no schools within a distance that can be negotiated by the children, or because, even if there are schools, there are no teachers or only a teacher responsible for all the grades so that the students get no lessons, or because the teachers are absentees or because the students are so badly treated that they simply cannot be induced to go to school or because the mothers are too poor to spare the labour of the child either at home or outside where the child earns a pittance as a labourer but the pittance is an essential addition for keeping the child or the family from starvation. All of these causes operate, jointly or severally, in the context of disadvantaged communities or locations all over South Asia. In many cases, parents (read mothers) on their own are unable to overcome these obstacles. Making primary education compulsory and putting the burden of compliance entirely on the parents are only likely to increase the opportunity for oppression of poor people in regions that are socially and politically dominated by landlords and upper castes. Neera Burra in her contribution has vividly brought out the myriad bonds that bind the formally free citizens who may be Dalits, Adivasis or just unable to cross the poverty barrier. If the state only spends money to provide schools, these obstacles may not be overcome for reasons already given. But under the current neo-liberal policies, the central government has created a situa-



tion under which most state governments are unable even to spend enough money to create a minimum infrastructure of primary schools with a sufficient number of teachers. Most state governments are now dependent on aid agencies to fund such an infrastructure.

Some of the dilemmas for policy-makers are starkly brought out by Susan Bissell in her study of Bangladeshi child garment workers who lost their jobs in the wake of the threat of the passing of a Bill by the US Congress in 1993 banning the import of goods produced with child labour. The blatant protectionism and hypocrisy of the proposers of the Bill are evident from the fact that the preamble to the Bill cited the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CORC) which the US government itself had not signed (the only other member of the United Nations that had not signed the CORC was Somalia because it did not have a recognized government). But the threat had its effect and thousands of very poor children were thrown on the street without adequate provision for their subsistence and education. What is the moral standing of a threat that worsens the condition of the children in the name of improving their lot? Certainly, the governments of Bangladesh, India, Indonesia or the Philippines should take adequate measures to see that all children go to school and have adequate nutrition. But who is to police the observance of these policies? The people of those countries or governments of developed market economies and international organizations which have worked assiduously to ensure that the capacity of the developing country governments to spend money on the scale required is destroyed, and the kind of social change that might bring to power governments that can take on the task of such capacity-building is blocked by using every device, including arms and deliberate subversion. Kaushik Basu in his paper justly argues against the imposition of labour standards by external agency and makes a sensible proposal that developing countries can get together to monitor the progress of labour standards that would lead ultimately to the disappearance of child labour through the increase in national incomes and the evolution of appropriate social norms. But apart from the fact that such a proposal might sound utopian in the current state of the world in which the US government has declared that it won't be bound by any UN mandate or international law that it perceives to be against US interests, Basu's proposal to make the WTO a joint supervisor (along with the ILO) of the observance of the compact among the developing countries is akin to bringing in the burglar to oversee the division of food in a house that has been systematically plundered by him.

The volume contains several other excellent papers that throw light on the condition of the South Asian child as learner, bread-winner, baby-minder or household drudge. R. Govinda and Dhir Jhingran in their papers summarize some of the major official measures in the field of literacy and primary education and show how excellent laws or policy initiatives have been mangled because of deliberate feet-dragging at the stage of implementation or because of the dominance of social forces that official policy could not or would not tackle. Mohammad Talib gives a sensitive account of class bias in the access to education and in the methods of teaching; he brings out again how upper-class or upper-caste biases in the very way of speaking can subject not only the child but the community she comes from to such indignity that going to school becomes yet another experience of social humiliation. Rukmini Banerji, Shobhita Rajagopal, Shanta Sinha and Cini-Asha have written competent analyses of the intervention of four highly motivated NGOs in the states of Maharashtra, Rajasthan and West Bengal respectively that have worked to make up the deficiencies of government action and ensure that the children under their care get at least the rudiments of education. The work of BRAC in the area of child education in Bangladesh is the subject of a similar paper by A. Mushtaque R. Choudhury.

While, in a situation of extensive government failure owing to lack of will or lack of funds, such NGO initiatives cannot but be welcomed, it is also necessary to point out the dangers of dependence on external aid or on private funds directed towards bringing up children with undemocratic value systems. In Bangladesh, funds provided by Saudi Arabia and even the USA have been used to run schools that inculcate sectarian religious values in the name of Islam; in India, the VHP, RSS and BJP are running thou-

sands of schools which try to indoctrinate the children in a very sectarian and violent form of Hinduism. Now, of course, many of these schools in India also manage to get central government funds and funds from NDA-ruled states under one scheme or another. The central government is also trying to enshrine this narrow sectarian view in all its official organs and educational projects.

In her paper, Naila Kabeer gives an overview of the many explanations of child labour and educational failure associated with it. Altogether this is a very welcome addition to the literature on elementary education and child labour.

If I might voice one criticism of the scope of discussion in this useful volume, I would say that there should have been more focus on the international economic and political constraints on the attainment of universal primary education and literacy in poor countries; conversely, I would also have liked greater awareness of the reasons for success of some quite poor countries in attaining universal or near-universal literacy. How did Vietnam or for that matter, Cuba, with lower per capita incomes and in a much more beleaguered position than India or Pakistan in 1980 attain their very high levels of literacy? One short answer might be 'their communist ideology'. But what did they actually do? Or are most researchers into the issues reluctant to ask such questions?

Finally, the current situation of desperate poverty, increasing joblessness and steeply rising inequality has as its background the Social Darwinism and the philosophy of devil-take-the-hindmost that determines the general structure of economic and social policies. That philosophy puts man against man, man against woman and tiny tots against adults as foot soldiers in the undeclared war that is even more deadly than the US war against Afghanistan. Childhood is not only being stolen from the children of the poor but also from those of affluent families who are told from the age of three to compete or perish. I wish that more of the sound of devastation caused by that rampaging monster had reverberated in this book. But that is perhaps asking for too much. ■

Amiya Kumar Bagchi is at the Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata.

Books-In-Brief	Books-In-Brief
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COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

Edited by R. Govinda and Rashmi Diwan
Sage Publications, Delhi, 2003, pp. 252, Rs. 295.00

This book is the outcome of a national seminar conducted last year by the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) on the same theme. The papers by academics and activists working on the field engage with the problematic nature of the terms 'community', 'participation' as well as 'empowerment', and highlight the complexities of the present debates, especially with regard to government policies and programmes for educational provision. The papers offer insights and critical reviews from specific states such as Rajasthan, Kerala, Bihar, Karnataka, and Madhya Pradesh and also attempt to relate those with specific national development programmes for literacy and watershed management. A wide spectrum of issues ranging from the conflicting interests and heterogeneity within stratified community groups, constraints of decentralization and devolution of power, and the political consequences of notional or even passive participation are raised along with substantially nuanced questions pertaining to quality and equity in education.

Anita Rampal

Putting Children First

Poonam Batra

THE STATE OF CHILDREN IN INDIA: PROMISES TO KEEP

By A.B. Bose

Manohar Publishers, Delhi, 2003, pp. 335, Rs. 700.00

The human condition in large parts of the world and in particular the condition of children suggests that economic development has grossly neglected the human factor. The explanation for this situation lies in the dominant approach to development, where development is understood as a cumulative sequence of diverse economic needs, capital accumulation, increased production and higher consumption. Social factors of development have been relegated to relative unimportance. It is only recently that children have begun to be 'posed' as a substantive concern of development planning. In reality, there continues to exist an exhaustive denial of the rights of the child. In this context, *The State of Children in India* by A.B. Bose, is yet another reminder.

The author attempts to provide an "overview of the current state of India's children, after nearly five decades of independence" and focuses on outcomes as reflected by various key indicators of child development. Different sectors of the development of children, namely, health, education, child-labour, poverty, disadvantaged and destitute children, are brought together. The book begins with a situated description of the context in which children grow and develop. Subsequent chapters address the individual concerns of the child, their survival and health, nutritional status, educational status and achievement, child abuse, as reflected in child labour and sexual abuse. In each of these sectors the book examines the progress made and concludes with the 'unfinished agenda' reflected in the title 'promises to keep'. The descriptive arguments presented are based on secondary data generated from major government statistics such as the Census of India and National Institutes dealing with issues of child development.

Overwhelmed by the magnitude of statistical information, the reader looks for a perspective that may explain the state of India's children. The author's thinking is reflected in the prescriptive statements that appear in the summary of each chapter. The first chapter begins with the assertion that the developmental status of India's children is affected by 'key social and economic factors' such as literacy rates, poverty, backwardness of rural areas, poor public social services, civic amenities and the rapidly increasing population. The author explicitly argues "a huge backlog of social services" in "...states which not only have a large population but...have slower economic growth rates...puts at risk the developmental opportunities for children".

The chapter on 'Struggle for Survival' presents a thorough description of the multiple factors related to child health. Arguing for the child's right to health as 'the mandate', the author asserts that the "control and eradication of major diseases" is a major breakthrough in addressing issues of health. Statistics on infant mortality rates, female foeticide, infanticide, early and late childhood mortality are presented along with a detailed focus on common childhood diseases and large-scale immunization efforts. It is towards the second half of this chapter that the author argues for enhancing infrastructure facilities, budgetary allocations, political commitment and accountability to make a visible impact on children's nutritional status. Statistical details backed by CAG reports make a case for "better governance in the public health sector with emphasis on performance and accountability".

The chapter on children in and out of school also relies heavily on the 1991 Census Data. Here the author takes the opportunity to cover a whole range of issues related to elementary education. These include provision of infrastructure facilities, drinking and toilet facilities, teaching aids, school management and teacher preparation and competency. The chapter is however disappointing on two counts. First, it does not provide an adequate analysis of why access continues to be an issue, why children prefer to remain

Making primary education compulsory and putting the burden of compliance entirely on the parents are only likely to increase the opportunity for oppression of poor people in regions that are socially and politically dominated by landlords and upper castes.

outside than inside the school and how the training and performance of teachers is intimately linked with the more recent target-oriented, externally aided programme packages of primary education. Second, there is no attempt to analyse policy perspective and programmatic directions that have in the most recent years played a key role in the major shifts of school-going population from government to private schools and the continued low achievement levels.

It is indeed disheartening to note that a book that claims to expose 'unfinished agendas', should hold parents and children responsible for high dropout rates. In the author's view, the absence of a supportive home environment, inability of parents to spare the child for schooling and poor parental motivation are some of the factors responsible for high dropout rates. The author also attributes high dropout rates to 'pupil related factors' such as "...absence of learning experience in pre-school, emotional, behavioural and adjustment problems, physical and mental handicap, language deficiencies, inability to do homework and cope with studies due to difficulty in following lessons."

Confining analysis to the Census data of 1991, the book fails to draw upon the more recent researches conducted to study the impact of large-scale intervention programmes in primary education, such as the DPEP. The chapter on education is in this sense dated. The section on non-formal education for example makes no mention of the recent efforts of alternative school centers and the education guarantee scheme under the DPEP. Hence, significant issues such as the proliferation of the para-teacher, the casual abandon of the need for pre-service preparation and the consequential dilution of quality education are left unaddressed.

The next chapter situates child labour in a historical and a contemporary context thereby promising some insights. In the last chapter the author brings into the fold of disadvantaged children, a range of children who become easy victims of adult insensitivity, neglect and abuse. In no uncertain terms is the author reminding us that such neglect and abuse adds to the population of children already living in inhuman conditions of poverty, malnutrition, underachievement in education and illiteracy. The book ends abruptly. A conclusive chapter that would logically attempt to draw interlinkages between the different sectors related to children's development is missing.

Some of the strengths of the books are detailed presentations of statistics across a vast canvas of the subject, which can be used as ready reference material. Relying exclusively on secondary sources of data, the descriptive account is indeed exhaustive, but sparse commentary fails to bring any fresh insight into what are otherwise well-known facts about the state of children in India.

The book falls short of making a bold statement on behalf of India's children. The convergence of the different sectors presented in the book needs to be understood in terms of their intertwining, overlapping and mutual reinforcing from the earliest possible stages of and through the developmental process. The opportunity for children to play and learn must be accompanied by a cluster of basic services, each of them essential to the child, none sufficient by itself to ensure the child's development. A societal alliance for children dedicated to a new ethic of development for them has to be consciously established and nurtured with perseverance. In the case of the child the responsibility of the state is immediate for the name of the child is today—it simply cannot be the 'promise' of a distant future. ■

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Breaking Knowledge Barriers

Karuna Chanana

CONSTRUCTING SCHOOL KNOWLEDGE: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF LEARNING IN AN INDIAN VILLAGE

By Padma M. Sarangapani

Sage publications, Delhi, 2002, pp. 308, Rs. 350.00

This book is among the very few studies of a school in India and as Sarangapani says, the first on the common school. It deals with the issues of the deeply entrenched pre-existing values about what is teaching, what is learning, what is the place of the pupil and the teacher within the school system. It is surprising that even though the reader is familiar with what Sarangapani tells us her presentation makes it refreshingly different. The focus of the book is the child in school. The research questions revolve around the school, the epistemic community, and common school knowledge with the child and her understanding of the school knowledge in the centre. Added onto this perspective is that of the teachers and the community. Using a combination of interpretative frameworks, the author presents the main actors' views, that is, the inner worldview. The insiders' view is seen within a more elaborate worldview shared by teachers and children. This is combined with the external view, that is, the researcher's understanding of the situation. As she puts it, 'both the ethnography and the interpretation are biased towards the child'. The child is the knower and the learner. The child is also an epistemic entity.

This study was undertaken primarily in a government primary school for boys situated in a village on the outskirts of north Delhi. Sarangapani's observations are supported by some fieldwork in a private coeducational school and a government girls' primary school located in the same village. The government school in India is a symbol of all that is wrong with the Indian school system. Although she is dealing with the mundane she takes your attention away from that while dealing with the inner world of the child, her understanding of what is school knowledge, who is a good student, etc. The focus of attention is the process and meaning of schooling. According to her, "What seems routine, mindless, ritual practice reveals itself to be more complexly interconnected and related to the local ethos and socio-cultural situation of the participants—the teachers, the children and the community. It is this fact of the school—that it is 'living' and 'lived in'—that constitutes a challenge to education theory, practice and reform-oriented policies."

The book consists of ten chapters followed by two appendices. Chapter 1 introduces the study, the research framework and the questions. The second chapter introduces the reader to the village, the family and the process of social change which has affected the village. The third chapter focuses on the boys' school in which the study is located. Thereafter it goes on to explore why schooling is important and views education as cultural capital. This is being done through informal discussions with the students. What comes out is that schooling is important for securing steady desk jobs, for becoming *bada admi*, for securing jobs in lieu of traditional employment and to escape the unorganized sector, to achieve socio-economic mobility. In other words school prepares the student for work, it teaches you how to speak and walk (*bol-chal*). The fourth chapter on the end of childhood discusses the ideology of childhood, schooling for growing up and the critical issue of the model students and failures. Although Sarangapani states in the conclusion that she has not dealt with issues of caste and gender she provides very interesting data in this and other chapters on these two dimensions. The next chapter on the teacher and the taught and the nature of teachers' authority looks at the adult-child relationships, namely, those between the student and the teacher and those of the parent-child, patron-protégé. She argues that 'the effort should be to ensure that the teachers' authority does not undermine the mutuality and dialogue which is possible within the classroom, rather than to undermine the teachers' authority per se.'

The next chapter on teaching and learning gives a graphic account of

how the whole process of teaching and learning, pedagogic communication is meant to regulate knowledge and divide knowledge into that which is received in the school and that which is outside of it. In fact, the latter is not even considered knowledge. This chapter also talks of framing, boundary control and teaching devices to justify the division between textbook and non-textbook knowledge and teachers as the authority to legitimize this division. The seventh chapter goes into the importance of memorization vs learning, understanding and intelligence and how memorization occupies prime position within the school system. Sarangapani refers to the traditional literary

sources to show that the importance of memorization is part of the traditional thinking as is the respect for the teacher or the guru. Therefore, some of what is happening in the school system has also to be understood within the context of the local, folk and traditional heritage. Sarangapani has done this in the other chapters as well. Referring to traditional, indigenous pedagogic practitioners she states in the conclusion that the existence of these debates, concerns and articulations suggest a deeper truth about the pedagogical enterprise when it is deliberate and reflective rather than habitual.

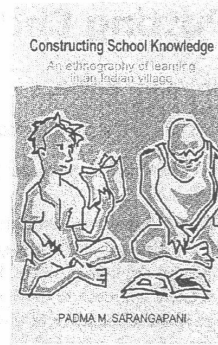
Chapter 8 and 9 are on children's epistemology; the eighth focuses on children as knowers which includes the inference of English medium on epistemic self-identity and the cognitive versus the social. The ninth chapter specifically revolves around school and everyday knowledge with specific reference to the science curriculum. The last chapter is divided into two sections, the first summarizes very skillfully the findings of the study and the second discusses the insights gained in the study and uses them to conceptualize issues relating to reform of school education. The appendices on theoretical framework and on fieldwork are critical and are worth reading.

Her methodology is anthropological and the data are qualitative. As mentioned earlier, the central assumption is that the child is an active participant in the process of learning, gives meaning to the process of schooling within a wider social context consisting of the teachers, parents, the community and the local/folk heritage of values and understanding of what is knowledge, the role of the teachers, etc., etc. She uses a combination of Dewey, Piaget, Mead, Berger and Luckman and Bernstein's framing. It is indeed an eclectic mix but Sarangapani handles them skillfully and crafts them into the main analysis of the book. To convert the everyday reality of the school, which is common, dull and dreary, to arouse the curiosity of the reader and to derive such intense insights and conclusions from ordinary conversations of small children is an admirable task.

Although the subtitle says that it is an ethnography of learning in an Indian village, it brings home very strongly the framework of values within which this learning takes place. The book is written in a refreshingly readable language and style though it falls in the domain of sociology of knowledge. The simple language does not require deconstruction nor does it lack in depth and richness of detail and understanding. However, the boxes in the book were avoidable. The material in the boxes should have been integrated in the running text.

The book makes a valuable contribution at the empirical and theoretical level. The formulation of the problem, the stretch of reasoning, and the sequence of arguments have been presented meticulously. The book is very well researched and fills in an important gap in the study of schools in India. There is little doubt that Sarangapani's graphic account of the school and school knowledge as seen through the eyes of the children offers rich food for thought. The most noteworthy point about the book is that it is a work that breaks the barriers between disciplines, and all those working in the realm of education will find it valuable. ■

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A Multi-disciplinary Approach

Krishna Maitra

CHILDREN WITH CEREBRAL PALSY: A MANUAL FOR THERAPISTS, PARENTS AND COMMUNITY WORKERS

By Archie Hinchcliffe
Vistaar Publications, Delhi, 2003, Rs.450.00

LEARNING DISABILITIES IN INDIA: WILLING THE MIND TO LEARN

By Pratibha Karanth and Joe Rozario
Sage Publications, Delhi, 2003, Rs.250.00

The title of Archie Hinchcliffe's book and its focused approach is reflective of a genuine problem parents and therapists of children with cerebral palsy (CP) face everyday, i.e., how to help their child. Though the book is written mainly for the therapists in developing countries, it deals with basics which would be useful for anybody working with these children. As the author herself is a consultant physiotherapist and trainer with lots of hands-on experience of working, the book is a practical guide supported by basic theoretical underpinnings. The chapterization is done keeping in mind the sequence of what one should know. Each chapter of the book has been sequenced logically with relevant diagrams. I found this approach excellent for parents. In fact, it can be used as a self-learning resource material by them.

Chapter 1 concentrates on theoretical concepts like 'What is cerebral palsy?' 'How does it affect the child?' 'What are the causes?' 'How to diagnose and how can a particular therapy help the child?' This is the only chapter in the whole book without any diagram. Once one is ready with the theoretical background the next obvious step would be to acquaint oneself with the real situation, i.e., how to assess a child.

Chapter 2 is thus on 'Collecting Relevant Information'. According to the author each child with CP is different and the therapist treating the child must be able to find out the underlying causes of his or her inability to function normally before the treatment can be made effective.

This chapter contains 'a step by step' guide to observing and handling the child one is assessing. The observation could be in different situations. So the author has detailed out diagrammatically various postures and the underlying causes. This chapter is unique in a sense that a reader feels as if she is watching a documentary on various postures and movements of children with CP.

After observing the pattern of movement and postures, it is necessary to understand how the child functions and how the child compensates for her incomplete functions. As assessment and treatment can not be separated, the next step needs to go beyond observation, which means actually examining the child in different postural patterns. The information thus collected should be analysed so as to arrive at a practical programme for helping the child use as nearly as possible the normal movement.

Chapter 3 is concerned with the analysis of information. It is divided into three sections. The first and second sections give a brief description of different kinds of CP, whereas the third section is for understanding the underlying causes of the child's problem. The accompanying diagrams and description are well coordinated for a reader's understanding. The feature of different kinds of CP have been properly highlighted. The chapter ends with a table containing the possible problems interfering with a child's motor functions. One can summarize the whole chapter at a glance.

Chapter 4 describes how therapists can prevent permanent contracture and deformities. In spite of using quite a number of medical terms which are rather uncommon for a parent to understand, the author's use of language makes these terms easy and familiar. The chapter closes with a note on surgery which should be encouraged only when other means were not helpful.

Every child with CP is unique. As there are different types of spasticity so are there different types of children even with the same kind of physical problem. Difficulties should not overshadow the child's uniqueness. Hence,

the 'Principles of treatment' in chapter 5 is a welcome addition.

Unless there is a purpose or understanding of the common goal, which is to help a child function as normally as possible, whatever work you do as a parent or family member or as a therapist will be ineffective. Chapter 6 is an attempt in this direction. How the therapist, the family and the child can work as a team for a positive outcome is the focus of the chapter. To work as a team needs a common ground. 'Listening and Understanding' highlights this basic

norm of cooperation/joint venture. With the help of a specific case, the author helps her readers to understand how to arrive at a common solution. Of course, difficult relations are not always uncommon where the family has to go for a new therapist or think about a new strategy to iron out the difference. As the child is the focus of all activities, she/he should be brought into this fold of partnership, keeping in mind the concerned child's specific needs.

Chapter 7 deals with useful equipments needed for helping a child. Various equipment along with their uses have been detailed in this chapter. Excellent use of diagrams and explanation needs special mention.

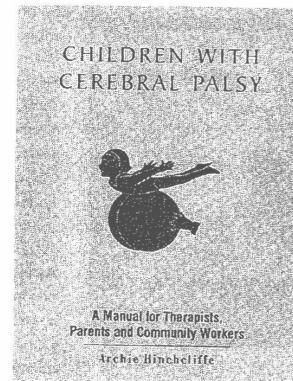
Chapter 8 has been contributed by Marian Browne who is a speech and language therapist. This addition is extremely important as no other chapter deals with these particular problems, i.e., eating and drinking. It is a fact that many children with CP find it extremely difficult to swallow. In fact, mothers feel helpless and confess to therapists about their inability to help the child. To recognize and understand difficulties in eating and drinking, it is important to have a sound understanding of the normal processes involved in these acts and the way these skills are developed in the young infants and adults. Starting with the pre-oral to the stage of swallow, it is important to understand why and how a child with CP faces problems. With the help of a general principle of postures for eating and drinking, the author explains the whole gamut of the management of these complex processes. The chapter is also authenticated by a number of appropriate references.

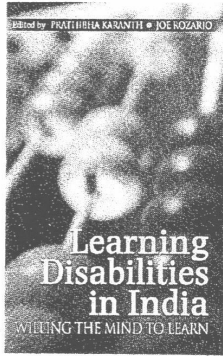
In spite of a genuine attempt to give professional tips about the management of eating and drinking, many of the terms, examples and concepts are foreign to Indian readers. I find that this chapter, though relevant, lacks the fluidity with which other chapters are attempted by Hinchcliffe.

How to make equipment from appropriate paper-based technology is one of the appendices at the end of the book. The other one is on 'choosing appropriate play activities' to engage a child's active involvement in therapy. This particular topic in the form of an appendix is very relevant for any caregiver anywhere.

Every child is unique and needs special care to be able to realize his/her full potential. It is really unfortunate that we are yet to fulfil many of the goals set for our children. In spite of having a separate ministry of Department of Women and Child Development, 'inclusion' is till now a dream for many children with varied degrees of challenges.

Learning disabilities are not even recognized by the Rehabilitation Council of India as a major disabilities. The book thus is a ray of hope for many frustrated parents who are handicapped by the sheer lack of awareness about this disorder among concerned people, particularly the teachers. The book is a compilation of thirteen papers presented during a 2-day seminar on 'Learning Disabilities'. The papers presented included epidemiological studies, psychiatric and psychological aspects, acquisition of reading, early identification, speech language and hearing deficiencies, assessment, remediation and advocacy. Definitions of L.D. are fraught with terminological confusion and operational difficulties. Pratibha Karanth in her introductory





chapter has tried her best to present an all-encompassing view of L.D. Her summary about L.D. covers identification, and various methodologies for its remediation. She lays special emphasis on lifespan approach to L.D. This chapter is quite exhaustive and informative for any reader working with children with L.D. P.A. Suresh and Swapna Sebastian have discussed in detail the epidemiological aspects of L.D. in the western context. They conducted a project in Kerala on this particular aspect. But the conceptual framework is completely situated in western environment, hence its validity in the context of Indian culture should be assessed seriously.

Philip John has focused mainly on accompanying disorders. According to him, academic remediation is not enough. A multidisciplinary approach is required to help children with L.D.

Shobini L. Rao has explained the neuropsychological aspects of L.D. The paper offers insights into the problems of dyscalculia based on some studies done by NIMHANS (2001). Diagnostic texts used were, though, western.

In the next two chapters, educational psychologists Prakash Padakannya and Aruna Sankara Narayanan have dealt with issues such as the Indian

scripts and bilingualism vis-à-vis the acquisition of reading. Both of them concentrate more on western theories on reading acquisition. Padakannya's paper is actually a review paper whereas Aruna Sankara Narayanan has presented cognitive profiles of Indian children learning to read English using the same battery of tests administered on the children in Boston. This approach of comparison of Indian Children with their American counterpart is irrelevant.

Chapters 7 and 8 deal with the issues of identification and assessment. Sita Krishnamurthy describes the early identification of children susceptible to L.D. whereas Joe Rozario, a clinical psychologist, describes the assessment procedures. N. Shivashankar discusses recent findings on the central auditory processing disorders and their implications for the management of children with L.D. The next few chapters are continuation and addition of such sensory processing.

The concluding paper is on advocacy presented by Vinita R. Pandit. She discusses briefly the efforts of a group of dedicated people in Maharashtra for changing the dismal state of public awareness about L.D.

The book does not get over the concepts developed and tested in the West. Most of the chapters are basically a review of whatever researches are going on in the West. Nevertheless, this could be the start of a joint venture by experts from different disciplines to create space for children with L.D. ■

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Existential Dichotomies

Shivani Arora

ADOLESCENCE IN INDIA: AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

By Suman Verma and T.S. Saraswathi
Rawat Publication, 2002, Jaipur, pp. 477, Rs. 795.00

Whether adolescence in India is a myth or reality, a functional fact, an elite construction, or a notion derived from the western world, have been the focal issues which sociologists and developmental psychologists have time and again been grappling with.

In many ways this book addresses these issues—it engages with the complex phenomenon of adolescence in 20th century India, exploring its ramifications across different representations of the society. Crisply written, it will be of utility to the serious student and the lay reader alike. In its quest for a realistic portrayal, it provides a developmental profile of the Indian adolescent at the manifest level and a more serious analysis of the same at a latent level. The authors' métier clearly lies in their dialectical style which convinces the reader of the unique stature and significant issues surrounding the critical stage we know as adolescence. This bibliography is meticulous in its production. Spreading their efforts across thirteen extremely engaging chapters, the text annotates theoretical as well as empirical research on Indian adolescents and also presents a glimpse of the trends shaping adolescence, intricately interwoven with the dynamics of a society in transition.

The authors present a mixed conceptualization of the Indian adolescent by supporting the Meadian view which patents adolescence as a stage of 'storm and stress', on the one hand, but also consciously highlighting literature which optimistically describes it as a stage of challenge and potential on the other. The chapter on socialization entitled 'Some contexts for Socialization' illustrates the impact of issues such as parenting styles, gender bias in the family, maternal employment, family trends, parental attitudes and role of various socializing agencies, namely neighbourhood, peers and media on the emerging social identity of the adolescents while the research addressing their educational and vocational concerns clearly points towards inequality and disparity across class, caste, gender and demographic variables which in turn stigmatizes all aspects of education in India—from accessibility of education to its content. The need for restructuring higher education to suit the requirements of students as preparation for adulthood also emerges as a salient concern in the literature review.

The section on personality and adjustment is quite an eye-opener with studies explicating the influence of home environment and parental perceptions and attitudes on the personality development and coping mechanisms undertaken by adolescents, ranging from psycho-social moratorium to foreclosure. Identity development and self-concept too emerge as concerns of utmost significance.

Equally important and finely categorized is the chapter on physical and

mental well-being which demonstrates that the health scenario of adolescents in India is rather disturbing, plagued largely by anaemia, infections resulting from poor sanitation and lack of awareness and undernourishment. This problem is further aggravated by the gender bias in favour of the male child, leaving the girl child neglected and maltreated.

However, literature regarding the mental health of the adolescents remains limited. Issues such as body image and prevalence of the image disorders in adolescence are missing. The chapter entitled 'Political and Civic participation' is brief and for the most part reflects ideational and theoretical orientation, thereby discounting hard-core empirical studies.

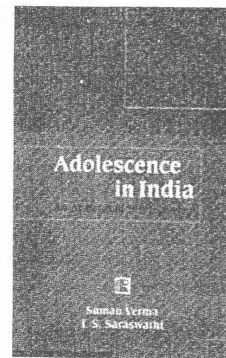
Research compiled in the section on Delinquency and Crime is interesting as it describes the various causal factors with substance abuse dominating the list.

The book contains a separate section on focusing socially deprived and institutionalized adolescents and carefully examines the strained impact of disabilities and impairments on adolescents and their kin, emphasizing the need for facilitative, intervention strategies. Not only does the book provide a comprehensive compilation of research studies in the various facets of adolescent development, but the authors go a step forward by presenting a detailed outline of the different policies and programmes introduced by governmental as well as the non-governmental organizations which include life skills education, awareness about reproductive health issues, critical thinking and empowerment through vocational guidance with a sustained effort to enhance the quality of life.

Holistically speaking, this is a carefully organized and well presented pastiche of information. It has been vastly enriched by the diversity of issues that it has sought to raise. The literature surveyed covers the past three decades with more focus on the last decade of the 20th century (the most recent study compiled dates back to 1999). The population sample of interest for theory and empirical investigation is the Indian adolescent cutting across demographic variables like gender, class and location. The work reviewed includes both published and unpublished material, authored by Indian and western scholars.

The authors' grasp over the subject is clearly thorough and is reflected in the subtlety with which they have emphasized the curative, preventive and promotional aspects associated with the well-being of adolescents. The dialectical approach employed by them allows the reader to clearly visualize the conflict between intergenerational blues on the one hand and self-realization on the other—an existential dichotomy which adolescents eternally live with. ■

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THE CHILD IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

By Vimala Veeraraghavan, Shalini Singh and Kanika Khandelwal
Mosaic Books, Delhi, pp. 280, Rs. 600.00

The complexities of the 'world of childhood' routed through children's experiences, the pleasures and pains which they grow up with, the issues and concerns which occupy their inner psyche, how they interface with social and cultural realities and their adjustment patterns and ways of coping have always drawn the attention of those interested in studying childhood. An attempt in the same direction is visible in *The Child in the New Millennium*. The obvious expectation is that all significant issues which impact on children's lives in the present millennium will find a legitimate space and voice. In effect, this is more or less what the book strives to do. It is basically a compilation of a few independent pieces of research, some reported perspectives of NGOs and voluntary agencies on matters concerning childhood and some status reports on domain specific ground realities which exist.

The theme coverage is extremely vast and diverse with thirty two contributors finding expression and articulation of their work. The authors have made an effort to classify and categorize the contributions into three main areas—perspectives representing childhood, studies contextualising

children's problems and reports of remedial measures and policy formulations.

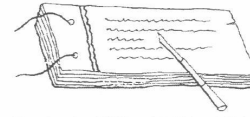
Most of the articles are very brief and either focus on generalized themes like the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Mental Health, Pediatrics AIDS, Drug Abuse, Disability, Exceptionality etc, or are specifically set in sharing the finding and implications of micro-level studies which are locale- and context-specific. The issues to reflect upon are also very many and one wishes that the studies had been used to build up a theoretical understanding of childhood which was not set in a monolithic and universalist paradigm of interpretation. In fact, the individual and cultural variations, diversities and uniqueness which ought to occupy the center-stage in Developmental Psychology could have already gained legitimation from a book like this. The importance of intersectoral convergence and interdisciplinarity in dealing with children's problems and understanding their phenomenology could also have been highlighted.

From the epilogue however it appears that the prime concern of the authors was to evaluate the quality of work being done in the context of the "rights of the child" as envisaged in the U.N. Declaration. The analysis has thus been restricted to spelling out future needs. ■

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Negotiating the Space For Children's Books in India*

Radhika Menon



This is what we have been doing for the last few years — negotiating the space for children's books in an education system that has no space for it and in a market that does not set particularly high standards. Two questions follow: Don't schools use books other than textbooks? And are there no quality books for children? The answer to the first question is, 'No, they don't', and to the second, 'Yes, unfortunately.' A bleak picture, but it is the reality.

These observations are made from first-hand experience interacting with teachers and parents at Goodbooks Bookstore, the only exclusively-for-children bookshop in India, based in Chennai. The magnitude of the problem hits home especially when going through the process of reviewing books for the bookstore, with even established and longstanding publishing houses producing children's books of below average standard.

The good news—and there is good news thankfully—is that the picture is slowly changing. Chennai itself has four major children's publishing initiatives, including two publishing houses, a magazine, and an audio books company, all set up within the last ten years and each trying to get away from the conventional and carving out a niche.

The big established companies that include multinationals seem, however, to have worked out a well-thought-out strategy to tap a market that is seeing a boom in children's products—from branded clothes, shoes, fizzy drinks, chocolates, to computers, multimedia products and stationery. When books become primarily products to be marketed, then packaging and speed of delivery is the focus. So we have more and more of the same thing—the same ways of telling, mediocre writing, irresponsible editing and unimaginative illustrations and design—but now well packaged and produced. Again, the good news is that when there is such demand from publishers for more and more titles, some talented writers and illustrators do surface. Of course, this is not to say marketing does not concern the small independent publishers. Indeed, it is a major concern if we are to survive. But we have to find new ways of tapping the market as the kind of books that small, independent, niche publishers produce don't fall into neat, familiar categories.

Children's books and magazines in India have a long history. The earliest record of written material for children is probably 14th century Urdu poet Amir Khusro's riddles in verse. I am not including here the oral tradition, the stories of the *Panchatantra*, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and so on, which predates Khusro. Since then, every kind of genre has been explored by writers both in Indian languages and later in English. The publishing scene in languages like Bengali, Malayalam and Hindi has been very vibrant. But if we look at the sheer volume of titles produced and the range, the number of books that stand out as constituting exceptional or even very good children's literature is shockingly small. There are a handful of titles in the Indian languages, and fewer still in English. What we have is this huge mass of standardized, unimaginative, largely didactic and often imitative books—this, in spite of the many good writers and illustrators in the different Indian languages. Children's publishers in India, with their limited and narrow understanding of children's literature, failed to tap this talent to create a modern, relevant, responsive Indian literary resource for children.

Though the marginalized status of children's literature is a lament one

hears everywhere, including in the UK and USA, children's books in India seem to belong outside the realm of literature. They are more in the category of textbooks whose role is to inform and hone skills. And in a country where the textbook culture in schools is a continuing legacy of its colonial history, and has a stranglehold on the education system even today, children's books are accepted only as an extension of text books.

To understand the predominance of the textbook culture, we need to look at two things: the perception of childhood and the history of school education. As childhood varies from period to period, place to place, culture to culture, the literature too reflects the changes. The perception of childhood in India and the Indian educational system and pattern have wielded a strong influence on the growth and development of children's publishing in India.

In the Indian closely-knit large joint families there is a continuity in the adult and child worlds. In a typical Indian family, small or large, there is always a head of the family, male in most cases. In the eyes of the head of the family, young and old are merely children of varying ages, and hence the relationship and the behaviour of the senior and other members of the family are being defined by this. A 30 year-old father and his 8 year-old child are treated as an older and younger child by the head of the family, who is a benign autocrat. Children, young and old, are not encouraged to ask questions or make independent decisions. In the past, child marriage and early parenthood pushed children into the adult world as early as when they were barely 12 or 13 years old. It is not surprising then that children imitated the adults. And so, a lot of stories in the early books and magazines for children were role-model based.

In *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, which is Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography, we get a vivid picture of the times. Mohandas and Kasturba were betrothed when they were both 7 years old, and married at 13. "And on the first night, two innocent children all unwittingly hurled themselves into the ocean of life", writes Gandhi. "We were too nervous to face each other and we were certainly too shy. How was I to talk to her and what was I to say?" By his own confession, young Mohandas knew little about sex beyond a few whispered hints he had received from his sister-in-law. "The coaching couldn't carry me far," he wrote, adding that he never knew and never inquired whether or not Kastur had been given any helpful information or instruction.

Paradoxically, however, childhood in India had also been a privileged state though this privilege was most often reserved for the male child. Lullabies were among the most freely available examples of children's literature of the pre-colonial times, songs that expressed the mother's love for her child. Certainly, texts told from the adult point of view. The strong oral traditions further strengthened the proximity of adult and child. These stories were never separated as being for children or for adults, and many of the stories would probably be taboo for children today!

In the words of A.K Ramanujan, the renowned poet, linguist and folklorist, "The stories we heard in Tamil were told by a grandmother, an aunt or a cook....The stories we read in English had names like Cinderella, Snow White, Hansel and Gretel, but grandmother's stories had no names at all. The characters were poor people like a poor Brahmin and his scold of a wife, or two sisters, one kind and one unkind, who were daughters born of a dog that lived under the palace balcony, or clever daughters-in-law who* terrorized even the goddess with their farts or outwitted their cruel but stupid mothers-in-law." Ramanujan describes how children grew up hearing all kinds of stories with adults in a variety of settings—the grandmother telling a story to the child during a meal, the ritual tale connected with a festival or a ceremony, the travelling storyteller who sat in the *tinnaï / angan* or veranda and who wove romantic tales, and the professional bard who was invited to do his harikatha in a public space.

* Paper presented at a seminar organized by Tulika Publishers, Chennai, and Centre for South Asia, University of Wisconsin – Madison, for a group of teachers visiting from the United States, June 2003. The teachers were part of a programme to develop multicultural content for their school syllabii.

Generally, folktales spoke of things that could not be spoken of, often violating ordinary decencies, but which were incidental to the stories. Each teller laced his or her stories with a unique brand of humour and drama and every family had their own favourite storytellers.

This was the world of the pre-colonial child, growing up in a large family, very much part of the adult world, with stories and songs quite clearly blurring the lines between the two worlds. Yet, they also maintained and reinforced class, caste and gender hierarchies.

The education of the pre-colonial child was entrusted to teachers in the villages who were highly respected. The Hindu teachers were the pandits and the Muslim teachers were the Maulvis. Children went to the best teacher, irrespective of the religious denomination they belonged to. Rich children often had private tutors. What children learnt was decided entirely by the teachers.

A lot of the teaching centred around religious texts in the classical languages of Sanskrit, Persian and Urdu along with instruction in their own languages. In the case of the trader and artisan classes, the child learnt the craft or trade through apprenticeship along with basic literacy skills. Until about the middle of the nineteenth century, it appears as though education was tailored to the child's individual needs and was based on a strong teacher-student relationship.

Though I have been speaking of the 'child', what I have been describing is the experience of the upper caste male child. The educational and socializing experience of the girl child and the lower caste child is quite different, aimed at keeping the hierarchical status quo. The upper-caste girl-child was educated informally at home often by family members or sometimes by semi-professional teachers like the wives of the pandits and maulvis. As for the lower-caste child, education was entirely occupation-based.

Again, dipping into Gandhiji's autobiography offers illuminating insights into the different growing experiences of a boy and a girl. Mohandas was given free run of the neighbourhood, usually under the watchful eye of his older sister or the family nurse, Rambha. He would slip away to the nearby temple to climb trees or wander into the woods. He teased his mother, scribbled all over the floor and once removed the statue of a god from the family prayer room so that he could sit there himself. He began attending school in Porbandar when he was six and struggled with alphabets and arithmetic but, as he wrote in his autobiography, "I recollect nothing more of those days than having learned, in company with other boys, to call our teacher all kinds of names."

Kastur, meanwhile, was learning too. She was learning to be a good wife, mother and housekeeper.

By the mid-19th century, the British had introduced a formal system of education. The introduction of English into the complex, hierarchical language system of India has proved to be the most enduring and contentious aspect of this process.

In his *Minute on Education*, Thomas Macaulay writes, "We must do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and millions whom we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect." The motives of the colonial rulers couldn't be clearer. Other features of his grand design succeeded in giving a bureaucratic format to the education system.

Macaulay's spin sent down roots so deep that India is still coping with the problems it created. The textbook culture and a policy of impersonal, centralized examinations was the creation of the British. Each reinforced and legitimized the other while creating a new set of problems, including an alien curriculum, distancing children from local crafts and occupations, with textbook content being drawn from an unknown, unfamiliar Victorian milieu. Naturally, this called for a great deal of memorizing, or else how could children ever pass exams since they understood little of what they were being taught? Sadly, the concept of examinations engendered a very real and deep fear of failure among the young people, a recurring motif in literature and popular culture.

Ironically, colonial education also sowed the seeds for a nationalist education. A large section of people, that included many leaders and thinkers, endorsed western education with its modern, liberal pedagogy, as a means of building a nationalist ideology. A number of nationalist schools sprang

up against a backdrop of growing rebellion against colonial rule. The educationists were also political activists who encouraged them to participate in picketing and non-violent protests. The Civil Disobedience Movement and Non-cooperation Movement saw the active participation of child volunteers. Political organizations called Vanar Sena and Bal Bharat Sabhas were the children's wings of political groups. Boys between 10 and 13, arrested for their political activities, filled the jails. This was the phase of the politicized child, which again made the adult-child divide artificial and complex and had a deep and regressive impact on the writing for children of that period.

The economic and educational policies of the British forced a large number of people to move to cities from villages to continue higher studies and in search of jobs. A combination of nationalist ideals, lack of job opportunities outside the government services, a newly awakened literary spirit particularly in the link languages of English and Hindi and a fast-growing print culture thanks to the simultaneous proliferation of text books, Christian missionary literature and nationalist writings saw many opt for literary careers.

Children's writings, whether in books, magazines (there were a huge number of these) or textbooks usually attracted writers with very limited literary skills who didn't make it in the adult literary field.

The 'twin burdens' of tradition and modernity became a creative resource and enriched the body of Indian writing, both in English and in the other Indian languages. The nation-centredness of the new generation of writers was tempered by a cosmopolitan outlook and experience.

Unfortunately, none of this was reflected in the writing for children. What was churned out was a mass of literature that was didactic, unimaginative and highly moralistic. The mission was to inform, instruct or reform! Children's books and magazines were produced on a mass-scale almost like propaganda material for one agenda or the other. They were either overtly religious or overtly secular, anti-British or pro-British, nationalistic, jingoistic very often, and highly moralizing. There were instances of very good and creative writing particularly in languages like Bengali, Urdu, Marathi, Gujarati and so on, and many well-known writers did write for children. But they remained isolated phases and did not set any creative trend. Even the Gandhian values of ahimsa, nonviolence, simplicity, village-based economy, uplift of the women, workers, untouchables and peasants which, many writers have acknowledged, gave power and energy to their work, did nothing for children's literature. It merely translated into the high moral ground, which persists to this day.

In the nationalist period the debate over writing in the mother-tongue and writing in English paled into insignificance before the more immediate need to forge a national language. Thus the language of the colonizers became the language of the colonized and was a powerful medium of communication during the freedom struggle. Today English is as Indian as any other Indian language and is used creatively, with a lot of energy and dynamism by writers.

Not by children's writers, however. Their writing style, by and large, continues to be archaic or over-simplified and bland, deliberately shorn of any cultural inflections. Worse still the metaphors and references remain western and alien to a large number of children—what sense do meadows and daffodils and tongue sandwiches make to the average Indian child? We still receive manuscripts with characters named Amelia and Amanda (and of course, they are blonde and blue-eyed)—the trendier aspirants use Micky or Twiggy!

How traumatizing it becomes for a child when forced to learn a completely alien language and its images and symbols, is illustrated in this description of the well-known writer R.K. Narayan's experience as a 5 year-old at "a rather severe missionary school in Madras — Tamil and Sanskrit were a badge of inferiority and occasion for jokes in the schools". Narayan's first English lesson went along these lines: "A is an Apple Pie, B bit it, C cut it". Narayan could see what B and C had been up to, but the identity of A eluded him. He had never seen an apple before, not to mention a pie. The teacher who hadn't seen an apple either wondered if it wasn't like idli—the south Indian white rice cake. And so Narayan's education in English began, "with everyone else in the class left free to guess, each according to his

capacity, the quality, shape and details of the civilization portrayed in textbooks."

It is interesting at this point to briefly compare the situation in India with that in England. Children's books in England and India have been around from early fifteenth century onwards. The beginnings in both countries was greatly influenced by strong oral and religious traditions. Legends and myths, stories and songs were common property of both adults and children. The tone of the books that came out at that time was heavily religious and moral. From mid-eighteenth century the histories of the two countries take different paths. While the British empire grew across the globe, England prospered. To quote John Townsend, "A growing number of people had the time, the money, the education and the inclination to be readers of books. Middle-class life was growing more domestic, centred upon the home and the family rather than on the bustle of the street or the great house. Children were coming into their own: ceasing to be dressed like little adults, calling their parents 'Papa' and 'Mamma,' and leading more sheltered and perhaps more innocent lives."

The prosperity also saw the growth of a modern education which in turn freed children's literature from the earlier puritanism. The growing English-speaking population across the world provided the economic base for a flourishing children's literature. So while colonial history left India with an education system that stifled all creativity and energy in children's literature, the historical circumstances of the colonizers created the conditions for the growth of the most vibrant body of children's literature.

The long uninterrupted history of children's literature in England has enriched it in a way that it is difficult to find parallels in other parts of the world. It is not without reason, that the long age of storytelling has been kept alive in the classics of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Lewis Carroll and now J. K. Rowling!

In a world taken over more and more by all-powerful market forces and technology, a global village on the one hand and a deeply polarized world on the other, children are constantly exposed to conflicting and confusing messages about values and attitudes. In such a context the role of stories whether told or written becomes even more crucial in helping children discriminate and make informed choices at every stage in their lives.

In the Indian context, the responsibility of publishers is even greater — to negotiate a space in a system that has no space for it, and to create a demand for good writing and illustration in a market in which there is no demand or expectation. When Indian writing is winning international acclaim by overcoming historical disadvantages and building on cultural strengths, there is no reason why this should not happen in children's publishing.

Negotiating for a space that doesn't exist, for a challenging and culturally distinctive children's literature is the BIG challenge that faces us. Creating that space is certainly tough negotiation as all of us involved in serious publishing understand and acknowledge. ■

Radhika Menon is Managing Editor, Tulika Publishers, Chennai.

TELLING TALES FROM ASIA: A RESOURCE BOOK FOR ALL WHO LOVE TELLING STORIES

By Cathy Spagnoli
Tulika, 1999, pp. 80, Rs.85.00

PRIYA'S DAY (ENGLISH-HINDI)

By Cathy Spagnoli. Hindi translation by Sushma Ahuja
Tulika, 1998, rpt. 2001, pp. 32, Rs. 92.00

SIMPLE WONDERS: TOY STORIES TO MAKE AND TELL

By S. Paramasivam and Cathy Spagnoli
Tulika, 2001, pp. 46, Rs.80.00



Despite increasing globalization in the economic arena, the world of children's fiction remains stubbornly local. Cathy Spagnoli, not of Indian origin yet connected to India in many significant ways, has brought together a collection of stories spanning Asia. She has gone further to refine the art (and an art she believes it to be) of story telling, providing suggestions for the use of means and props.

In the introduction to her book *Telling Tales From Asia: A Resource Book for All Who Love Telling Stories* she offers a comprehensive number of ways in which storytelling helps children, including "develop sensitivities to various world views and find new role models, explore school subjects enriched by stories, develop a deeper interest in heritage and history, have social values reinforced through stories, be stimulated to find further reading material, exercise skills of imagination, visualization, concentration, develop aural comprehension and expressive oral skills, increase knowledge of story structure, sequencing, imagery, editing, grow in self-confidence and self-esteem." She wisely reminds the busy school-teacher already burdened with a punishing syllabus that storytelling is not an extra subject but a means by which the existing subjects can be enriched.

Although it may surprise some that a woman living in this "computer age" may still validate the ancient skill of story telling, Spagnoli is by no means out of date. One of the chief thrusts of her argument is that stories come out of history, and the personal history of the narrator is a better place to begin than another. The last few decades have witnessed such a significant increase in the recording of personal narratives, and to take this into the branch of oral narration may be seen both as a progressive step forward as well as providing a link to a past tradition. Under the sub-heading 'Original Stories' the author suggests that while the source of stories may be memories or journal notations, they may equally be dreams and fantasies. Some very practical advice on ways to get started are provided: suggested

opening lines are "Did you ever watch a person die?" or "Mr. Choi was like a ripe grain of rice, bending humbly while full of knowledge," or "With angry eyes I still stare at old men, because they're alive and my father isn't." On the importance of finishing at the right moment the writer says, "Don't draw out the tale after its climax. Your listeners will carry away the last words of your tale."

So comprehensive is the guideline provided that we are even given suggestions on how to record our stories in handmade books, not necessarily confined to sheets of paper either. Yet more practical is the tackling of difficult situations that may arise during the course of the story telling; what do you do when children just want to hear stories about TV characters? How can you discourage unwanted participation when a child keeps interrupting?

Part II is the tales themselves, and a sense of fun is evident in the two versions provided, 'The original written version' followed by the 'Telling version'; there seems to be no end to Spagnoli's invention. While she thoughtfully provides a bibliography, and suggestions for tracking down sources, it is doubtful the reader would need one; all you could want to know about the practice of story telling is already here in this book.

Yet another book by Cathy Spagnoli is the highly inventive *Priya's Day*. It has four bilingual versions (English-Tamil, English-Malayalam, English-Kannada, and English-Hindi). It is the story of one day in the life of the young girl Priya, but what lifts the story out of the realm of the mundane is that it is designed to be uniquely interactive. As the story is being told, the listeners, each provided with a roll of scrap paper, tear out shapes to fit the story and paste them into the book itself. In a tangible way each reader (or listener) creates his very own book in the course of hearing the story, and no two will be identical.

In *Simple Wonders: Toy Stories to Make and Tell* Cathy Spagnoli co-authors with her husband, sculptor S. Paramasivam, an instruction book on making folk toys. As before, the author adds her own special touch, here it is by providing each toy with a little story, some traditional and some invented by the writer. The instructions on the craft of toy-making are lucid and practical, and the little stories told alongside provide the key ingredients to make the book irresistible to children—they are charming, they don't patronize, and they convey fun.

With each of her books Cathy Spagnoli reminds us that one of the most meaningful and sound offerings we can make to the young is the simple gift of a story. ■

Jayanti Seth teaches in the Department of English, Jesus & Mary College, University of Delhi.

"The Good, The Bad and The Invisible"

Every time, Uma and Chandra have asked me to guest-edit the Children's Literature issue of *The Book Review*, I have been delighted, but then I get very depressed. It is so very difficult to get books for review. A vast chunk of the time spent on co-ordinating issues is actually used up in chasing publishers to send us review copies. Of course, some publishers are more than happy to do so. Then there are quite a few others, who either send a poor selection of what they have, and/or claim not to have catalogues at all. This seems odd, especially since I have seen some beautiful ones made by these very same publishers in circulation! It is a sad comment on the value placed upon children's literature if an established review journal like TBR has to chase publishers for review copies and catalogues.

It's not as if people don't want books for children. A few days ago, I gave away a pile of children's books to a chowkidar. It was most certainly a Kodak moment when he got these books. The normally garrulous Vasudev was speechless. He could not even utter "Thank you," which he is normally quick to do. He is one of the fortunate few to have a confirmed job with the Government of India, which means that he gets subsidized accommodation and all other perks that go with it. Unfortunately, his salary is not sufficient to buy his children (and the umpteenth others that he has adopted) even a small selection of books that are available in the market. He can only afford their textbooks, which he usually buys second-hand. They are cheaper. We had not given him an impressive pile. It was a motley collection of textbook supplements, workbooks, colouring books, and some slim volumes of short stories and folk tales. Some were magnificently produced, while others were not. The only thing they had in common was their exorbitant prices. This odd collection of books added up to approximately two thousand rupees. Not a mean sum and certainly not for Vasudev. It is about 2/3 of his monthly income.

Towards the other end of the economic spectrum is a lecturer in Delhi University who has a small child. This young mother, too, often moans about the cost of books for children. Even though she and her husband can afford many of them, they cannot buy as many as they would like. Many of my generation grew up on the inexpensive, beautifully produced books from Peoples Publishing House, but they are things of the past.

Obviously, there is a market for books for children and in many cases the books are also there. It is not possible for every book to be a Harry Potter, where its launch is accompanied by such a media blitz that no one even questions its price. On the contrary, the demand for it, at the high price of £17 or Rs.795, seems to be insatiable. But if publishers and parents want a larger reach as well as a more affordable range of books respectively, in India, then there has to be a re-think on the content, prices and marketing of children's literature.

There is a vast amount of "invisible" literature that has not been included in this issue for instance, the textbooks, literature in regional languages, literature in translation etc. If it were possible to somehow to get a directory of publishers of children's literature in India, then that would be perfect. But obviously, Children's Literature is not totally out of focus as later this year an international conference is being organised in Kolkata to "consider the entire range of texts written for children as well as the presentation of children in other texts".

Jaya Bhattacharji

The Charles Pick Fellowship

Applications are invited for the Charles Pick Writing Fellowship in the School of English and American Studies at the University of East Anglia. Applicants must be writers of fictional or non-fictional prose in English who have not yet published a book (please note that for the purposes of this fellowship non-fictional prose includes, for example, biography, memoir and travel writing, but not critical or historical monographs based on academic research). The basic purpose of the Fellowship is to enable a writer to devote time to the development of his/her talents. No teaching duties attach to the Fellowship, but the Fellow will be able to consult informally with faculty and students in the School of English and American Studies. The Fellowship will be for six months, starting in August 2004 and ending in mid-January 2005. The award is £10,000. The Fellowship is residential and free accommodation will be provided.

All applications must be made using the official application form which sets out the requirements for submitting written work and providing a reference. For further details and an application form contact:

The Charles Pick Fellowship
School of English and American Studies
University of East Anglia
Norwich NR4 7TJ
UK
Tel: 44 (0)1603 592810
Fax: 44 (0)1603 507728
Email: v.striker@uea.ac.uk

The application form is also available on our website:
<http://www.uea.ac.uk/eas/Fellowships/CharlesPickapplic+intro.pdf>
The closing date for applications is January 31st 2004.

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BOOKSELLERS • SUBSCRIPTION AGENTS

STRAVAGANZA: CITY OF MASKS

By Mary Hoffman
Bloomsbury, London, 2002, pp. 545, £5.99

THE THIEF LORD

By Cornelia Funke. Translated by Oliver Latsch and illustrated by the author, cover by Christian-Birmingham, map of Venice by Lothar Meier
The Chicken House, UK, 2002, pp. 349, Rs. 295.00

WIZARD'S WINTER

By Dhruva Chak
Rupa, Delhi, 2003, pp. 237, Rs. 195.00

HARRY POTTER AND THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX

By J.K. Rowling
Bloomsbury, London, 2003, pp. 766, £16.99

FANTASTIC BEASTS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM

By Newt Scamander, Special edition with a foreword by Albus Dumbledore
Bloomsbury in association with Obscurus Books, London, 2001, pp. 42, £2.50

QUIDDITCH THROUGH THE AGES

By Kennilworthy Whisp
Bloomsbury in association with Whizz Hard Books, London, 2001, pp. 56, £2.50

THE MAGICIAN OF SAMARKAND

By Alan Temperly. Illustrated by Adam Stower
Macmillan Children's Books, London, 2003,
pp. 154, \$19.95

THE PUFFIN TREASURY OF MODERN INDIAN STORIES

Edited by Mala Dayal
Puffin Books India, Delhi, 2002, pp. 194, Rs. 399.00

ROALD DAHL AND HIS CHOCOLATE FACTORY

By Andrew Donkin. Illustrated by Clive Godard
Scholastics, UK, 2002, pp. 192, £4.99



Fantasy more or less unites these books whose basic plot is a fight between good and evil. Good wins, as it does in the world's best stories, though it is often a near thing. What is fantasy? Though poets have worried over its near relatives, fancy and imagination, the dictionary of literary terms in my shelf has no entry for it. We should be grateful for the omission, which leaves us free to read these books unencumbered by critical baggage.

Stravaganza: City of Masks by Mary Hoffman depends upon time-travel, or stravaganza, from present-day England to a 16th century place that is not quite Venice. Hoffman deflects details. A Duchessa rules instead of a Doge. She is not chosen from among Patricians but elected from among ordinary folk.

An English boy dying of leukemia finds himself in Belezza. He helps his new friends fight the Chimici, who resemble the historical Medici. The evil Chimici hope to plunder the future of its "magic," especially medicine, for nefarious purposes. Does the hero die of leukemia? Yes and no. Is the old world bemused by his irruption into their lives? Not really. But let me not spoil the book for you.

Its greatest charm is the vivid descriptions of Venice, its lagoon, and its islands. Peter Bailey's pen and ink illustrations are precise and lovely. Tiny gondolas, a small but menacing Bridge of Sighs, and minute masks crown the chapter headings. Mr. Bailey's name is not on the title page where it belongs but it nestles in the small print about copyrights. Canaletto, the exquisite details of whose *The Bucintoro at the Molo* illuminate the cover, is, however, properly acknowledged.

Stravaganza: City of Masks is the first of a trilogy. The second book, which will transport its characters to Sienna, is due this month (it's September as I write). Mary Hoffman has written 40 books and more for children. And—to warm the cockles of our parochial hearts—she is married to an Indian. All this and more is on the Stravaganza website.

The Thief Lord by the German writer Cornelia Funke, is another Venetian novel. This one is set in today's Venice. Like a latter-day *Oliver Twist*, it's about a band of child thieves led by a sinister young man who is really not

a man after all, though thanks to a neat piece of magic in the second half of the book, he doesn't remain a child either. Most importantly, he gets away from his horrid dad, to our great satisfaction. A detective who looks like Bob Hoskins (the book is dedicated to Hoskins) helps the sweet and very lost children. Into the imbroglia enters a rich woman, a female Mr. Brownlow, who has a large enough house to accommodate all waifs and strays, including the Hoskins lookalike. A bad aunt and uncle get the child they prefer to their two nephews who run away to Venice, which is how the novel starts. In a usual and irritating ploy of children's books, the magic merry-go-round that sensibly orchestrates the poetic justice is destroyed in the end. In case, perhaps, our children dash off to look for it? Not that it would be a wasted trip. They'd see Venice. What could be better than that?

Once again, we have pen and ink drawings at the heads of chapters. Ms Funke began her career as an illustrator of children's books, but (website zindabad) she wanted to write her own stories so that she could draw what she really wanted to. Delicate and heartbreakingly perfect, her sketches take one instantly to Venice, as do Hoffman's descriptions. Ms. Funke is the third most popular children's writer in Germany. The first is J.K. Rowling.

Dhruva Chak's *Wizard's Winter* is more affordable than the other books reviewed here, but it never really takes off. It has much mystery and little fantasy. Characters are called "the young man" and similar things for far too long. Children like characters to be individuals. They must be named and their personalities known right away. When Dhruva Chak eventually names his characters, they sound like a cocktail of the Lord of the Rings and He-Man (Horos, Morf, the Guardians, Trueblade). Other than these derivations, there is nothing recognizable in the book. All fantasy tells of alternative worlds but if there is no native, as it were, how can you recognize its alter? The book's style veers between the mysteriously meaningful and P.G. Wodehouse (a foot is applied to someone's "nerther end." High seriousness, even in a children's book, doesn't admit of such terms). At one point there's a mismatch between authorial comment and a character's action. A dwarf is described as greedy but for several pages after that he is just blumblingly cute. A good editor would have straightened it out. All this notwithstanding, I was delighted to learn that Mr. Chak has an MBA from the IIM, Ahmedabad, and likes crosswords. Only the truly good people of this world like crosswords. With his skills, he will find the two novels waiting to be born out of this one. I look forward to that.

J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* is a giant-sized book and an excellently told story. Rowling knows her fictional world as if it were her home. She knows the staircases at Hogwarts school and where they lead to, the décor of rooms, distances, the relationship of gardens to buildings, the personalities of her characters who are consistent with what we know of them from earlier books. And yet this is not the world it was earlier. Rowling does not repeat herself. The portraits that go visiting, Quidditch matches, spells—all these are present as we would want them to be, but we don't linger over them. This is not an imitation of the earlier books but a continuation. Fifteen-year old Harry has strong confused and conflicting feelings against almost everyone, including his best friends Ron and Hermione. In the way of that liminal age, he wants more recognition than he gets. He's so absorbed in himself that he cannot see the merits of people and situations.

Harry's world in this latest novel is more sinister not just because Voldemort, the Dark Lord, is back but because that is how the world seems to us as we grow older. The adults in Harry's ambit are frightened and he can see their fear, for when adults think that children are sufficiently grown up, they stop pretending to be invincible. Their vulnerability adds to Harry's confusion. For many children's writers, bad guys are simply lumpen adults, but Rowling's bad guys are subtly drawn. They are lingo-like people without love who have enormous ambitions to be powerful without any idea of what they will do with the power beyond practising it to bring down others. This world becomes progressively dark as truth and lies exchange places in the official newspaper whose editorial policy is to alter readers' minds and isolate the good people. Rather than being crudely stated in so many words, it is shown. Thus for two months, the paper publishes snide comments about Harry's defeat of Voldemort. By the time he returns to school, he is

no longer the hero who won the Triwizard Championship but is sniggered at wherever he goes. Even his friends are doubtful about him on the ground that so many people have said so often that Harry is possibly a fraud, it could be true.

An especially good part of the book is Harry's relationship with his dead father whom he hero-worships. Like many of us at that age, he imagines him to have been the best father in the world. When he learns that he is quite wrong, he doesn't go into a poor-me sulk as he might have done in a bad TV serial. Instead he is helped to see that his dad simply made the mistakes of the young. Harry then stops wanting to be like his father and is ready to strike out on his own. There are grand precedents for such sea changes in hero's journeys to manhood. Odysseus, for one, leaves his parents' home and goes on a hunt during which he acquired the famous scar on his thigh that is the sign of his identity as hero, husband, and householder.

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix is not a sentimental book, yet Rowling is very sure about the place of generosity, goodness, love, and trust in its world. I use *world* deliberately because she gives equal importance to institutions, families, friends, and morality. The value of children's stories lies in the way they uphold the values that bind us together. Rowling does not preach—as Enid Blyton tends to do—but this is the core structure, the RRC pillars of her story. The novel's structure matches the priorities of young adults, which is why it's not the Quidditch match but the OWLS examination and the "final" battle between good and evil that are its high points. Its continuous riff is that magic must be *worked* at, like any other skill. That magic and life are easy is not endorsed anywhere in it.

Rowling uses the clear, coherent vocabulary and syntax of intelligent children and adults. Her language is not archaic, dumbed down, or cute. She drops Mulciber and Minerva casually into the prose, assuming her readers' familiarity with mythologies. In a delicate compliment to the intelligence of her readers, she doesn't interrupt her narrative with explanations. If they don't know who these creatures are now, they will find out some day. So much excitement awaits them. "But what is the book about?" That's not a question I'll answer except to say that with the hype of its launch, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* filled me with distaste for weeks. I didn't want to read it. But once I began, I couldn't put it down. A cliché, but true.

You don't *want* some books to end. There are more Harry Potters to come, which is good. But *this* one came with two interesting, elegantly slim companions. (They are not easily available but they should be). *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* by Newt Scamander, with a foreword by Albus Dumbledore is the property of Harry Potter, with marginalia by Harry, Ron, and Hermione. It is published from 18 A Diagon Alley, London, by Bloomsbury in association with Obscurus Books, and costs 14 Sickles 3 Knuts. J.K. Rowling holds the copyright. The second one is *Quidditch Through The Ages* by Kennilworthy Whisp, also published from Diagon Alley, London, this time by Bloomsbury and Whizz Hard Books. This too costs 14 Sickles 3 Knuts. J.K. Rowling holds its copyright as well. Now *that* is acceptable fantasy.

My first reaction to *The Magician of Samarkand* by Alan Temperly was relief at global awareness, political correctness, and things of that proper sort because the names in it are recognizable: Samarkand, Anahita, Kashgar. It's the most practical use of p.c. I know of and quite different to the time of imperial expansion when the colonies were physically present in thousands of British homes as bric-a-brac and cloth yet Robert Southey, Britain's poet laureate, wrote of *The Curse of Kehama*. The curse of who? Precisely. I am addicted to pointless observations but this is not one of them. Those weirdly named characters we read about as children seemed to inhabit worlds as remote and fantastic (a bad word here) as Enid Blyton's Magic Faraway Tree. The colonies and their readers were erased by this careless inattention to names.

Fantasy seems to operate closer to real life now. I almost left off reading *The Magician of Samarkand* for its endless reports of what was happening. "Not enough direct speech here," I said to myself. But then the evil magician turns the beautiful young heroine into an old crone because she refuses to marry him. What sort of punishment is this? Why is she not turned into a dog or cat or the usual things in curse literature? Well, possibly because

Temperly has a frightening few pages on how a gentle and decent community treats an old woman. She is beaten and stoned, even by her own family, and threatened with being burnt alive. So, as happens in so much folklore, she goes off to live in the forest where she is helped by a clever lizard and rat whose parents, we suspect, weren't lizards and rats. We are right, as we often are in this satisfying genre. It all turns out well in the end. Good triumphs over evil. There are some magical

metamorphoses, some sadness made right, and a lot of jolly running about. The baddie vanishes in a puff of smoke. The prince marries the shoemaker's daughter. A fun book. Its illustrations are less fun, but that's not even a grumble.

"Treasury" was never used more accurately than in *The Puffin Treasury of Modern Indian Stories*. A luxuriously illustrated collection of sixteen stories, Mala Dayal's 12" x 9" book is meant for children "broadly between the ages of eight and twelve." Its authors are all well-known storytellers, among them Premchand, Mahashweta Devi, Satyajit Ray, Shama Futehally, Ruskin Bond, Salman Rushdie, Shashi Deshpande, Poile Sengupta, Margaret Bharry, and Bhisham Sahni. Vikram Seth is present through a Beastly Tale in verse, R.K. Narayan through Swami and friends. A few translations are included but, as Mala Dayal says in her introduction, very little children's fiction from the Indian languages has been rendered into English. Ghost stories, fantasy, humour, historical fiction, real-life incidents, the whimsical, and explorations of the inner life of children are all here. We even have notes on authors, translators and illustrators, ten of whom are Bengalis (that's a genuinely pointless observation). I hope this is not the last collection Ms. Dayal will give us. (A passing thought. If those of us brought up on fiction in English had read stories like this when we were growing up, would our minds have different furniture in them? Have we lost or gained by knowing other cultures at impressionable ages?)

So to *Roald Dahl and His Chocolate Factory* by Andrew Donkin, in the series entitled Dead Famous.¹ I was familiar with Roald Dahl, master fantasist, author of bizarre short stories. Then a friend introduced me to *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *James and the Giant Peach*, and the best of them, *BFG*. Dahl's wild imagination, his acute sense of the ridiculous, and the gentle kindness of his good characters are deeply attractive to readers of all ages. From *Roald Dahl and His Chocolate Factory*, we learn that Dahl began writing children's books very late in his life. He did very well, too. Visually, the book seems to be inspired by the Web. Each busy page has text and information-carrying pictures, as opposed to illustrations of the text. A few decades earlier, *Roald Dahl and His Chocolate Factory* would have been part of *Hundred Great Lives* but we live in debased times. Dahl is not held up as a role model or saint. There he is, warts and all, and he is almost all warts, alas. A part of me wishes I hadn't read this book. Still, it is well-written, full of facts, with clever illustrations. I'd have bought it for my children when they were about 10 years old. I'll pass it on to them anyway. To tell the truth, it's a treat for Dahl fans. ■

¹ I have learnt much about George Stephenson and railway engines from another of the series.

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THE GARBAGE KING

By Elizabeth Laird
Macmillan Children's Books, London, 2003, pp. 330, £9.99

ARTEMIS FOWL – THE ETERNITY CODE

By Eoin Colfer
Puffin Books, London, 2003, pp. 338, £5.25

A large squawking noise in the tree above made him look up. A pair of big black birds was quarrelling noisily. One of them suddenly swooped down to the road, snatching at the body of a dead mouse, which had been stiffening beside the tarmac. The other flung itself down from the tree too, and they began to tussle all over the little grey body, threatening each other with furious flaps of their wings. Dani watched them, half envious. Birds were free and independent. They could do what they felt like, find their food anywhere, fly freely in the sky. They didn't have to depend on each other, get depressed and lonely, worry about the future and hang around waiting for other birds to come and help them out.

When one hears of Ethiopia, two things come to mind—famine and civil war. It is a great shame that the vast richness of its culture goes unsung. It has at least seventy-five languages and a rich tradition of storytelling, unwritten tales that are passed on from generation to generation. Author Elizabeth Laird worked in Ethiopia when she was in her twenties, and has now returned there thirty years later, to record some of these stories for the rest of the world.

The Garbage King was inspired by Laird's experiences with the street children of Addis Ababa. It is the story of two runaway children and their struggle to survive. Mamo comes from the wrong side of the tracks—his only family is his elder sister Tiggist, and as the book begins they are forced to leave the shack in which they were living. Mamo is kidnapped and sold into slavery on a farm. After months of abuse and suffering, he escapes and returns to the streets of Addis, where he meets Dani. Dani could not be more different—he comes from a wealthy upper class family with a huge house and servants to attend to his every need. But terrified of his cold and ruthless father, he runs away from home. The boys join one of the city's many street gangs—the *godana*—and the rest of the book relates how they survive, with nothing but courage and loyalty to see them through.

This is a moving story of the human spirit prevailing over the harshest of life's trials, a story of hope amongst despair. Thanks to her closeness to the subject, Laird pulls no punches in describing inner city squalor—this is not one of those novels where Third World poverty is romanticized to make it palatable to western audiences. The relationship between the two boys is wonderfully portrayed, and it is this central relationship that forms the heart of the book. While a lesser novel might have settled for undying loyalty and devotion, here the boys have some very real differences. Dani's problem seems ridiculous to Mamo, perhaps rightly so—he sees him as a spoilt rich brat who doesn't know how lucky he is, just to have a family and a home. And despite the situation, Dani is painfully class-conscious



and sees begging as beneath him; he cannot bring himself to fully become one of the *godana*. Yet the boys repeatedly stand up for each other, and their unlikely friendship endures. The end offers hope and a better future for all concerned, with the realization that life is going to be tough nonetheless. This moving and realistic portrayal of children's lives amongst class divisions and urban poverty makes *The Garbage King* an outstanding book, which should appeal to thoughtful teenagers everywhere.

"Earl Grey – no sugar." Thus, in classic James Bond style, pronounces teenage criminal mastermind Artemis Fowl. Artemis is a boy genius, as adept at technological wizardry as he is with his devastating wit and charm. Although his skills are put to use mostly for concocting various criminal schemes in order to amass a vast fortune, he's an endearing fellow, more a suave anti-hero who isn't half as bad as he seems.

The Eternity Code is the third book in the Artemis Fowl series. Artemis has developed a tiny super-computer, with the help of some advanced technology stolen from the fairies—a race blessed with magical powers, which lives deep inside the earth. He shows it to a ruthless American businessman, and is soon embroiled in a race to retrieve the device with an assortment of sidekicks: bodyguard Juliet Butler, an eighteen-year old black belt in seven disciplines, Holly Short, a fairy captain of the "Lower Elements Police" who has crossed paths with Artemis before and is suspicious of his every move, and a fugitive mud-chomping dwarf fairy named Mulch Diggums. What follows is a high-speed ride through various country featuring a mind-boggling array of magic and high-tech gadgetry, both fairy and human—camouflage foil and neutrino blasts, flying wings and subterranean elevators, "mesmerizing" and mind-wipes—this is a rollicking fantasy adventure for the twenty-first century. Like many children's books today, it packs in adventure and fun for the young, with enough in-jokes and pop culture references to please the old. Yet the concept is brilliantly original—you'll never have seen high-tech wisecracking fairies like these before, nor a main protagonist whose moral compass is... well, a bit skewed, as he himself would cheerfully admit.

It's a pity that the Artemis Fowl series, written by Irish schoolteacher Eoin Colfer (who has described his creation as "Die Hard with fairies") has remained—along with hundreds of other children's books, presumably—in the shadow of the Harry Potter phenomenon. Yet a quick search on the Internet reveals that Artemis Fowl has a cult following of his own, and in fact his first adventure will shortly be made into a movie, courtesy of studio Miramax. Here's hoping that many more adventures lie in store. ■

Sunil D'Monte is a software professional based in Bangalore.

Books-In-Brief

Books-In-Brief

HULK

By Peter David
Ballantine Publishing Group, New York, 2003, pp.338, £6.99

Based on the screenplay by James Schamus, *Hulk* tells the story of how meek scientist Bruce Banner gets irradiated by gamma rays and is transformed into the green giant. He must then fight for his survival against the military, and also for the love of his colleague Betty Ross. It's a decent novel, the one fault being the inordinately long build-up—nearly half the book goes by before the creature makes his first appearance. Yet thankfully the book does not shy away from the darker aspects of the story. And for once we're given that rarest of comic book characters—a walking, talking, three-dimensional girlfriend.

Sunil D'Monte

ACROSS THE NIGHTINGALE FLOOR

By Lian Hearn
Macmillan, London, 2002, pp.294, £9.99

The title itself is intriguing, its significance even more so. The cruel warlord Iida Sadamu has had a floor constructed which 'sings' to the tread of a human foot. The combination of the exquisite in matters aesthetic and a murky, gory, warrior culture adept in cruelty is one of the hallmarks of this book, the first in a trilogy by Hearn, which is set in a Japanese feudal samurai world of feuding clans. This is a book for teenagers and adults, written from the point of view of a teenager, and it does not balk at facing the darker, ravaging faces of life, including love, sex, and death.

The structure is a classic quest narrative. While this reviewer will certainly not give away the secrets of the story, one must nonetheless say that the journey from innocence to experience that Tomasu/ Takeo undergoes (if you want to know why two names for one person, read the book!) is made that much more poignant by his having been brought up among the peace-loving Hidden people, who had deliberately abjured the ways of war, only to face the wrath of rampaging warlords. Born in a world of gentleness and ritualized arts of peace, Takeo discovers that his destiny is going to be full of violence, cunning, subterfuge, and a twisting maze of tricks and stratagems in which not even his loved and admired protector Otori Shigeru can protect him from layer upon double-dealing layer of danger.

Yet another strand to the plot is provided by the story of the young girl Kaede, a lonely, neglected hostage to an enemy clan, who gets caught up in the deadly game of enmity between Iida and Otori. The sections devoted to her are beautifully handled, from her awakening awareness of threats to her sexuality, to her journey towards an

ABRACADABRA! YEEPS! SECRET IN THE STATUE!
VOL.4

By Peter Lerangis. Illustrations by Jim Talbot
Scholastic, New York, 2002, pp. 88, \$3.99

HOOT

By Carl Hiaasen
Macmillan, 2003, pp. 276, £9.99

I love adventure fiction books or comics, like say, Biggles or Commando comics. But in this *ABRACADABRA!* I certainly think Peter Lerangis could have added a bit more excitement. But still in times like the one when Erica thought Jessica was a thief—there, certainly not!

The moment I looked at the cover of *Hoot* I thought it wouldn't be good. But, the moment I opened it I thought different. Once I had read it 20 times I really liked it. Out of all of the characters I liked Mullet Fingers the most. Best book in the world!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Vidur Butalia is a student of Class II-C at Delhi Public School, Vasant Vihar, New Delhi.

arranged marriage, her falling in love, and her facing of moments of extreme violence. In this world, no one can afford not to know the arts of self-defence, and Kaede too must undergo such training, from the unlikeliest of sources. The tricks of defence that she is taught include some involving unbelievable cruelty, to be used in extremity: putting a needle into the eye of a man attacking one is considered an acceptable means of defence in a world where the façade of stylized samurai ethics cloaks complete anarchy and greed.

Lian Hearn, the author, says of the social setting for his book, 'I am interested in feudalism. Whenever democracy and the rule of law break down human societies seem to revert to feudalism. I wanted to write a 'fantasy' set in a feudal society, but I wanted to write about real people whose emotions are all the more intense for being restrained by the codes of their society.' (This quotation is from the web-site of the book, <http://www.thenightingalefloor.com>) He manages this consummately. Hearn, who studied Japanese at Oxford, spends long periods in Japan from his base in Australia, and is clearly immersed in the culture of the country he writes about.

As might be expected in a successful fantasy set in Japanese myth and history, the style is reticent, spare, often sharply visual, and characterized by its ability to say much by what it omits to say. Hearn writes, 'I like the concept of *ma*: the space between that enables perception to occur. I wanted to see if I could use silence in writing.' What I liked, however, was that despite this emphasis on reticence and silence, human emotions are expressed in the book, powerfully, simply, and honestly: this is not a book where a stiff code of honour or ethics succeeds in repressing and debilitating bonds of love, solidarity, and affection out of existence.

The Nightingale Floor has already attained cult status, and will take its place among classic fantasy narratives such as Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* sequence, or, dare one say it, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The second book of the series, *Grass for His Pillow*, is coming out as this review is being written. The first book involved a major dilemma centred on Takeo's ancestry and clan loyalties, which resulted in sacrifice and pain. We look forward to finding out how this is unravelled in the next book.

I leave the reader with the epigraph to the book, which speaks volumes in its compactness:

The deer that weds
The autumn bush clover
They say
Sires a single fawn
And this fawn of mine
This lone boy
Sets off on a journey
Grass for his pillow
Good luck, Takeo and Kaede!

Barnita Bagchi is an academic at the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai. Her current research includes work on gendered reading and children's reading.

Of Kings & Commoners

FACT AND FICTION FROM THE PAST

◆ Monisha Mukundan ◆ Subhadra Sen Gupta



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SALIM ALI FOR SCHOOLS: A CHILDREN'S BIOGRAPHY

By Zai Whitaker

Permanent Black, Delhi, 2003, pp. 98, Rs. 195.00

ALBERT EINSTEIN AND HIS INFLATABLE UNIVERSE: INVENTORS AND THEIR BRIGHT IDEAS

By Mike Goldsmith

Dead Famous series

Illustrated by Philip Reeve and Clive Goddard

Scholastic India, Delhi, £3.99 and £4.99 each.



"I'll look it up in the Salim Ali." Or "Salim Ali says. . ." are terms frequently used by almost anyone who has even a passing interest in birds. *The Book of Indian Birds* written by the celebrated ornithologist Salim Ali has a place on the shelves of many homes and in every worthwhile library in the country. There are other books on Indian birds on the market now, but the one by Salim Ali was the very first, and it remains the most authoritative, just as his other books, on the birds of Kerala and the Himalayas, and his ten-volume set on Birds of India define and classify our wealth of bird life. Salim Ali spent his entire life in pursuit of Indian birds and every entry in his books is based on first-hand observation and scientific data.

Zai Whitaker is an exceptional writer for children. Her book, *Andamans Boy* is among the most delightful books available for children today. She also happens to be Salim Ali's grandniece. Her biography of her 'Salim Mamoo' is full of affection and humour and I found it practically impossible to put down, even when I had to stop for meals and to do essential chores.

Told in an anecdotal and exciting style, this biography of Salim Ali creates a vivid and loving picture of an extraordinary man and his unusual family. I wish it had been longer. I would love to have read more about Salim Ali's adventures. For he did lead an adventurous life and his courage and dedication to his chosen work shine through the pages of this book. Zai Whitaker's lively style carries the reader into the past and to the amazing places to which Salim Ali went, with enviable ease. The reader rapidly becomes engrossed in the fascinating story which is being told, but at the same time there is a great deal of information being shared. Without quite noticing it, the reader learns of the development of the science of ornithology in India and of the passion and perseverance that gave Salim Ali the strength to do the work he cared about so much.

Salim Ali lost his parents when he was very young. He was the youngest of "an army of nine brothers and sisters" who were adopted by an affectionate uncle and aunt and went to live in their large and roomy home in Bombay. Bombay of the early twentieth century was still a spacious and tree-filled place and here young Salim Ali developed an interest in birds. His interest was encouraged by people at the Bombay Natural History Society, of which his uncle was a member.

Zai Whitaker takes us into the atmosphere in which Salim Ali grew up, and his early investigations into the birds that surrounded him. His first observations were of the common house sparrow and his discovery of a yellow-throated variety helped to spur his involvement with the natural history of our country. However, his path to becoming India's "Bird Man" was far from being a smooth one and he began life by dropping out of college and going to join one of his brothers in a business venture in Burma.

The book takes us to Burma with Salim Ali and to a glimpse of the life he led there. We learn that the two brothers were not very successful businessmen and Salim Ali returned to Bombay to study business and zoology and to spend all his free time in the Bombay Natural History Society, learning about birds. He finally took a job at the BHNS and got married to a woman who was as special as he was. Zai Whitaker's vivid and affectionate portrait of Tehmina Ali is evidently based on Salim Ali's autobiography and the stories she has gathered from her family, because Tehmina Ali died before the author was born. Salim Ali's wife travelled with him by bullock cart and on foot to some of India's most remote forest areas, in the days before trains and motor vehicles were in widespread use. It was her energy and support which made it possible for him to give up the idea of a regular job and

embark on a series of what we would call 'projects' today, to document India's bird life. They did so under the most difficult circumstances, walking unimaginable distances, living in snake-and-tiger-infested areas, facing dacoits and scorpions with equanimity. When he lost his wife Tehmina, just twenty-one years after they were married, Salim Ali came to live with Zai Whitaker's grandparents in Mumbai and continued to work intensely. He travelled to Afghanistan and Tibet, and to forests and deserts in distant corners of India. He studied the science of ornithology and he acquired all the skills his calling demanded. And, when he returned to Bombay, he began to write his first book on birds. An early memory of the author is of being kept awake by the sound of her 'Salim Mamoo's' typewriter clack-clacking away in her grandparents' home.

Zai Whitaker's memories, her research, her invaluable fund of family stories and the recollections of her father, the ornithologist Zafar Futehally make a formidable base of material from which to draw for a biography such as this. However, what provides even more depth is her own wide knowledge of natural history and her evident involvement with and concern for the environment. She has been able to communicate this concern with a light hand, which is more effective and more likely to linger in a reader's mind than many more earnest and scholarly tomes, not to mention the dreary textbooks that are offered as part of the Environmental Studies courses in schools.

I would recommend this book as part of the reading list of every school. If there is any criticism I have to offer, it is the title, which seems to limit the range of readers. This book is neither merely 'for schools' nor just for children. It is a delight to people of all ages. Zai Whitaker's text has been given the production that it deserves, in the form of good design and printing; and gentle, quietly placed illustrations by Anuradha Roy, which enliven the writing. The size and shape of the book make it easy to handle and the hard cover makes it possible to lend this book to friends and family without fear of its falling apart. The price too is one which makes it an ideal gift for children and to adults who are interested in history, in the natural world or in a well-written story, full of adventure and humour.

Written in an irreverent, slangy style frequently interspersed with cartoons, the books by Mike Goldsmith blend science and biography in an energetic and highly readable way. They appeal equally to those who have a background in science ('brilliant!' was the passing comment of a sometime science student who casually leafed through them) and those who, like this reviewer, have enormous voids where a knowledge of science should be. These books are like spotlights bringing areas of darkness into sudden unexpected clarity.

Mike Goldsmith carries the reader into the subject through simple everyday examples, and keeps us interested through humour both verbal and visual. Biographical details bring alive the characters being portrayed and the times in which they lived. The lively illustrations help the reluctant reader over the humps of technical concepts and the author's mastery of his subject makes it possible for him to explore each idea with innumerable examples. Otherwise impenetrable scientific and mathematical facts are presented in language that even the scientifically-challenged can comprehend. To use the author's own adjectives, the chatty, "wacky, matey" language invites the reader into the text. Come on, he seems to be saying, I remember how inaccessible it all seemed to be, but look, if you consider it this way, it may not be simple, but you can understand it, see? And then he proceeds to illustrate the idea at hand in layman's terms that lead us into the heart of the matter with deceptive ease.

Here are books, which make learning a joyful journey for children and adults alike. If the humour seems too British and the slang sometimes alien,



these are small discomforts to contend with in the wider pleasure of being able to enter a world that seemed so foggy before. The devices of comic strips, lively diagrams and cartoons, wild facsimiles of imagined newspapers and notebooks to highlight historical events and ideas add emphasis most enjoyably. Even the pun used for the series title is picked up and given emphasis through the books.

The volume on Einstein leaves the reader with a vivid sense of knowing something of this great scientist's life and of the period in which he lived. We begin to understand why he is considered a genius and how he contributed to an understanding of the world in which we live.

In *Inventors and Their Bright Ideas*, the author takes us from Archimedes and Leonardo da Vinci to Thomas Edison and Marconi, and from there to a last chapter entitled 'Inventors R Us' which involves the reader and, in passing, comments on the fact that there have been no celebrated women inventors. As the reader progresses through the book, she or he is made aware of how much hard work was involved in each invention and how often, an invention was the result of economic necessity, opportunity and an accumulation of knowledge and effort by many individuals. To give you a flavour of his style, here's how he puts it, "You'll have noticed that its not always easy to say just who invented what, and that hardly anything was invented by just one person. But that's not to say there are no individual inventors any more . . . So what do you do if you want to be an inventor—maybe the first dead famous female inventor—what do you do. . ." He goes on to close the book with five pages of a cartoon summing up, which provide "Dead Famous Inventions: Wheels to Starships in Easy-to-Swallow Chunks" each visual "chunk" being an illustration with an invention and a date. It makes an appropriate end to this enjoyable and informative book. ■

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MALKA

By Mirjam Pressler. Translated from the German by Brian Murdoch
Young Picador, London, 2003, pp. 246, £4.99

As I was reading *Malka*—obsessively, as does not happen often nowadays—I kept wondering *what* it was in the book which so held me. The writing is good, certainly, but it is hardly 'brilliant'. The story is abysmally depressing, and one does not wait particularly for a happy ending because, with such a story, once it has happened it can hardly end at all—it is inside you for ever. Apart from that, I have a fierce and unreasonable bias against children's literature which is about Grim Reality. What, then?

Perhaps it is the fact that this story—which is about a little girl lost during the Holocaust—does not, so to speak, *begin* with the assumption that dreadful things happen. Nor is it wide-eyed and cute. While things are told from the little girl's point of view, they are also told from the point of view of the mother, calmly assuming what all parents know, that children understand anything as long as it is told to them. The mother, too, does not believe that dreadful things happen. She is Dr. Hannah Mai, a Jewish lady doctor, who—as we learn later—has been a single parent to her two daughters ever since her husband decided to leave for Israel. She is a competent, respected, well-liked professional in a small Polish town, circa 1943; so much respected and liked that she simply cannot take seriously the well-meaning people who advise her to leave. It all rings horribly true for those of us who have lived through Delhi 1984, Bombay 1993, and Gujarat 2002, all of which erupted on perfectly normal streets among people who were going to cinemas and shops.



Nonetheless, there comes a day when Hannah finds herself making an excuse to leave town with her daughters, and 'on a sudden impulse she tucked her children's birth certificates and her medical registration document into the inside pocket of her jacket' (p.13).

The same afternoon the seven-year-old Malka, playing at the home of a friend, is made to feel unwelcome for the first time. On coming home she finds herself being taken, with her mother and older sister, to unknown people who own a farm at some distance. By now it is clear that they had better get across the border to Hungary as soon as they can. The next day, an unwilling youth guides them through an exhausting mountain walk to a more distant homestead and another promise of help. And a more exhausting, and more dangerous, trek.

And so it goes on. The treks, which now take place at night, become frankly nightmarish, and the feeling of being unwanted turns into stark terror. The only escape is the all-too-brief snatches of sleep: Malka didn't know if she was awake or asleep when her mother touched her shoulder, because she was dreaming about her mother waking her up in her home in Lawoczne. She sat up. In front of her she saw not her own window with the flowered curtains, but dark wooden walls with scraps of cobwebs hanging from them. She thought she was still dreaming and rubbed her eyes, but that was her mother's face in front of her—the new face with the two lines from her nostrils down to her mouth... (p. 53). Also, the book's lack of sentimentality—another childlike feature—means that the quarrels and accusations which accompany such stress are all there.

It is when they are about to cross the border, a collective escapade which has been set up in careful secrecy, that Dr. Hannah Mai realizes that her little daughter is ill, too ill to cross, and faces the only decision possible in the circumstances. For the sake of her older daughter, and of the others involved in the escapade, Malka must be left behind, hidden in the home of a 'friendly' family, and Hannah must come back for her later. The friendliness of the family evaporates in the face of Nazi threats and without further ado the seven-year-old is abandoned on the streets. From then on it is a saga of hunger, fear and sheer survival:

Hunger made her chew her fingernails and suck her fingers. At night on her coal sacks she even chewed at her toenails... If she saw a woman come out of the bakery... or out of some other shop, she would stand in their way and say, 'I'm hungry'. Often she would get pushed aside—in fact, that was what happened usually, but from time to time someone would give her a piece of bread (p. 162).

This story alternates with that of the mother, who has had to continue her agonizing journey along with an ill-assorted group of fellow refugees and who fights hunger and terror by telling herself that Malka must be 'warm and safe'. Hannah's story is made more believable, and more sympathetic, by a lack of stereotyping which many of us will be grateful for. She is by no means an orthodox Jew, she feels estranged from many things in her own tradition, and she has fought bitterly with her own family to be allowed to become a doctor. What, in any case, is the identity which she is being forced to defend with her life? My father, she thought, comes from Krakow, my grandfather from Skawina, and where my great-grandfather was born I no longer have any idea, except that it was somewhere in Poland (p.158).

It was only when I was looking up the details of the publication for this review that I realized that this is a translation, and that the book was originally written in German. Surely this calls for a salute to the translator.

In a postscript we learn that Malka Mai is a real person, now a grandmother in Tel Aviv, and that Pressler learned the key bits of her narrative from her during a meeting in 1996. Mai's mind had of course suppressed most of the details, but it is clear to anyone that Pressler has filled them in by an extraordinary act of identification. ■



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Loung Ung's autobiography spans a period from April 1975 to February 1980, encompassing the ouster of her family, along with thousands of others, from Phnom Penh and the deepening trauma of existence under the Khmer Rouge. In her Epilogue Loung retrospectively projects her narrative as one which heals through its coming into being. 'As I tell people about genocide, I get the opportunity to redeem myself. [...] It's empowering; it feels right. The more I tell people, the less the nightmares haunt me. The more people listen to me, the less I hate. After some time, I had talked so much I forgot to be afraid; that is, until I decided to return to Cambodia' (p. 218). Narration and storytelling, as therapy for trauma victims is a commonplace idea reflected in 'rap' sessions for Vietnam veterans and in the proliferation of oral histories and memoirs after the Vietnam War. Robert Jay Lifton, for instance, has analysed in detail the pathology of post-war recollection. These recollections, whether in the form of 'rap' sessions, poetry, or memoirs, are animated by the belief in the transformative possibilities arising from painful experiences. Lifton provides a psychological paradigm for such beliefs: 'The death imprint is likely to be associated not only with pain but also with value – with a special form of knowledge and potential inner growth associated with the sense of having "been there and returned."' Loung's narrative is permeated by the 'death imprint' and 'the sense of having "been there and returned"', a combination of relief, triumph, hatred for the Khmer Rouge, and guilt at having survived while her parents and two siblings perished.

Loung projects her story as a representative one and therefore of value to all who lived through Pol Pot's agrarian dystopia. As she writes in the Author's Note: 'This is a story of survival: my own and my family's. Though these events constitute my experience, my story mirrors that of millions of Cambodians. If you had been living in Cambodia during this period, this would be your story too' (p. 6). There are two strands in this comment and indeed in the memoir that are again fairly typical of post-war, post-trauma narratives. First is the authentication of the narrating self as authoritative purely because of personal experience. The second is the universalization of personal experience so that in a significant manner Loung speaks for and mediates the stories of countless others who suffered but did not care or were unwilling/unable to narrate. Loung arrogates to herself the authority to speak for her people and this is further problematized by the manner in which publishers in the US or indeed India (this book is the Editor's Choice to celebrate Penguin India's 15th anniversary) market the book as a documentation of 'one of the worst genocides in modern history' (blurb, back cover). That documentation is crucial in its passion and searing detail but it cannot be construed as the impartial story of all Cambodians; it is a moving tale of personal trauma and survival bound by contingencies of history and politics.

The printed book has typescript headings and is scrupulously dated: 'Phnom Penh April 1975', 'The Youn Invasion January 1979', 'Lam Sing Refugee Camp February 1980', to create a sense of despatches, of reportage from the field. Along with family photographs this framework binds the mixture of memory and fact, recollection and rage into a verbal tapestry of life under Pol Pot. The child Loung's narrative perspective is effective in conveying the bizarre social engineering and horror unleashed by the Khmer Rouge and the gradual dehumanizing of an entire people. As a victim and a child Loung displays a solipsism that attempts to wish away the politics of the Angkar: 'I do not care why or how the Angkar plans to restore Cambodia. All I know is the constant pain of hunger in my stomach' (p. 80). All political opinions are received from Pa, Kim (Loung's elder brother) or other men and there are elements of political naivety and silence in the memoir. For instance, the US role in the Lon Nol coup against Sihanouk or Nixon's 'secret' bombings of Cambodia that further decimated civil society are not mentioned by the adults. Immigration to the US and the memoir being written there contributes to the teleology of freedom that the US steadfastly



propagated in its war against Vietnam. In fact the barbarism of the Pol Pot regime was retrospectively used to justify American intervention in Vietnam and Cambodia. Furthermore in American political mythology the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia was seen as a vindication of the domino theory. Richard Nixon wrote in his memoir, *No More Vietnams*, 'Today, after Communist governments have killed over a half million Vietnamese and over 2 million Cambodians, the conclusive moral judgement has been rendered on our effort to save Cambodia and South Vietnam: We have never fought in a more moral cause.'²

Despite its political silences and/or naivety Loung resists the egregious revisionism of Nixon. The men in her refugee camp are quite clear 'that the Youns [Vietnamese] have liberated Cambodia and saved us all from the murderous Pol Pot' (p. 163). Watching the execution of a Khmer soldier, Loung writes, 'His government has created a vengeful, bloodthirsty people. Pol Pot has turned me into someone who wants to kill' (p. 191). As Loung delineates the sufferings of her family she also articulates her growing sense of hate, rage, and desire for revenge. As a child victim and trainee soldier Loung highlights the plight of children not only in Cambodia but also in conflicts through the century. 'Children are not asked for opinions, feelings, or what they individually endure. I do not volunteer information [to her siblings] about my indoctrination as a soldier, escape from being raped, or how I lost three days of my life when I found out about Ma' (p. 197).

In the shadow of the Vietnam War Cambodia became merely a backyard for Nixon's 'secret' war and Pol Pot's primitive atrocity. Even anti-war activists and humanitarians in the US seemed to suffer from compassion fatigue while the Khmer Rouge rolled on. Hollywood woke up to the trauma with *The Killing Fields*, a not entirely inaccurate picture especially in comparison to its Vietnam War fantasies. *First They Killed My Father* can be placed within the context of Vietnam War narratives, memoirs and documentaries such as Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*, James Fenton's *All the Wrong Places: Adrift in the Politics of Asia*, or Lady Borton's *After Sorrow: An American Among the Vietnamese*. Fenton and Borton display a political acuity that is absent in Loung. Nevertheless Loung Ung retrieves in painstaking, personal detail what it meant to be a child in Pol Pot's Cambodia and that is in itself a significant achievement. 'Someone once told me that if you hit your head hard enough you lose all your memories. I want to hit my head hard. I want to lose my memory' (p. 154). The trauma of remembrance haunts the author and the narrative and although there is no analysis of the politics and particular matrices of memory in the recuperation of the silenced, the buried, and the unspeakable, Loung resists precisely the loss of memory that contributes to the rewriting of history. *A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* so that generations may not conveniently erase or forget. ■

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- ¹ Robert Jay Lifton, 'Understanding the Traumatized Self: Imagery, Symbolization, and Transformation', in John P. Wilson, Zev Harel, and Boaz Kahana (eds.), *Human Adaptation to Extreme Stress: From the Holocaust to Vietnam* (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1988), 19.
- ² Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (London: W.H. Allen, 1986), 209.

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BORN CONFUSED

By Tanuja Desai Hidier

Scholastic, India, 2002, pp. 413, Rs. 295.00



The publication of Tanuja Desai Hidier's *Born Confused* marks a new and much-awaited turn in the tradition of Indian American literature. Though a relatively new entrant in the literary marketplace, this tradition has already established itself through the critically acclaimed works of writers such as Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, etc. So far this literature has focused largely on the experiences of first generation Indian immigrants as they negotiate new definitions of home and identity. But a growing part of the Indian diaspora in the US now consists of second-generation Indian Americans, and yet, this experience has been explored only in occasional pieces that have appeared in South Asian-American literature anthologies. By writing a full-length novel about Dimple Lala, the American-born child of Indian immigrants, who is experiencing the characteristic "not quite Indian and not quite American" dilemma of second-generation Indian Americans, Hidier has opened the doors for the exploration of a whole new set of diaspora experiences that promise to further enrich the field of Indian American Literature.

Hidier's novel, however, has been preceded by several filmic explorations of the second generation experience, from Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* to the relatively recent *American Desi* by Piyush Dinkar Pandya. In fact, the title of Hidier's novel, *Born Confused* comes from the same source as that of Pandya's film; while Hidier has chosen the middle two letters from the epithet ABCD ("American Born Confused Desi") for her title, Pandya's film takes the first and the last to create "American Desi." As the source of the two titles implies, both works explore the cultural confusion that besets second-generation Indian Americans. The perfect complementarity of these two titles, however serendipitous, is particularly appropriate in the light of their equally complementary treatment of their common subject matter; Hidier's novel tells the same story of a youngster who first rejects and then, inspired by love, learns to appreciate Indian culture, from a female perspective that Pandya relates from a male point of view. Both works have been enthusiastically received by mainstream American media, and as such, appear to mark the coming of age of second-generation Indian Americans. And yet, if this is the voice of the next generation, the generation that claims to embody a rich cultural hybridity, then why is its creative expression so univocal? How can a single simplistic script suffice to contain this rich hybridity? As little more than a cross-gendered clone of Pandya's film, which is itself marked by stereotypical characters and easy resolutions, Hidier's novel dissatisfies by its refusal to deal with any of the complexities of cross-cultural conflict even in a narrative that stretches over 400 pages.

Born Confused as mentioned earlier is the story of Dimple Lala, a second-generation Indian American growing up in a small town in New Jersey. More precisely, it is the story of one summer vacation that begins with a very confused Dimple torn between the expectations of her very white American friend and her traditional Indian parents, and ends, three months later, with a self-confident Dimple who has discovered her "true self" with the aid of her camera and her Indian boyfriend. This condensed bildungsroman follows what the author herself admits to be a fairy-tale pattern; "The Ugly Duckling," "Cinderella," and "Rapunzel" come together to shape the journey of Dimple from a small-town girl who sees herself as the nightmarish reverse twin of the "blonde-haired, blue-eyed... American Dream," to "the famous Dimple Lala" whose photographs adorn the walls of the hip New York dance club where she also becomes the "rani" of her Prince Charming, the suitably unsuitable Karsh Kapoor. There is, of course, some overt feminist revisioning of the fairy tale narratives. Dimple's transformation is made possible more through her own talent as a photographer and the intervention of her female friends (Gwyn, the all-American best friend, and Kavita, the fresh-from-India lesbian cousin) than the aid of her Prince Charming. And while Dimple's love for Karsh may be the most important motivating factor in her transformation, the novel is careful to make Karsh only one among several rewards that she gets for becoming her "true self." Recognizing that her conflicts are just part of "being a person - growing up" rather than "a personal drama" that no one else can understand, Dimple emerges at the end of the novel with a stronger relationship with her parents as well as her "supertwin" Gwyn. Even more importantly, perhaps, she

establishes for herself an identity as a professional photographer who can make others see "the view from the inside of [her] eyes." Dimple's story then, in Hidier's own words, shows that "an ABCD wasn't a failed Indian, but a being in her/his own right ... [who could] turn the confusion to clarity through creativity." Read in this way, *Born Confused* may be seen as an inspiring novel for its intended young adult audience.

But Hidier's revisioning of fairy tales, while foregrounding female agency, also involves a process of Disneyfication whereby all manner of unpleasantness is swept out of the narrative. *Born Confused* is singularly free from any intrusion of the violent power politics that are embodied in the wicked witch type of fairy tale characters. In a novel that attempts to touch upon all sorts of cross-ethnic, cross-generational and cross-sex/gender issues, this complete absence of any real conflict is perplexing to say the least. While Dimple does feel that her parents are using the Indian "marriage mafia" to control her love life and her best friend is "stealing" her cultural identity (along with the love of her life) by dressing in Indian clothes, the narrative clearly reveals all such feelings to be merely a result of Dimple's own immaturity. Once Dimple overcomes her sense of persecution and actually talks to the people in her life, it becomes obvious to her (and hence, supposedly, to the readers) that her parents, far from trying to get her married off at the age of 17, are merely trying to find her a "jeevansathi" / "someone to share the world with, this life with." And Gwyn's wrapping herself in all things Indian, from rakhis and bindis to scarves and sequined tops, is merely an attempt to be "cool," to have "a culture, a country" that she could belong to since her own parents have no place for her in their lives. Some readers may wonder about the necessity of parents' finding a "jeevansathi" for their 17-year old daughter, and question this self-deluding portrayal of a poor little rich white American girl who, paradoxically, has "no country" of her own. But the narrative itself glosses over these implications to confidently make all conflicts disappear like mirages caused by small interpersonal misunderstandings. The novel, ultimately, becomes an unquestioning and unproblematic celebration of the classic liberation narrative wherein "the land of the free" allows all immigrants to create their own space and their own identity.

The novel does provide an enlivening glimpse into this space and identity that is created through the creative fusion of two cultures. Hidier's vivid description of the fast-growing South Asian-American music and dance scene almost makes the act of reading itself into a multimedia experience. This feeling, in fact, is being shaped into concrete reality by Hidier who, along with her music group, is currently composing songs that would accompany the narrative of *Born Confused*. At the same time, the novel also embodies this cultural fusion in its own vibrant prose through creative innovations ranging from using "frock" as an expletive to naming Dimple's camera "Chica Tikka" after "the scarlet dust her own mother pressed between her [Dimple's mother's] brows the morning she left for America." And yet, can cultural confusion be resolved easily through such creative fusion? Is culture merely a matter of material objects, of accessories that can be mixed-and-matched with their American counterparts to create a new ensemble? What about the ways of living, thinking, being, that form part of one's cultural baggage? These, the novel implies, can easily be shed through the trans-Atlantic journey. It is only in India that arranged marriages close-off all possibilities for suitable girls, which is why both Dimple's mother, who has an inter-caste "love" marriage, and Dimple's cousin Kavita, who "loves women" more than men, come to America where they can be themselves. And yet, it is in America that Dimple's mother, a trained doctor and skilled classical dancer, becomes the house-bound obsessive parent who arranges for Dimple's meeting with a "suitable" Indian boy.

The novel's easy division of cultural property into the seemingly immovable ideas and attitudes that are left behind in India, and the movable objects, from Lata Mangeshkar records to clothing and furniture, that are carried over to America, is thus belied by the subtext of its own narrative. Hidier's refusal, or inability, to deal with culture as a whole, and hence, to explore the complexity of the second-generation Indian American experience in a nuanced manner undermines her stated purpose of redefining the immigrant alphabet - ultimately it is confusion rather than creativity that is the defining feature of this ABCD novel. ■

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THE FACTS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

By Brock Cole

Young Picador, London, 1997, rpt. 2003, pp. 150, £4.99

An unusually brave children's book; it deals head on with problems like child abuse and dysfunctional families that most authors prefer to avoid. To me the real merit of this book is that it recognizes that children can and should absorb and think about many issues generally considered inappropriate for them. It is also a daunting task to package these concerns in a manner which children can digest, without reducing those concerns in the process.

Narrated through the eyes of the thirteen-year-old Linda, the story opens in a police station where Linda is being interrogated about the murder of the man who had been raping her and who was, incidentally, also her mother's boss. The accused is her mother's former boyfriend. Linda is sent to a Catholic charity home where she is put into therapy. A major part of this book is in the form of a 'preliminary report' required by social services, which Linda insisted on writing herself. It reveals the series of events – in fact Linda's whole life – leading up to the murder. The first child of a college drop-out mother and a Native American father, her life is a dismal saga of upheaval and uncertainty. After Linda's mother 'kicks' her father out and slides into another disastrous relationship with a law student, she has a nervous breakdown. Thus eight-year-old Linda, far more pragmatic than her mother ever is, becomes the mainstay of the family. Her mother's take on the situation is as follows: I now understand True Peace and how to obtain it, she said... All you have to do is Cease Striving. If you do that, you will feel complete peace. I said if you do that you will starve to death in no time (p. 31).

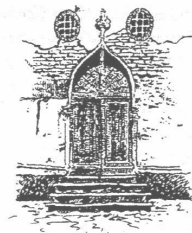
When a concerned neighbour intervenes, they move in with Linda's grandparents in Hibbing. Though obviously not very welcome, they stay there until Linda's mother takes up with another man, this time the father of one of her old schoolmates. Things are unusually stable for a few years only to fall apart again when this man, Mr. Bloomberg, has a stroke which

leads to dementia. Linda's mother leaves him. Linda, however, refuses to abandon Mr. Bloomberg and stays behind to take care of him. This, I should mention, is one of the incidents of the story which I find unconvincing. No thirteen-year-old, however balanced or mature, could handle this situation with the cool control which Linda displays. It is at places like this that the bland unemotional style of the book seems overdone: There was a homeowners' insurance bill and also one for the car. I paid that, even though Mom had the car. If anything happened to her and Stoppard, I thought it was important that they be covered (p. 77).

Those parts of the book where Linda betrays a more believable vulnerability and loneliness come as a refreshing change. There is, for instance, the time when she plans to call over an old classmate and keep her prisoner for a while: I thought I would write her a cheque and say this is for you if you stay overnight. I couldn't decide what the right amount was. Fifty dollars didn't seem enough, and a hundred would scare her away (p. 82).

As the story proceeds, Linda eventually returns to her mother, who has both a new job and a new partner. This is the would-be climax of the book, as her mother's new boss, who was abusing Linda over a period of time, is shot and killed by that same partner. I say 'would-be climax' because in point of fact the tone of the book does not change from beginning to end. Another factor that struck me very forcibly about this book was the use of the photographic mode of writing. It is dotted with details, some of them, I thought, superfluous in the sense that they failed to create an atmosphere: We do our laundry at Wash'n'Dry. It costs a dollar a load to wash. The dryer takes quarters. I put in seventy-five cents to start and then add another if the clothes aren't dry enough. They also have a wash-and-fold service (p. 15). ■

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GHOST STORIES FROM THE RAJ

Edited by Ruskin Bond

Rupa, Delhi, 2002, rpt. 2003, pp. 170, Rs. 150.00

THE RUPA BOOK OF THE TALES OF MYSTERY AND ADVENTURE

Edited by Ruskin Bond

Rupa, Delhi, 2003, pp. 236, Rs. 295.00

THE RUPA BOOK OF RUSKIN BOND'S HIMALAYAN TALES

Rupa, Delhi, 2003, pp. 135, Rs. 150.00



I don't usually read ghost stories. They're no fun because I never believe them enough to get the jitters. But last night I read *Ghost Stories From the Raj*, and by the end, I started wondering if it were possible that there really were things like spirits. Perhaps it was just a cumulative effect of one absurd thing after another, and it being the middle of the night.

If you decide to read this book, perhaps you should start with 'The Return of Imray' by Rudyard Kipling. It's quite creepy, if it's true.

Did you know that when a tiger kills a man for the first time, the man's spirit adopts the tiger, and becomes his guide? After this it is supposedly much tougher to trap the tiger because the spirit has the intelligence and knowledge of the man and guides the tiger away from any danger. Or that eating a certain root turns men into tigers, and eating it a second time (though this is the tricky part because the tiger doesn't usually want to eat the root) turns him back into a human being. But these stories actually make you wonder. The 'natives', that is, Indians—are superstitious to the nth degree believing wholeheartedly in the legends about various spirits and what not.

The stories in this book are written by British staying in India and are about their experiences with the local ghosts, spirits and even a man who could concentrate on objects and move them with his mind. This particular story is quite fascinating and left me wondering whether the narrator was using his imagination to entertain readers, or was there something more to it? Was it true—had there been men who could create a champagne glass

out of thin air using some sort of mental power?

You don't need to be a fervent animal lover to enjoy 'Tiger Roars Eagle Soars'. If I were to describe it, it would sound like the typical story of the animal whose natural habitat is destroyed by men, and the animal kills a man when he has no choice left, and then is hunted by the rest of the men. But there's much more to this tale; it leaves you with this feeling of compassion for all animals. When you have just twenty minutes, and you really need a break, this is what you should read.

'Earthquake', another short story by Ruskin Bond made me realize one can never outgrow Ruskin Bond's books.

Then there was the *Himalayan Tales*. Ruskin Bond's style is so simple and straightforward that it makes his stories very easy to read. And the beauty is in the story itself. Sit down in a nice comfy sofa, pick up *The Rupa Book of Ruskin Bond's Himalayan Tales*, and the next thing you know, you're climbing a mountain, crossing a stream and looking out for leopards. Even though I've never lived in a small Indian town, nothing in the story seems odd or unfamiliar. It only makes me wish I'd lived that kind of life. The author must remember very clearly what it was like to be a child. When I read his book, I remembered thinking the same things when I was younger, I can really identify with his characters.

The *Rupa Book of True Tales of Mystery and Adventure* has every kind of story—stories of courage, misfortune, torture and, of course, mystery—not mysteries invented and solved by the author, but strange incidents which remain unexplained. One story I really liked was about someone who gave up hunting after he witnessed the compassion and love of one animal for another. ■

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WHO WILL BE NINGTHOU? A STORY FROM MANIPUR
By Indira Mukherjee. Illustrations by A.V. Ilango
Tulika, Chennai, 1999, pp.20, Rs. 120.00

AND LAND WAS BORN
Retold by Sandhya Rao. Art by Uma Krishnaswamy
Tulika, Chennai, 1998, pp.25, Rs. 175.00

A FOLKTALE FROM TAMIL NADU: MAGIC VESSELS
By Vayu Naidu. Illustrations by Mugdha Shah
Tulika, Chennai, 1997, pp.21, Rs. 60.00

A FOLKTALE FROM RAJASTHAN: EYES ON THE PEACOCK'S TAIL; A FOLKTALE FROM BENGAL: HISS, DON'T BITE; A FOLKTALE FROM BIHAR: A CURLY TALE
By Vayu Naidu. Illustrations by Mugdha Shah
Tulika, Delhi, 1997, pp.21, Rs. 60.00 each

EKKI DOKKI: A MARATHI FOLK TALE
Retold by Sandhya Rao. Illustrations by Ranjan De
Tulika, Delhi, 1996, pp.25, price not stated.

A TREE IN MY VILLAGE
Written and Illustrated by Paritosh Sen
Tulika, Delhi, 1996, pp.32 (19 illustrations), Rs. 140.00

TALES OF FABLED BEASTS, GODS & DEMONS
By Bulbul Sharma. Illustrations by Sujata Singh
Puffin Books, Delhi, 2002, pp.111 (45 illustrations), Rs. 199.00

THE WISE MONKEY AND OTHER ANIMAL STORIES
By Geeta Ramanujam. Illustrations by Ajanta Guhathakurta
Puffin Books, Delhi, 2002, pp. VII + 112, Rs. 199.00

THE PUFFIN BOOK OF CLASSIC INDIAN TALES FOR CHILDREN
By Meera Uberoi,
Puffin Books, Delhi, 2002, pp.200, Rs.399.00

In this age of forgetfulness folktale is the only way of connecting children to their ancestral memory and timeless origins of orality. Folktale is also the only way of making children learn how culture specificity of their language and its environs are in fact universal in nature. These two important thoughts immediately come to the foreground when one reads these eleven books of Indian tales in English at one stretch. But first of all what is a folktale? Folktale is a generic name for a variety of prose narratives found in the oral traditions. Like the numerous forms of folklore folktales also undergo various changes as they pass on from one generation to another and in the course of retellings. So if versions characterize folktales as an essential trait their oral transmission through a culture or many cultures add another important trait to their identification. Although very well defined definitions for myths, legends, fairy tales, tales explaining proverbs, ballads, epics, ghost stories, ethnic slurs, chanted narratives and folktales exist in various Indian contexts, all these forms overlap on to one another to produce the blurred genre called folktale. Some folktales may go into the written literature and some literary stories may come into the oral traditions. So the definition of any folktale depends on its function in a society and the way the audience think of it at the time of its retelling. In this context the books under review need to be looked at in their ability to facilitate children to reconnect to their collective cultural resources so that they can gain intellectual foundations for their cultural excellence.

Tulika's Wordbird Books series have beautifully conceptualized the retelling situation (or the reading situation) of the folktales in print. In their own words "Wordbird Books: This series features cross-cultural, cross-lingual stories published simultaneously in English, Hindi, Malayalam, Kannada and Tamil. The stories, sourced from the rich oral traditions and folklore of India and other regions, emphasise the similarities and differences existing in this, our one world. Unfamiliar words and ideas are explained with the help of Wordbirds, which streak across the pages and the child

quickly acquires a multilingual vocabulary. Wordbirds nest in all the books in this series, ideal for 4 to 8 year-olds."

Of the two books in the series *Who Will Be Ningthou? A Story from Manipur* is excellently narrated by Indira Mukherjee retaining the oral character of the tale. A.V. Ilango's illustrations powerfully evoke Manipuri characters. Interspersed with words from the Manipuri dialect called Maitailon this charming folktale is the best in accomplishing the stated objectives of the Tulika publishers. The tale itself is worth summarizing here. "The Ningthou and Leima, king and queen of Manipur, rule well over their meeyam, their people. The people are happy and live in peace. And then it is time to name a successor to the throne. A contest is held. Who is named the next Ningthou? The people were all attention. The Ningthou stood up. He looked at the three boys. He looked at the little girl. He turned to his people. 'If anybody is worthy of becoming the ruler,' he said, 'it is little Sanatombi. It was she who felt the pain when the khongnang was hurt. It was she who told us to look at the soul of the khongnang. Sanatombi feels the pain of others. She feels the pain of the people, the animals, the birds, the trees. I declare Sanatombi the future Leima of Kangleipak,' the Ningthou said. Everyone turned to look at the little girl, their future queen. There she stood, all of five, like a small khongnang, with birds flying all around her. They sat on her shoulders and on her head. She held out her hands full of grain and the birds flapped about her, pecking at the food." Such tales are the rarest of rare kind.

The second book in the same series *And Land Was Born* is a wild one. One of the creation myths of the Bhilalas, a tribe living in central India, *And Land Was Born* was a story told by Guna Baba and retold by Sandhya Rao in English. Uma Krishnaswamy has appropriately drawn her motifs from the folk painting traditions of the Worlis, Gonds and the Bhilalas to create an exquisite illustration for this book. Although she claims that the 'fantasy element in the story reflects the unfettered nature of the oral tradition' and that this book brings together 'picture and word in a spirit of that freedom and celebration' are partly true, it would have been better had an introduction to the generic qualities of the creation myths been included.

This kind of a lacuna points to the storywriters' unfamiliarity with international folklore scholarship. The Finnish folklorist, Antti Aarne and the American folklorist, Stith Thomson have prepared full geographical and historical surveys of all the known versions of widely disseminated tales and produced the basic index for tale types and motifs. Aarne produced the catalogue in 1910, which Thomson enlarged, and translated it in 1928. This is known as Tale-Type Index to international folklore scholars. In addition to this, Thomson's Motif-Index classifies worldwide plots of folktales into narrative elements. Had Sandhya Rao consulted these two indices it would have greatly facilitated her in presenting the creation myth of the Bhilalas and also in identifying the similarities and differences existing in the worldwide phenomenon of creation myths.

The same comment holds good for the three, the other folktales *Ekki Dokki*, *Eyes on the Peacock's Tail* and *Hiss, Don't Bite* published by Tulika as all three of them are familiar tale types. Like the creation myths, tales offering explanations for the origins of certain familiar characteristics in animals and birds (for instance, eyes on the peacock's tail) are universal features of imagination at work in the oral tradition. Acquaintance with indices of tale type and motif and also the associated scholarship on particular tale types would greatly enhance the presentations and retellings for the children. Imaginative authors such as Sandhya Rao and Vayu Naidu could also develop several educational games based on the tale types.

Through the four retellings of folktales Vayu Naidu emerges as a great storyteller. When read aloud *Hiss, Don't Bite* and *A Curly Tale* create excellent performances of story telling. Mugdha Shah's imaginative use of Mithila style of painting for illustrating a folktale from Bihar and Parh painting for folktale from Rajasthan immensely enhance the reading experience. The linking of local painting tradition with the presentation of the tale is another laudable effort from the Tulika publishers.

The Puffin books under review have great illustrations but do not exhibit any clear thoughtful process behind either the selection of tales or in sequencing them. Except Sandhya Rao's *And Land Was Born* none of the

folktale books reveal the original source of the tales. In the Puffin books there are no glossaries for Indian words.

Meera Uberoi, Bulbul Sharma and Geeta Ramanujam may have young adults rather than children in their minds when they put together their collection of tales. Some of the myths included in Bulbul Sharma's and Meera Uberoi's collections depict violence, cruelty and brutality fit only for the adult perspective. Bruno Bettelheim once wrote in his *Uses of Enchantment* that exposure to evil characters and the destiny of good characters in suffering is actually therapeutic. Perhaps from the gentle story of *Who Will Be Ningthou?* to the death of Abhimanyu in Meera Uberoi's collection a child may have to go through several inevitable rites of passage to become an adult.

Paritosh Sen's *A Tree In My Village* is an odd book in the sense that this is not a folktale. It is a sensitive recounting of a childhood experience. In his observations Paritosh Sen records the variety of bird, animal and insect life in and around the Arjuna tree in his village. *A Tree In My Village* stands to testimony to how simple documentary writing of childhood recollections could produce rich symbolisms. Perhaps for reconnecting to cultural memory what a child needs is an individual artist's experience and not a folktale!

M.D. Muthukumaraswamy is the Executive Trustee and Director of National Folklore Support Centre, Chennai.

EASY READER! STANDARD I, II AND III

Academic Unit Atomic Energy Education Society, 2002, 2002 and 2003, Rs. 60.00, 70.00 and 75.00

MATHS LADDER I-V

Academic Unit Atomic Energy Education Society, 2003, Rs. 40.00 each.

The *Easy Readers* published by the Academic Unit of the Atomic Energy Education Society are very colourful and clearly printed text books. The exercises leave enough space for the child to write easily, a point often overlooked in workbooks. The extensive exercises on English Grammar and Language work aim at improving spoken English. The names of characters and foods situations are those familiar to the average child, making it easier for them to understand. Though they are entitled Readers very few questions based on comprehension of the story have been included. In fact it serves as a good language text book. The accompanying Teacher's Guides not only serve to assist the teacher but also give useful suggestions. However at times too many details have been given and the teacher should be competent enough not to confuse the child.

Reader I published in April 2002 is for students of Class One. It is colourful and imaginative and is bound to make learning more enjoyable. However assuming that the students have been through kindergarten and preparatory classes, the first few lessons and exercises seem rather elementary. Lesson Two is very good for picture reading, being colourful, it is bound to stir the child's imagination. However, the exercises are again a bit too elementary but might help the students who have not had much exposure to English prior to Class One. There are six lessons in all starting from the Alphabet to forms and usage of irregular verbs. A limited vocabulary (about 375 words) makes it easy to just concentrate on the basic rules of the English Language. Poems are related to the lessons preceding or succeeding it enabling the child to understand common words and phrases of the lesson.

Reader II published in May 2002 and revised and reprinted in February 2003 gives the impression of being a bit too extensive. A lot of emphasis has been laid on forms and usage of verbs. No doubt it will help children improve spoken English, but some exercises are too lengthy. Besides there are too many exercises. This book is also quite colourful.

Reader III published in February 2003 introduces many new phrases and words, along with more complex rules of grammar in keeping with those introduced in the previous two volumes. Besides helping the children learn English it also teaches moral values, good manners and life skills. The

book gets a little too exhaustive and again some exercises are a bit too lengthy. But once a student does manage to complete these exercises he is bound to gain more fluency and master the basic rules of English grammar. Children from homes where English is not used will benefit greatly.

Maths Ladder - 1: In order to enable children to do well in Mathematics, it is very important that they be taught the basic concepts correctly and thoroughly at the primary school level. And to help their primary school teacher to do this the Atomic Energy Education Society has written its own mathematics textbooks. Ladder 1 to 5 were published in February 2003, along with their Teachers' Manual. The exercises are graded gradually and it is important that the child go stage by stage. A single step missed in the ladder of the Mathematics is a setback for the child. Very often children who are weak in English are also weak in Mathematics. Keeping this in mind, these text books have used symbols and not advanced English, symbols being easier to follow. The steps are explained very clearly and are geared to help the child climb higher and higher. A total of six hundred steps are being systematically covered in these five books. The exercise pages leave enough space for the children to work. The Teacher's Manuals give clear instructions to enable the teachers teach concepts clearly without confusing the young minds. The exercises shouldn't be attempted until the concepts are thoroughly explained, for which the teacher should refer to the Manual.

The exercises are fairly exhaustive. However for ladder 3-5, the teacher could supplement with a few similar sums from other text books.

In order to do justice to these well written books it is very important that the teacher clearly study the accompanying Manual. In fact parents who wish to teach children should also refer to the Manual.

In *Ladder One* although the first three lessons would have been covered in the preparatory Classes they should be covered thoroughly, because these concepts are fundamental in the learning of Mathematics.

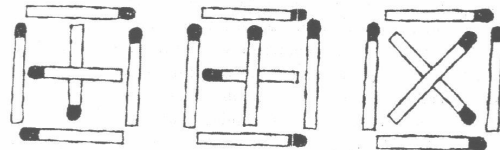
It is very important that all the lessons in *Ladder One* be thoroughly understood, otherwise understanding *Ladder Two* becomes difficult. In *Ladder Three* the lessons taught in Class 1 become a bit more complex—step by step. Lessons on Measurement have been introduced. The exercises are quite exhaustive but teachers could add some more sums to supplement.

Ladder 4 Includes Multiples and Factors, the concept of Decimals and exercises in Geometry. The exercises are planned in a simple and clear style, hence the child will be able to tackle them with ease once the teacher has clearly explained the concept.

Ladder 5: Averages, Percentages, Speed, Distance, Time are taught at the level for which a thorough understanding of division and to some extent multiplication is required. Thus, the teacher should brush up the knowledge of these topics off and on. The exercises at this level are presented in a clear manner. Although story problems are there, there should have been more as the child learns to apply the concepts that have been taught. Bills and Timetables as well as Area and Volume have also been included. Once a child masters all these concepts his foundation will be strong and he will be able to tackle Mathematics in the higher classes with ease.

Ladders 1-5 truly aim at giving children a good foundation in Mathematics. ■

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MY BIG BOOK OF VALUES VOLS. 1-8
Ratna Sagar, Delhi, Rs. 44.90 each

READ AND COLOUR FREEDOM SERIES

By Sandhya Rao

THE STORY OF TIPU SULTAN

Illustrations by Uma Krishnaswamy

THE STORY OF RANI OF JHANSI

Illustrations by Reginald Goveas

THE STORY OF DANDI MARCH

Illustrations by Ranjan De

THE STORY OF 15TH AUGUST 1947

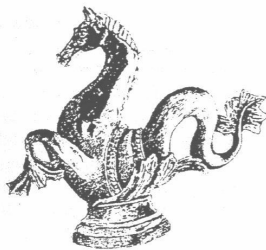
Illustrations by Reginald Goveas

Tulika, Chennai, 1997, rpt. 1999, Rs. 40.00 each

BHOPAL GAS TRAGEDY: A BOOK FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

By Suroopa Mukherjee. Photographs by Raghu Rai

Tulika, Chennai, 2002, pp.48, Rs. 50.00



When we were in school, one class in a week was devoted to moral science and we were subjected to the torture of going through loaded didactic passages from a drab blue book. I still remember most of us made boats and airplanes with the cover. It was our own way of seeking freedom from the do's and the don'ts. But then we were probably the last generation of Indian children who were brought up under strict parental surveillance. In the name of family ties and prestige, we were expected to pray to the family deity, celebrate religious and social days and obey the elders with as much respect as one shows to God. The school in this respect was an extension of the home. Maybe the intendment of values made us claustrophobic and so our children grew up with enough democratic rights. Now, why would they want the future generation to go back to the so-called forsaken values?

I realize that a generation grew up following a merely pragmatic value culture. Crass materialism and opportunism has today become the order of the day. Many of us realised that somewhere down it has taken a heavy toll of our cultural and familial system. When I read stories like 'Kaki' by Premchand as it appears in *My Big Book of Values, Vol. 8* and notice how a value-vacuum attitude robs the dignity of the old and the infirm, my apprehensions are confirmed. A market-oriented education system has created a generation of insular children, who have distanced themselves from human as well as patriotic value culture. A mild but pointed dosage of value education, if it forms part of the curriculum, can subconsciously infuse in a child the sensitivity that is fast withering.

My Big Book of Values Vols. 1-8 has been designed to cater to the National Curriculum Framework year 2000. Though the inclusion is at a primary stage, it desires to provide meaningful opportunities for the holistic development of the child. Books 1-4 are tool kits designed for very small children. They make value education altogether an exciting project. Books 6,7 and 8 contain interesting stories, which send multiple messages. But most important, they touch the finer chords in human beings, adult as well as children. 'Bet I Can't' (Book 8) is one such story about a unique friendship between an uncle and his nephew. The uncle dies of lung cancer. The young boy regrets not having challenged his uncle to give up smoking. 'The Brother' (Book 8) is another such touching story about a young bully. If one sensitively treats maladjustment of children, rather than being judgmental, one can discover the hidden sorrow behind their anger and frustration.

'The Bag', (Book 5) I think is less about a good Samaritan and more about a humane police officer. 'In Prodigal Son' we get the message that parental love is unalloyed. 'Lonely Sunday' (Book 7) is another beautiful story about how not to wallow in self-pity. The boy's feelings softens when he realizes that the mother is suffering no less, because the parents have separated. The stories depicting exemplary courage in war and crossing the insurmountable barrier can be valued for projecting the human angle in war and life. In sum, these books have used many real life stories and anecdotes that touch the finer chords in our heart. I also notice with great relief that the stories are not overtly didactic. At the same time, the exercises attached to each story robs the pleasure of reading and enjoying them. It

would have made a greater impact if the author had left it to the imagination of the child. The section that tries to impart religious values appear a little contrived. Faith in God and all religions are equal, are hackneyed theme. It is pointless recycling them unimaginatively.

The series *Read and Colour Freedom Stories* are innovatively designed books to raise the level of patriotic fervour in children. *The Story of 15th August 1947* contains reminiscences of those who actually experienced the joy of unfurling the national flag for the first time in Independent India. Many recounted the thrilling experience of listening to Nehru's broadcast to the nation on the 14th of August, midnight. Raghu, who stays in Mandya, gives a most honest account. The broadcast was unclear, but that did not deter him from gluing his ears to the radio. Sabinu very sensitively remembers how in the year 1942, Kanaklata Barangabari, a 13-year old freedom fighter from Assam, laid down her life while trying to hoist the national flag. Let us not forget her courage and faith, and what she contributed towards winning our freedom.

The biographical sketches, which include Rani Jhansi and Tipu Sultan, are brief accounts of how the two organised a resistance movement towards colonial oppression. Gandhi's Dandi March is yet another story of resistance, only the method he used was non-violent. Fortunately, no eulogistic language has been used in this series. The pictures detailing the write-up on each page, which the child is expected to colour, is an innovative technique of infusing the text into the minds of the child. Altogether, I think it is not an effort wasted.

The Bhopal Gas Tragedy has been described by Suroopa as 'an alarm call to mankind'. As the story unfolds we realize how it happened and also what was in store for the victims. It all happened on a cold wintry night on 3rd December 1984. The city dwellers had settled indoors. In the Union Carbide factory, a multinational company producing pesticides containing methyl isocyanite, the night shift had begun. Some workers noticed a chamber containing MIC had got over-heated. Earlier in the day, the pipe leading to the fated tank was being flushed when a large amount of water leaked. Through the leakage, some metal particles and other debris went in and led to a combustion like situation. The deadly gas that was emitted killed more than 20,000 people. Those who got maimed were countless. The UCCL had throughout lied about their safety norm. More important the government seemed to have lacked the wherewithal to cope with a disaster of this magnitude, even though it made promises like giving Rs.10,000 and employment facility to the victims, family members (STEP UP programme). Operation Faith, a camp for the victims had also been set up, but both failed to deliver on a long-term basis.

UCCL could get away with murder, because according to law, the case against it could be filed only in the USA and India could only hope that a greater compensation could be arranged for the victims. But UCC was not willing to waste the US taxpayer's money for what happened in a distant country. The moral of the story is that nobody really suffered except the innocent. 550,000 injury claims are still pending. More than half the claims have been rejected because the law courts are unwilling to consider long-term health cases. The area close to the factory continues to be a health hazard for the people living in the surrounding areas. Besides, there are many such factories in India, which are a potential threat to the people and the environment because they have not as yet abided by the safety norms.

The Bhopal gas tragedy has been described as the 'Hiroshima of the chemical industry'. Even after two decades, breast-fed babies are exposed to dioxin! I have to congratulate Suroopa for this wonderful exposition on this legendary tragedy. The photographs of Raghu Rai have been very sensitively used. ■

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DAZZLING MATH LINE DESIGNS FOR GRADES 2-3 AND 4-5

By Cindi Mitchell
Scholastic India, rpt. 2003, pp.64, price not stated.

SCIENCE EXPERIMENTS FOR LEVELS 2 AND 3

By Tricia Dearborn
Scholastic India, 2002, pp. 48, price not stated.

JUPITER – MORE THAN 150 FACTS; MARS – MORE THAN 150 FACTS

By Biman Basu
Scholastic India, 2002, Rs. 40.00

SIGNPOST MATHS DICTIONARY: AN ESSENTIAL REFERENCE

By A. Parker
Scholastics India, 2003, pp. 76, price not stated.

DARE TO DRAW IN 3-D: GADGETS AND GIZMOS

By Mark Kistler
Scholastics India, rpt. 2003, pp. 42, £4.99

100 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT SPACE

By Sue Becklake
Miles Kelly Publishing, pp.48, GBP 7.99

SPACE EXPLORATION ATLAS

By Tim Furniss
Fire Publishing, 1999, pp. 96, GBP 7.99

Most of the books under review are published by Scholastic, which has been doing a commendable job for several years bringing into the Indian market the kinds of books that make learning and teaching fun. These are the type of books that we in India, teachers, parents or schools, got scarcely any opportunity to see, let alone buy. The progressive teacher is always on the lookout for new ideas to teach the same concepts and thanks to the interesting and exciting variety of books available now, it is possible to bring much greater participative learning into the classroom.

The two volumes of *Dazzling Math Line Designs* provide some ideas for taking the boredom out of repetitive maths operations. Acquiring proficiency in arithmetic requires children to be drilled in solving problems—the more they are drilled, the more likely they are to acquire speed and accuracy, but of course, drilling is often monotonous for children as well as teachers. In these books problems in the four arithmetical operations as well as in fractions and decimals (for the higher levels) are set in a particular geometric pattern. After solving the problems the children are asked to colour shapes, draw lines connecting the problem to its answer or even cut out their geometric shape to form 3-D mobiles. Some additional skills children would pick up while using these books would be learning to read and follow instructions, colouring neatly, drawing straight lines using rulers and cutting neatly. The 'Taking it Further' section on each page provides just that extra challenge to the brighter child. However, there are some problems: While these activities can be interesting, they can also get monotonous if over-used; the space provided to write the answers is often insufficient, particularly for younger children; some of the instructions presuppose a certain level of language ability which the younger Indian children may not have; the construction activities would require a fair amount of teacher involvement and might therefore mean that in the classroom situation the teacher may decide not to do them. Also, while it is desirable that such activities should be done as often as possible, it is also quite possible that the average Indian teacher, more used to traditional teaching, might find these activities time consuming and therefore decide not to do them.

The two volumes of *Science Experiments* are best suited for ages 8-12 – the levels mentioned on the covers are misleading. Children love learning science through activity and experiments and this book is full of interesting ideas to get them started in physics, chemistry and biology. They would also develop such science skills as observation, recording of observation, postulating a hypothesis, planning an experiment to test the hypothesis

and drawing conclusions from the results of the experiment. There is a most vital page of guidelines on safety while doing experiments. The books are organized into four sections—an introductory section for parents or teachers, ideas for quick and easy experiments, longer experiments and a final section where the child is encouraged to design his own experiment. One activity I particularly liked is where children are asked to design their own animal. They start by making up a habitat, including water, foods available, predators, terrain etc. They then swap sheets and make up an animal to fit the habitat given. What a wonderful way for children to understand adaptation in nature. There are, however, activities, which I can imagine a teacher feeling somewhat uncomfortable with. For example, asking a child to hang upside down from a chair while a partner helps him to take a gulp of water – to understand the role of gravity in swallowing. It seems like a recipe for trouble. On balance, though, the pluses of the books far exceed the minuses.

The two small fact books on Jupiter and Mars are just the kind of thing to give as a gift to a 9-11 year-old child or to have in a library, since children love fascinating facts. The facts are organized in bulleted form, which makes it easy to assimilate them. Though the photos are in black and white, they are interesting, particularly the one of a volcanic eruption on Io. The tables at the end of the books are a quick and easy way for children to find facts about Jupiter's moons or space missions to the planets. However it has to be said that a certain science vocabulary and understanding of concepts

is taken for granted. For example, the term magnetic field or the concept that the gravity of heavenly bodies can be used to alter the motion of a spacecraft would both be beyond the comprehension of the average 9-11 year-old child.

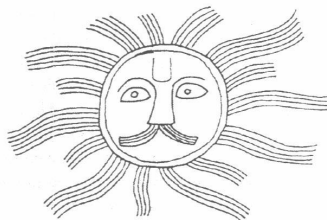
Signpost Maths Dictionary, suitable for children of Classes 4-7, would be an interesting and useful addition to a school or personal library. The maths information at the back of the book on topics such as symbols, shapes, circles, etc., is interesting—the most interesting being the one on counting systems. It is a pity however that a dictionary should have spelling errors—for example kilogram is misspelt on page 26.

The book on 3-D drawing has an interesting presentation, but the language might just be a little difficult for many Indian children to follow, thus reducing the usefulness of the book. Foreshortened, for example, is a word that appears often and is sure to mystify most children.

The two books on space are for two different levels. *100 Things You Should Know* is for younger children, up to about 9-11 years of age. It is a child-friendly book with an attractive layout and very clear and good pictures. The facts are presented well and even difficult concepts are explained clearly, simply and lucidly. The cartoons on each page—like the one on black holes—are charming. Snippets of extra information (endearingly titled 'I don't believe it'), suggestions for interesting activities which enhance understanding—making a crater is one of them—or short quizzes are scattered randomly throughout the book and are sure to capture the child's interest and imagination.

The Space Exploration Atlas is more suited to middle-school children since a certain amount of understanding of scientific terminology is taken for granted. It too is profusely illustrated and the layout should appeal to computer-savvy children. Each page has several boxes of text, photographs as well as illustrations that vie for attention. Some of the photographs are stunning, such as the one of the earthrise over the lunar horizon or the one taken by the Galileo orbiter of the mosaic of colours in Jupiter's atmosphere. Learning skills are sure to be aided by the interesting tables, glossary and index at the back of the book. A good book for a school library. ■

Moneesha Sharma is a school teacher who has written activity-based concept development textbooks for young children. She is presently working as advisor to the Principal of The Future Foundation School at Kolkata.



APPU LEARNS TO TRUMPET

By Rajee Raman. Illustrations by Avishek Sen
Rupa & Co., Delhi, 2003, Rs. 50.00

MONKEYNUT AND THE MAGIC FIGS

By Pratibha Nath
Rupa & Co., Delhi, 2003, Rs. 50.00

A PERFECT FIT

By Mary Ann Dasgupta. Illustrations by Khitish Chatterjee
Rupa & Co., Delhi, 2002, Rs. 50.00

THERE IS SOMETHING UNDER MY BED

By Paro Anand
Rupa & Co., Delhi, 2003, Rs. 50.00

WAKEUP LAZY BONES!: THE RUMBLING GRUMBLING POT OF WORRIES

By Jayanthi Nanokaran
Scholastic, India, 2003, Rs. 25.00 each

TANI IS ANGRY WITH KIKLEE; KIKLEE'S FRIENDS BECOME POETS

By Vajjayanti Savant Tonpe
Scholastic, India, 2003, Rs. 20.00 each

KUTTIAMMA

By Shiela Dhir

FEET PROBLEMS

By Akhila Giriraj Kumar. Illustrations by Prithvishwar Guha
Children's Book Trust, Delhi, 2002 and 2001, Rs. 17.00 each

A WHALE OF A TIME

By Benita Sen. Illustrations by Surendra Suman
Children's Book Trust, Delhi, 2001, Rs. 15.00

THE GUJJARS

By Lisa Gammel. Illustrations by Sujata Bansal
Children's Book Trust, Delhi, 2001, Rs. 17.00

THE BANJARA BOYS

By Manikya Veena. Illustrations by Neeta Ganagopadhya
Children's Book Trust, Delhi, 2001, Rs. 30.00

KHILONE WALA GHODA

By Deepa Agarwal. Illustrations by Mahendra Yadav
Children's Book Trust, Delhi, 2001, Rs. 15.00

KILKARI

By Ramesh Dwivedi. Illustrations by Tapas Guha
Children's Book Trust, Delhi, 2001, Rs. 65.00

GRANDMA'S HAPPY FOREST TALES

By Shikha Chopra. Illustrations by Nina Bahl
Madhuban Educational Books, Delhi, 2003, Rs. 60.00

All the stories in the Rupa Children's Collection series revolve around animals. *A Perfect Fit* is a story of Coby, the gentle cobra, who spends his time eating honey with his friend Bob, the bear. A bad toothache leads him to Dr Ooow, the owl dentist, who extracts his fangs. Will Cobrina marry a toothless cobra? The illustrations are exceptionally good. Younger children may not be able to understand all the symbols used, for example the bulb used to denote a bright idea. But they will grow to appreciate them.

In *Appu Learns to Trumpet* the animals are so humanized that one wishes that animal stories were more reflective of the natural state of being. The two stories in the book revolve around Appu, the young elephant and his trumpeting. However, the only point of reference seems to be the volume of his trumpeting. The redeeming element in this otherwise uni-dimensional tale is Appu's pact of friendship with Kuppusswamy, a little red ant.

Monkeynut and the Magic Figs on the other hand is a very clever mix of prose and short rhymes that can be enjoyed independently but are inte-

grated into the story as well. Some magic figs turn animals into poets. This leads to the organization of a 'sing song evening' in which there is enthusiastic participation by all animals. Each one uses the occasion to recite a rhyme. There is also a touch of bilingualism, with the use of English and Hindi, in the rhymes. The crow's oratory piece, the Black Button, goes like this,

Water, water, all day long,
'thanda paani' is my song.
Give me sherbat, give me lassi,
I am tired, hot and dusty.

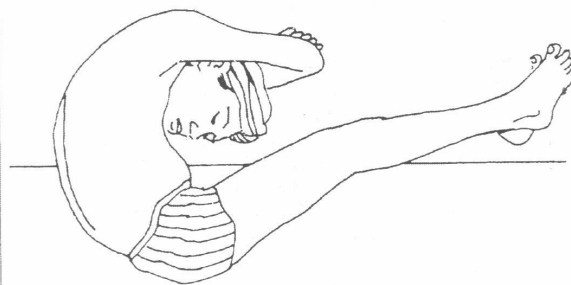
The rhymes in this story try to communicate some characteristic of the orator. The bear holds forth thus: "If old Mr bear would care to see, his face in a looking glass, he'd make such a fuss, and catch the first bus, to market to buy, a big hair brush, a big hair brush, a big hair brush." Thus, even though all the creatures live in utopian bonhomie, they retain some of their natural traits.

There's Something Under My Bed is a fantastic tale of the "underthe-bedsaurus" with its "slippy, slimy, icky-sticky, skinny long trail." It involves a strange creature that not only goes bump but "Rumble, Trumble, Bump and Grumble" in the night. Its favourite breakfast cereal would be "little boys with slippery pyjamas". The Old Woman of the Jungle (O W of J) adds an interesting turn to the story. 'Why is "sasurji" under Arjun's bed?' The tale has an unexpected twist at the end, which adds to the excitement. Definitely not a bedtime tale for the weak-hearted. The illustrations are humorous and merge into the prose.

Wake up Lazybones is a story set in a rural area. The cock Cuckrukoo wakes up an entire village and sets the women, men and children on their daily routine. But Bopu, the buffalo continues to sleep. This irks Cuckrukoo who adopts extreme measures to succeed in his mission to awaken Bopu. But these measures of Cuckrukoo backfire and now only Bopu can save him from the villagers' wrath. The story is brought alive in the wonderful Worli folk art of Maharashtra. Worli tribals paint the walls using rice paints and stick figures. These etchings provide a wonderful context for the story.

The Rumbling Grumbling Pot of Worries is a lovely tale complemented this time by Madhubani-style illustrations. Chitra's father is a potter who worries. She captures all his worries, stuffs them into a pot and climbs on to 'Dinoo Dinosaur'. With every giant step that Dinoo takes, Chitra reaches a new part of the world. She travels from the polar regions to the tropical forests, from deserts to mountains, from ocean beds to grasslands. Everywhere she discovers the flora and fauna unique to the area but nowhere can she get rid of the pot of worries. She meets resistance in natural forms of fires, waves, avalanches, hurricanes, sandstorm and blizzard. She returns home exhausted and dejected at not being able to help her father. Then Dinoo's advice "think good in everything" magically empties the pot of worries.

The same advice is reiterated in verse in *Kuttiamma*. She is the very embodiment of the never-say-die attitude. "Her house was flooded and



washed away, / "Well, I needed a new one anyway/ that is all Kuttiamma had to say." And further these lines sum up the positive philosophy: "The floods carried Kuttiamma along/ winding across the Yamuna headlong/ "Well, I always wanted a trip - a mini-cruise/ it is quite an adventure, what a fine excuse!" *Feet Problems* won second prize in the category Read-Aloud books in the competition for writers of children's books organized by the CBT. Batty, the caterpillar, is very unhappy when he has to visit a shoe-shop. Once there, he envies the butterfly who only has to buy three pairs of shoes. Batty is mortified by the number he has to purchase. He yearns to be a butterfly. The story of metamorphosis is simple yet lucid and the bright illustrations add more details.

In comparison, *A Whale of a Time* does not weave much information into a rather unconvincing storyline. Neither the blue whale nor its relationship with Rahit, his young friend, make any impression. *The Banjara Boys* is a didactic text that uses everyday realism to drive home issues of discipline, obedience, sulking and valuing money. There are four short tales that cover the life of Suraj from toddler to teenager. When Suraj wants a bicycle he has to earn the money by helping in chores, doing his homework and being good to his siblings. In ten months he is able to buy the bicycle from his hard earned money and therefore values it immensely. The book succeeds in blending creativity and learning.

The Gujjars is a very unusual story. It is narrated by a poor gujjar girl who recounts one day in the life of this nomadic community of shepherds and milk-sellers. Stories like these will go a long way in enabling children to gather knowledge about the very cultures and lifestyles of our country. The tale is a poignant account of a family's trek to the forest to milk buffaloes and collect wood and leaves. In spite of the hardships it talks of, the tone is far from condescending. In fact it is remarkably celebratory and content "I squirt the sweet, warm milk into my mouth, splat-

tering on my nose too. We both laugh until our sides hurt..." The Hindi translation of the Toy Horse was awarded second place in the Picture Books category by CBT. *Khilone Wala Ghoda* talks of a tribe, the Banjara tribals. Rami, the little girl is enchanting in her creativity. Her parents make and sell toys but cannot afford to give her one. So Rami too makes a horse for herself. This be-draggled horse is Rami's companion in endless flights of fancy. But one fine day a rich girl comes to buy toys. The problem does get resolved so that the two girls end up happy. The wealth and the details about Banjara life are also made available in the vividly colourful illustrations.

Kilkari is a collection of poems of inconsistent quality. Some of the metres lend themselves for recitation but others are a trifle forced. One must give credit though that the poet has chosen a variety of subjects. Some of the poems are homilistic like "Galti Mano", some are about female education like "Ma Main Jaaougi Vidyalay", while others are almost nonsensical rhymes like "Choocha Billi".

The Grandma is a parrot who is a story teller for all the little birds and animals gathered around her. There are ten tales that include 'Wicked Wolves', 'Proud Cockatoo', "monkeying" around with a mirror and other creatures. Some of the creatures are unnecessarily made to resemble humans more than animals. Though the book is supposed to be for reading and colouring, the illustrations are very rudimentary.

I Love Books from Tulika is a handy interactive book that could help generate interest in reading. With the help of the character of Pilu, the bookworm children are invited to attend to the different elements to the book, to assess or simply describe what they liked or disliked in a story, picture or character. Stickers and cartoons help to liven the interactive process. ■

Mitali Mishra Faridi teaches English at Lady Sri Ram College, Delhi University.

RUSTY: THE BOY FROM THE HILLS

By Ruskin Bond. Illustrations by Tapas Guha
Puffin Books, Delhi, 2002, pp. 209, Rs. 199.00

RUSTY RUNS AWAY

Puffin Books, Delhi, 2003, pp. 199, Rs. 199.00

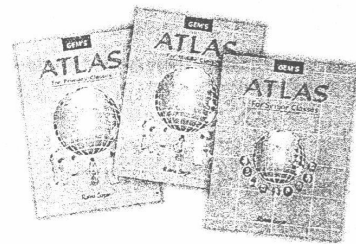
Rusty: *The Boy from the Hills* and *Rusty Runs Away* are delightful semi-autobiographical books by the inimitable Ruskin Bond. Reminiscent of Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals*, these comprise short chapters of Rusty's adventures with eccentric, loving grandparents and aunts, their pets and peevish, and his own cheerful bewilderment at it all.

Tapas Guha's illustrations as always entertain in themselves and fit the stories. Absolute must for book lovers, Bond fans, animal lovers, and anyone who enjoys good stories.



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EVEREST. BOOK ONE: THE CONTEST; BOOK TWO: THE CLIMB; BOOK THREE: THE SUMMIT

By Gordon Korman

Scholastic Inc., New York, 2002, \$ 4. 50 each.

Everest, the highest mountain on our globe has attracted climbers for nearly a century. This year is the 50th anniversary of its first ascent by Tensing and Hillary in 1953. The attitudes, organization and methods of climbing Everest—then and now—have undergone a vast change. The above three books, written as fiction for children, reflect how the modern expeditions operate, inside details of present-day expeditions challenging this great peak and it will be the pointer to the future. Sponsorships, commercial interests, and publicity are more important than spirit of climbing.

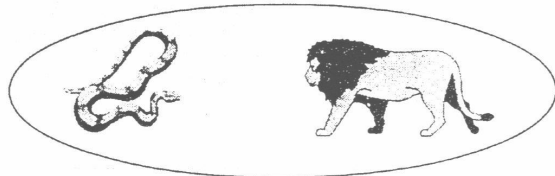
This is a story for the young aspirants climbing Everest. Gordon Korman though clearly states, he 'usually stays close to sea level', has studied the mountain, its routes, present-day heroes and scenario well to fit into the narrative. The race is to put youngest mountaineers on the summit, to better an age record established a year before. The climbers, some of whom are barely 14 years old, join the race and 'purpose of the expedition was advertising, after all'. Organiser 'Summit Quest would be on the front page of every newspaper on the planet—which was the whole idea.' Selection and training for the team is conducted at 'the Summit Athletic Sports Training Facility in High Falls, Colorado'. There are medical interviews as psychologists prepare 'Psych Profiles' of these youngsters and after initial elimination rounds a team of four is selected to attempt the mountain. The reason youths are risking lives is to beat just one risk, 'living a boring life'.

As they arrive at Kathmandu, Sherpa Babu Pemba receives them. Now they are in a world of websites and e-mails (not mountains), which regularly keep them in contact with the world, to keep them in the limelight and pursue the stated aims of the expedition—publicity, corporate logos, competition with the climbers from other nationalities, deceit and competition via e-mail contacts with the *National Daily*. They climb with 'This Way Up' expedition team and life revolves around <http://www.summaathletic.com/everest>, with various camps, routes and people featuring on the website with simple 'CLICK HERE TO SEE' button. If someone is suffering from HAPE the website ran a campaign 'Send this baby Home'.

The climbers who 'snacked on Summit Energy Bars', sent by their sponsors 'Summit Athletic Corporation' proceed higher on the peak as two Nepali officials, who chase them in a helicopter, fail to stop the under aged young. 'The homestretch began'. Despite the worst-case scenario of a leaking oxygen bottle (sabotaged!) climbers reach the summit, as the leader congratulates with 'You're going to be in all the papers tonight. You ate this mountain for breakfast'. Their record is beaten in the next two days and still younger members sneak up to the summit, despite the leader forbidding them to do so. Due to a storm the second party is forced to descend via the North Ridge on the other side of the mountain, and missing the route they descend by the West Ridge and are rescued quickly.

This is a work of fiction, but except for the final traverse of the mountain (which would beat any Bollywood film story), everything else reads very real. The sport, particularly on Everest, has taken shape where a laptop is more important than an ice axe at the South Col and publicity of the climb is more important than the climb itself. These books are introducing the present day realities to the youngsters and one wonders what they will do in the future, on this 'Greatest Blob on Earth'. Will they proceed on these lines or bring back the old spirit someday?

Harish Kapadia, mountaineer, author and editor of the *Himalayan Journal* for several years was recently awarded the Patron's Medal by the Royal Geographical Society.



THE ADVENTURES OF FELUDA: THE HOUSE OF DEATH; THE ADVENTURES OF FELUDA: THE MYSTERY OF THE ELEPHANT GOD; THE ADVENTURES OF FELUDA: THE EMPEROR'S RING; THE ADVENTURES OF FELUDA: THE CURSE OF THE GOD-DESS

By Satyajit Ray. Translated by Gopa Majumdar.

Puffin Books, Delhi, 2003, pp.96, 104, 99, Rs. 99.00 each

A treasure hunt for a ring that originally belonged to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb leads Feluda and his cousin Topshe from a sprawling bungalow with a cobbled driveway in Lucknow, where they are on holiday, to a dense forest between Hardwar and Lakshmanjholia. In between, there is a visit to the Imambara, with its famous, labyrinthine *bhoob-bhulaiya*, apart from the metaphoric maze out of which a way has to be contemplated and worked out by the amateur private detective in *The Emperor's Ring*, the first of the numerous detections he undertakes in the serialized Feluda stories of Ray. The child-narrator Topshe describes him as "Some people think him crazy, some say he is only eccentric, others call him just plain lazy. But I happen to know that few men of his age possess his intelligence. And, if he finds a job that interests him, he can work harder than anyone I know".

Thereafter, Topshe proceeds to catalogue Feluda's admirable traits — he is good at cricket and many indoor games, knows a lot of card tricks, can hypnotize people, write with both hands, is endowed with a stupendous memory, and most importantly, has an unimaginable power of deduction. In most of the Feluda stories, in fact, after identifying the criminal, the last chapter is devoted to a compelling presentation by Feluda before a small audience—his impeccable findings about the cause behind the crime as he recounts the inferences he has made at every step, down to the minutest and most insignificant details that elude both the narrator and the reader. As he relentlessly carries out his investigation, he smokes Charminar cigarettes, reads books on all subjects under the sun, plays chess, does yoga, is oblivious of food, sleep or creature comfort as the case nears its climax, when he is also immersed in deep thoughtfulness, with his eyebrows knitted in a frown, not wanting to be disturbed by anyone, not even the cousin who hero-worships him.

Feluda's traits are extraordinary, but not atypical of all the detectives that we have encountered through our acquaintance with popular English crime fiction, a colonial legacy that has enriched our libraries and our minds without encroaching on the originality of our own superbly clever, witty, skilful, heroic, almost larger-than-life sleuths. When Satyajit Ray made a concoction combining Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Father Brown and other detectives in Feluda, despite all the borrowings, he made sure that our own youthful, good-looking, physically fit, dexterous and amiable Bengali detective-next-door with limited financial, infrastructural and technological resources at his disposal, comes forth as a charmingly different specimen from the run-of-the-mill ones that we come across in western crime fiction or the pulpy Bengali thrillers that are sold by the bulk.

One cannot pay enough tribute to the stories without a mention of Feluda and Topshe's writer friend Jatayu alias Lalmohan Babu, who writes bestselling potboilers of crime. Jatayu livens up the atmosphere, for the affluent, well-meaning, generous man has a curious knack of inducing humour at his own expense, exposing fear, ignorance, lack of athletic skills, a limited cerebral capacity and spoonerism in everything he does and says. Whether he pompously recites less than mediocre verse, cooks up preposterous titles for his novels like *Frankenstein in Frankfurt* and *The Vampire in Vancouver*, or pronounces 'Hitchcock' as 'Hotchkick', he acts as a contrast to Feluda with his exceptional memory, sharp wit and superhuman reasoning abilities, providing the much-needed comic relief. This affable, affectionate and in turn loveable though comic foil to the character of Feluda was created in the third of Feluda's escapades, *The Golden Fortress*, and accompanies the two cousins thereafter in each of their adventures, adding colour, seasoning and some verve to the already perky goings-on, much to the delight of the reader. Topshe plays the young Watson to Feluda's Sherlock Holmes, and his narration, which has the innocence of childhood blended with the newly-discovered knowledge and awareness of adolescence, gives the stories their unique appeal.

For the most part, the stories are not set in Kolkata. If the locale is

Lucknow in the first book, it is Hazaribagh, Puri and Banaras in the other three under review, and what makes each of the stories more novel and exciting than the others is the author's sense of being steeped in the ambience of the place, exuding its colours, flavours and essence to a degree that conjures up exoticia. When it is Lucknow, you have Feluda singing Wajid Ali Shah's ghazal 'Jab Chhor chale Lakhnau nagri,' and the criminal using the spittle of *paan* to write warning notes to Feluda to indicate a bloodthirsty propensity; when it is Banaras, there is a holy man with a great fan following, a victim of murder breathing his last in a narrow street leading to the Vishwanath Temple, not to talk of the climactic end to the story accompanying the immersion of the Goddess Durga in the Ganga at the Dashashwamedh Ghat on *Vijayadashami*. In Puri, an innocuous visit to the Jagannath Temple and Bhubaneswar allows the reader some relief from the suspense that builds up with each passing moment, even while the sea beach and its neighbourhood gets strewn with corpses, blood and failed attempts at murder. In Hazaribagh, an aborted picnic at the picturesque Rajrappa, where the river Bhera turbulently mingles with the great Damodar intertwines with the thrilling episode of an escaped tiger from a travelling circus.

Feluda has continued to regale three generations of readers, kept them riveted in their seat, and compelled them to read on and find out who did it, and why, and where and how. One question, however, has continued to bother me about the Feluda stories in particular and the genre of juvenile mystery stories in Bengali in general. A large majority of them are denuded of women characters. Is it because the male authors do not believe that they know enough about women to be able to depict them in their stories, or do they shy away from them because they think that the presence of women characters will necessarily provoke romance, sex or even violence in stories centred around crime, something that is undesirable in children's or even adolescents' literature? The author hardly ever gives any explanation for his world being so incredibly devoid of women characters. In *The Curse of the Goddess*, however, the rich lawyer in Hazaribagh has a daughter-in-law and a granddaughter who, in all their passivity, at least play a crucial role in exposing little details that finally help Feluda unearth the mystery.

If there is a dearth of women characters, there is a plethora of *saadhus* and astrologers in the stories, so that every time one appears, one senses a con-man or a good man masquerading as a sage to achieve some breakthrough in solving a mystery. *The Elephant God* is set in Banaras, where there is every reason to find more than one *saadhu* around every street corner. There is, however, no justification to suppose that these holy men would also abound in Lucknow, Hazaribagh and Puri. But in Lucknow, there are four of them in the story. In Hazaribagh, the truant son who had run away from home reappears in a picturesque landscape, disguised as a *saadhu* and observing his family from afar. The recurring figure of the astrologer, like the one in Puri, is usually hand-in-glove with the murderer, but there is a harmless one in the Hazaribagh story.

The repetitive camouflage, however, does not detract from the sheer pleasure of these stories. Most of the relish is due to the fact that the lively threesome whose pre-occupations engage us equally are like people we meet in our daily lives, and yet so refreshingly different. And it is entirely thanks to the translator's rendering into a very simple, fluent, unconvoluted English that the stories read equally smoothly in English, without any jerks and bumps that often accompany such translations. There are very few instances in the stories where one can think of a possible improvement, or a more appropriate translation. I could only detect some minimally jarring sentences or phrases like Feluda saying, "If you write something in English using Greek letters, it *sounds* like a code" [Italics mine]. The word 'sounds' should have been replaced by 'looks' because the letters are not heard for them to 'sound' like a code, but read or just seen. These oversights, however, are not glaring or grating. All in all, they are absolutely delightful translations, and should do Bengali fiction proud in the international market of the English-speaking, English-reading world. ■

Nivedita Sen teaches in Hansraj College, Delhi University. She has a Ph.D in comparative literature for which she mainly worked on Bengali Children's Literature. Recently, she has been doing Bengali English translations.

Books-In-Brief

Books-In-Brief

READING BEYOND THE ALPHABET: INNOVATIONS IN LIFELONG LITERACY

Edited by Brij Kothari et al
Sage, Delhi, 2003, pp. 282, Rs. 350.00

The contributors to this volume are from all over India, Japan and England. They work or have worked in the government educational programmes and departments, NGOs, a children's new magazine (*Pitara*), and adult education. As the sub-title says, these are innovations in literacy and "not about the importance of literacy," (p.15). The immediacy of experience and the wealth of information it carries makes this a book well worth reading.

Shobhana Bhattacharji

1000 FACTS ON PLANTS

By John Farrdon. Consultant Peter Riley
Essex, UK, Miles Kelly Publishing, 2002, pp. 234, £ 9.99

An absolutely lovely little book. Each glossy page is illustrated in a way that one can recognize plants, leaves and trees and their environments. Shapes and colours are accurate. The focussed, bulleted text is close to the photographs and sketches. Occasional boxes of fascinating facts liven things up. Did you know that the world's largest leaves are those of the *Raffia* palm, which grew up to 20m. Long? Or that the roots of the South African wild fig tree can grow 120 m down into the ground? In 6 sections one learns how plants, flowers, trees, mosses and fungi, plant habitats, and people live—this is a good book for anyone interested in the world around them.

Shobhana Bhattacharji

MASSIVE

By Julia Bell
Young Picador, London, 2002, pp. 237, £ 4.99

The title itself emphasizes the issue of weight—an issue that has been handled in a masterly way by Julia Bell. The author portrays a superficial British society where a young teenage girl faces the battle of the bulge.

One of the focal points in Julia Bell's novel *Massive* is the mother-daughter relationship. A weight-obsessed mother on the downward spiral to anorexia keeps a constant watch on her daughter's diet. The mother (Maria) shares an unfulfilling relationship with her husband as well.

In this book, we are shown how pretentious people can be being "waif-like". She puts her daughter through this weight-loss ordeal as well but despite her success, the daughter never seems to lose weight. The relationship that the girl shares with her father is rather a peculiar one. He substitutes time and love for her by being her constant supply of food. The only stabilized relationship we see in the book is that of Carmen and her aunt Lisa, a sincere relationship which brings forth Carmen's confidence. Carmen's weight loss is seen as a massive task. She associates thinness with popularity and love and as she satisfies her lust for food while maintaining her weight, young Carmen turns into a bulimic.

Julia Bell's novel shows us a shallow world where appearances are of utmost importance. ■

Deepali Sud Varma is Project Officer in Dastkar.

THE SPEED OF THE DARK COVER

By Alex Shearer. Image by Tom Sanderson
Macmillan, UK, 2003, pp. 280, £9.99

THE STOLEN COVER

By Alex Shearer. Image by Tony Stone
Macmillan, UK, 2002, pp. 262, £9.99



The *Speed Of The Dark* is about a young scientist, Christopher and his strange mission. He is obsessed with inventing the impossible: a decelerator that can slow the speed of light to a point where it turns into darkness; to a point where matter is made miniature. He claims that the process could also be reversed. His eccentricity is further increased by his strong attachment to the glass dome, which he nails onto his desk. Yet that glass dome was the answer to the whole mystery. One day the scientist suddenly disappears as though he had never existed. The only thing he leaves behind is his manuscript. The mystery is unravelled through the pages with unexpected twists and turns. It unfolds the story of Poppea the dancer; Eckmann the brilliant but evil artist, Robert's three loves: his son, Christopher, the dancer and his art. Eckmann's physical deformity and ugliness were a curse to him. His feelings of wretchedness intensify when the beautiful Poppea does not take much notice of him. His hatred of Robert and his obsession with the dancer destroys him and their lives including the young boy, Christopher's.

Carly, a young and innocent girl is the main narrator in the second novel of *The Stolen*. Like any other child, she yearns for a special friend till she meets Meredith. She joins Carly's school. She is an orphan and lives with her grandmother, her sole relation. Thinking that she has found a potential friend in the new girl, she offers her friendship eagerly. But the new girl does not return it. Carly compensates for Meredith's unfriendliness by befriending Grace the old lady. In the course of it, she learns a terrible secret about Meredith, something that she does not even believe in. For Carly, the nightmarish journey seems unending. She realizes that ap-

pearances could be deceptive... The story has a bizarre twist; a girl who was meant to be an old woman and an old woman who was meant to be a girl.

The two novels share a common theme—Time and its value. Time is precious and irreversible. Once gone, it will never come back.

"Christopher was right. *Time's against us all. We only have so many days. All we can do is choose how to spend them ...* Our days, and how we can spend them. And the people we love...." (*The Speed of the Dark Cover*)

"Inside every old lady, you see, there could be a young girl, slim and pretty and agile, calling out to her friends. Inside of every old man, there could be a young boy, with a skateboard at his feet... Maybe they watch longingly, remembering when they too were young, only a short while, a few brief moments ago...." (*The Stolen*)

Both Christopher and Carly emphasize the value of time and how we use it. It could also be a lesson for all of us. As he says, we must maintain and nourish any relationship that we have formed. Carly extends it to old people as they themselves also yearn for company and friendship. Putting them in old people's homes is not the idea.

Alex Shearer's stories are a delight to read. He introduces unexpected shocks and thrills throughout the book. His ideas are refreshing and unique. We are compelled to look at life more closely and yet not made to feel that the author is being moralistic. Moreover, when he narrates it from the child's perspective, we are made to feel that children can understand life and give interesting insights on life. They have their own opinions and views about life and are not afraid to express them. Shearer succeeds admirably in this tough competition with J.K.Rowling, Roald Dahl and Tolkien.

I enjoyed the journey into the world of the impossible and the mysterious. The book was unputdownable. Now I want to read his other book, *The Great Blue Yonder* and enter Shearer's world again!!

Shantala N.Palat is a student of psychology, Lady Shri Ram College, Delhi University.

CROWNING A CLOWN AND OTHER STORIES: TALES OF

TENALI RAMAN

By Neera Jain
Rupa and Co, Delhi, 2003, Rs 50.00

AKBAR AND BIRBAL: TALES OF HUMOUR

By Monisha Mukundan
Rupa and Co, Delhi, 2003, Rs 50.00

THE SEVEN VOYAGES OF SINBAD THE SAILOR;

ALI BABA AND THE FORTY THIEVES AND

ALADDIN AND THE MAGIC LAMP

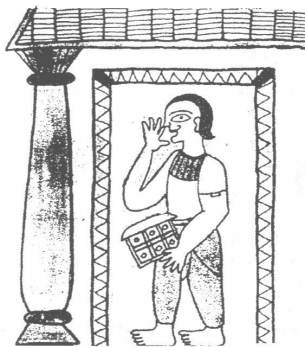
By Anupa Lal
Scholastic, 2003, Rs. 50.00, 60.00

STORIES OF THE BUDDHA

By Anita Khanna
Children's Book Trust, Delhi, 2001, Rs 65.00

OF KINGS AND COMMONERS: FACT AND FICTION FROM THE PAST

By Subhadra Sen Gupta and Monisha Mukundan
Ratna Sagar, Delhi, 2003, Rs 59.90



The past belongs to all of us, and we all help construct it. It is also a story, told and retold, and if this is so, then it is vital that children are part of its retelling. For this reason, each book in this collection is interesting as an attempt to introduce young people to the wealth of folklore, myth and history that is our inheritance. Yet the ways in which people remember the past and what they remember of it is another story, for what is salvaged most often is the myth, the legend, the love-story over more prosaic details. But these are important too, as a memory of the past that extends beyond details of old textbooks.

In this sense, Neera Jain's *Crowning a Clown* and Monisha Mukundan's

Akbar and Birbal begin from a common tradition: that of the court wit or jester. Jain's retelling of three Tenali Raman tales is set against the backdrop of the Vijayanagara court, where time and time again we see the wily Brahmin outsmart his rivals, please his king, and emerge triumphant in a battle of wits. The retelling is competent, but Jain's style is curiously formal, and the book needs editing for clarity and consistency. For instance: "Not much to arrange for, Sir, I just want to request for your daughters presence, politely requested the saint" (p. 6). The stories are supported by Nandita's illustrations that get the whimsical note just right.

Similarly, Monisha Mukundan's *Akbar and Birbal*, is a collection of stories about the Mughal Emperor and his Poet Laureate, in each of which

Birbal makes the Emperor think, laugh and reflect. A short introduction sets these stories in their context. "Some may be true, many are not" for "storytellers have added to these stories and changed them," but they still remain timeless and eternal. Mukundan's style is clear and elegant, and each situation is described in a manner that is engaging and evocative. There is always the Emperor, with his imperious curiosity, anxious to learn, yet aware of his power; the courtiers, still, silent and bewildered; and Birbal with his fearless humour, who always saves the day, opposing superstition, flattery and coercion with humour and commonsense.

Anupa Lal's retelling of the stories of Sindbad, Alibaba and Aladdin belongs to an entirely different tradition, that of the Arabian Nights, tales of magic and high adventure that originated in Persia, Arabia and India. *The Seven Voyages of Sindbad the Sailor* charts the changing fortunes of the intrepid traveller. Repeatedly he encounters fear, hunger and danger, but

blessed with good fortune, he returns to a life of ease, till wanderlust and a desire for wealth seize him again.

In contrast, the story of *Alibaba and the Forty Thieves*, which fortunately or unfortunately Lal retells in all its gory detail, strikes one with its violence. Here adventure belongs to the ordinary rather than the fantastic realm, and one feels again Alibaba's wonder when he opens the robbers' cave to find untold wealth and his horror when it reveals his brother's dismembered body. Yet at the end of the story, the resourceful win and the wicked pay—a moral that is echoed in *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp*. The old events are retold again—of Aladdin and his rise to power, wealth and happy matrimony—without losing their flavour. Lal's style is clear and confident. In particular, her account of Sinbad's voyages compresses the events of each voyage into a few short pages—an act of brevity that is hard to achieve.

Anita Khanna brings the stories of the Buddhist canon to a young audience. *Stories of the Buddha* recounts Prince Siddhartha's quest for truth that ultimately makes him the Buddha, but we also hear of the people whose lives were influenced by his teaching, compassion and wisdom. Khanna emphasizes the human element of these stories, so that what little detail she provides of the Buddha's doctrine appears as canonical formulae, not always easily understood. A number of sentences appear contorted and even grammatically incorrect. For instance: "She saw a six-tusked white elephant descended from the heavens and entered her body" (p. 5) being but one example. This well chosen collection of stories complemented by Tapas Guha's delightful illustrations.

Compared to the others books in this collection, *Of Kings and Commoners* by Mukundan and Sen Gupta is the only one that describes the past not as legend or folklore, but as 'history'. In their introduction, the authors speak of history as being more than dates and lists of kings. "History is first about people. About their dreams and aspirations, their lives and the events that shape them." Each chapter begins with a short story set in the period, and as one is drawn into the story, the narrative steps, almost seamlessly, into a 'factual' description of the past. Over the course of these pages one meets common folk from another time, so that the past is suddenly filled with 'people like us', a wonderful act of eavesdropping across time.

The account of political events is no boring king-list, either, and events like Akbar or Chandragupta Maurya's rise to power are retold in fast-moving detail. The attempt to bring women onto the stage of history—Mauryan women archers, women patrons to Chola temples, powerful women in the Mughal court is specially commendable. However, I think the role of the Muslim arrival in the oppression of women is exaggerated, while the prior existence of brahmanical patriarchy is ignored, an impression that needs to be contradicted. We need more children's histories like *Kings And Commoners*, liberal, inclusive histories of women and men, kings and commoners, rich and poor alike. ■

Meera Visvanathan is in History (H) II year, St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi.

BLOODY JACK

By L. A. Meyer
Macmillan Children's Books, UK, 2002, pp. 290,
£ 4.99

I think this story is specially meant for girls as it is about a girl who has a tragic past and then disguises herself as a boy to work on the ship. This story starts with the 'Dark Day' when Mary's mother and sister were murdered. Mary then finds some friends and she lives with them. The head of the gang is Charlie. Mary respected him, but one day he too was murdered by Muck, a vicious street boy. To escape poverty, Mary joins the ship 'HMS Dolphin'. Here she disguises herself as a boy, and names herself Jack Faber. Her adventures start immediately. One day Pirates attack the ship. To save her shipmates, she kills most of the pirates. After this, she is known as 'Bloody Jack'. This miraculous story ends with her leading a man's life, and she becomes a great sailor.

What amazed me most is the way the author wrote. It is Mary who narrates the whole story, and the author talks exactly like Mary who is an uneducated London girl. In other books, it is always boys who have these kinds of adventures, but here, it is the girl disguised as a boy who turns out to be a hero. This story had a touch of pain and sadness, with a mix-up of adventure and mystery!

I enjoyed reading this book, and think it is a very good book for all the people my age. ■

Lakshana Palat is a Class VIII student at Sanskriti School, New Delhi.

ALL AMERICAN GIRL

By Meg Cabot
Macmillan Children's Books, London, 2002, pp. 232,
£5.99

Meg Cabot is an award-winning author, all of whose books revolve around normal, shy American teenagers, who do something miraculous, or who become Princesses and only know it once they are in their teens. Basically about girls becoming famous, and how they deal with the changes in their lives.

All American Girl is the story of a normal American fifteen-year old girl, who one day does something that changes her life drastically forever. Samantha Madison is an average American teenager, with a popular elder sister and a child prodigy for a younger sister. Samantha does not care about her appearance. The only thing she cares about are her art sketches, her dog and her sister's boyfriend Jack, whom she thinks she is madly in love with. Though she comes from a well-off family, she sketches portraits for money to be able to buy CDs of her favourite singers. On finding these sketches in her school notebook, her parents disallow her from charging people for sketches, and start sending her for art lessons, which they believe would be an outlet for her creative energies.

Absolutely detesting the idea as she feels that art

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lessons would stamp out her natural ability, she goes for her first class to Susan Boone's studio. At first, she thinks it is nice, as a guy who look vaguely familiar compliments her boots and all she has to do is to draw a bowl of fruit on the table in front of her. But after she adds a couple of fruits which are not there, she is accused by her teacher in front of the whole class of not drawing what she sees but what she knows. Feeling publicly humiliated, Sam tells herself that under no circumstances was she going back to the art class, and instead begins going to the music shop below the studio.

She never expects that, in the act, she would save the life of the President of the United States of America. As she steps out of the music store, she sees the President walk into a cookie shop next door. As he comes out, she sees a man in front of her pull out a gun and shoot at the President, and before she knows what she is doing she jumps on him and the bullet goes off in a direction where it could do no harm. She breaks her arm while doing so, but becomes an instant celebrity. She receives phone calls from reporters, from companies to advertise their products, and even from her worst enemy, who calls to invite her for one of the parties which all the popular high-schoolers go for. She is appointed Teen Ambassador to the United Nations, and invited to the White House for dinner. During that horrible (because she hates any kind of vegetable and only eats hamburgers) meal, she discovers that David (the boy

from her art class) is the President's son. She asks him to go to the party hosted by her worst enemy, even though she still thinks that she loves her sister's boyfriend Jack. At the party, Jack and David get into a big fight about art, and Samantha, without thinking sticks up for Jack and hurts David immensely as he really likes her.

After this, Samantha feel very bad, especially when her sister tells her that she is obviously in love with David. Feeling confused and angry with herself, she goes to the only person whom she thinks could help her, and that is Susan Boone. Susan gives her a good piece of advice and tells her that she wasn't seeing what was in front of her. Samantha finally understands that David had liked her all the time and she had liked him too. That was why David had felt so hurt, and that was why she had felt so bad that she had hurt him.

In an interview on TV, she openly says that the rumours about her and the President's son were true enough, but she was afraid she had ruined their chances. After the interview, she receives a medal for her daring act of bravery, and also receives another bigger reward. David returns to her. Although Meg Cabot puts her characters in situations which are not everyday happenings in anyone's lives, this is a very entertaining book, and fun to read. ■

Gayatri Jayal is a student of Class IX at Modern School, New Delhi.

EXODUS

By Julie Bertagna

Young Picador, Delhi, 2003, pp. 337, £5.99



Exodus is a book written by Julie Bertagna and it deals with a subject that concerns all of us today: what is going to happen if we don't do anything to stop the icecaps of the poles from melting? This novel is rich in ideas full of sensitivity, imagination and reflexion. It is inspired by the reality of what is happening in the world, and the author has invented a prolongation that is harsh but promises hope all the same.

The story takes place in 2099-2100. It opens in an island, Wing, where the waters are rising more and more every day, dangerously. But the islanders don't want to admit the reality—their island is going to drown and no one is going to survive. Only Mara and her old friend Tain are ready to assume what is going to happen. But what is the escape? Apparently, the rest of the lands have already disappeared. Fortunately, Mara has seen in her *cyberwizz*, something that sounds unbelievable: cities have been built in the sky, cities that could save them, if they brave the rising oceans and reach one of them. Now, all she has got to do is convince the others to quit the island. This she finds difficult. Most of them have put their trust in God—the only hope they have left—like her friend with whom her brother argues, “*how can you decide to believe in God but not a giant city? You've no more proof of one than the other.*” Ultimately, Mara realizes that it isn't all that tough to persuade them; even her *practical down-to-earth father [...] looks as if he wants to believe her.* Here, Julie Bertagna brings out the irrationality of people in very complicated moments. Finally, they are all ready to leave, but her most precious friend, the old Tain, paradoxically refuses to go: “*I was born here and I'll die here.*”, he says to her. *And now Mara sees [...] the fear and the hope that shine in his dark eyes are for Mara and all the others on the boats, not for himself.* The responsibility of the elder people towards the future generations is beautifully highlighted. With this brilliant opening, the book announces its colours very clearly—it is all about love, friendship, kindness and the quest for a better world ...

Then an incredible journey through the oceans in rage begins.

But when they arrive, all their dreams are shattered. The imposing sky-city that had nourished their hopes so much rejects them and many others from other parts of the world. Does it not remind us of the boat people? And of the rich countries and our immigration laws? The description of the atmosphere amongst the ‘outsiders’ is like in the refugee camps where the people are so desperate, they will do anything to get out of their situation; there is no more sense of solidarity left in them. This idea about difference between people, integration comes up again, once more with children who are rejected just because they are savage, they have never had parents; Mara tries to understand them, “*But they're more like us than not. And they are human beings, children—wild children, maybe—but they've been abandoned*

by the world and they deserve kindness, not hate.” This evokes the suburban children and the slum children and their ‘violence’. Later in the book, when Mara meets the Treenesters, people who live under the sky-city and who try to keep up old values, a wise old woman, the equivalent of Tain for the islanders of Wing recounts how she is *too sickened by this New World which builds its empire out of such cruelty and decides its citizens are the only true human beings in the world— that the rest of them are no better than vermin.* Then she continues, “*Now the New World was to be only for what it judged the best of human beings: the most brilliant minds, the most technically skilled. [...] Everyone else was regarded as an alien, an outcast—even family and friends.*” The author denounces our elitist world that is based on exclusion.

Human emotions are discussed with a lot of detail, like for instance Mara's friend is dying, and still she is worried about her shoes: “*I need some decent shoes, I can't go to the New World with these raty things on.*” Insignificant thoughts reassure us in moments of desperation. This theme of the shoes is recurrent; we come across it in the New World and at the end. Another example is the fear people have of things of their imagination, things they can't fight, for the simple reason that they don't exist.

Through the character of a young woman, Broomielaw, another Treenester, we find the will human beings have, to always go further in progress; the reason why they invent and have always invented, the reason of science. Her venture to build a *suncatcher* brings this question to Mara's mind as to why there are so few *dreamswomen* we talk about.

Julie Bertagna underlines the importance of History and stories. No human being has not got a story. And so many people live with them, by them—books, movies, theatre, discussions etc. She shows the importance of how a story also can be the last hope for people, with the theme of destiny that is there all along the book. The influence of the stories you want to believe in is so strong that you would do anything to make it come true and give destiny reason.

The New World is described as an artificial world where all that remains is illusion and speed. Where people are fed to ‘oversatisfaction’, where every one of their needs is created and satisfied, where their lives are perfectly organized. It criticizes some societies, whose value is affluence—but not for everyone.

This book is full of pearls, little expressions that make us smile. *When in doubt, always take the most curious route.* Or, *Mara is packing her world into her small backpack. And eyes that are sunk in folds of time.*

All in all the most powerful idea in this book is that some people, dreamers, will never be satisfied with the system of life today, a system based on injustice, even if it suits the majority to ignore it. And even though *the universe is doing just fine, busy spinning its own dreams into infinity, [...] if one of these dreamers were not here, the universe would be one pot of dreams poorer.* ■

Anasuya Raj reads at Lycee Louis Le Grand, Paris

13 STRANGE STORIES

By Nini Gurung and Navin Menon
Children's Book Trust, New Delhi, 2002, pp. 104, Rs. 28.00

A FRIEND FOR RAJU

By Cheryl Rao
Gulmohar, New Delhi, 2003, pp. 106, Rs. 95.00

A LEAF OUT OF MY BOOK

By Benita Sen
Rupa & Co., New Delhi, 2003, pp. 88, Rs. 70.00

ROLE CALL

By Poile Sengupta
Rupa & Co., New Delhi, 2003, pp.136, Rs. 70.00

WHEN AMMA WENT AWAY

By Devika Rangachari
Children's Book Trust, New Delhi, 2002, pp. 120, Rs. 32.00

ORDINARY MR. PAI

By Kalpana Swaminathan
Tulika, Chennai, 1999, pp.43, Rs.70.00

16 SHORT STORIES

Edited by Geeta Menon
Children's Book Trust, New Delhi, 2002, pp. 112, Rs. 55.00

When I first saw the pile of books I was meant to read and review, I was slightly uneasy. They seemed so far from my usual choice that I put off reading them. When it came to the point where I had to read them, whether I wanted to or not, I settled down with the first one, *13 Strange Stories*. As I progressed, I found myself forgetting that I had thought that it might be too childish for me, and eagerly flipped the pages, lapping up more and more. The stories in it are unique. Each is written by a different author and each with its own mystery surrounding itself. Many of the thirteen stories are about the supernatural—I guessed they would be, considering the title. Most were eerily believable. The one story I liked the most, was called 'A Very Long Shot', written by Gita Iyengar—the reason for my special affection for this story may be that it involved genetic mystery, something that intrigues me very much. Some of the other stories were also quite fascinating—there was one which reminded me very much of Feng Shui. It told the story of a family who placed a gory picture of a battle in just the wrong place in their new house, which made them cross, moody, and irritable—until the Grandfather, hearing of these problems, rushed to the rescue. I enjoyed the clear writing style of most of the authors also.

The next book I read was *A Friend For Raju* by Cheryl Rao. Raju, who is living with his cousins, is mourning over his dead Labrador. After many failed attempts, he gains his cousins' favour when he visits a neighbouring, 'haunted' estate, and befriends the two big Alsatians that guard it. In a fascinating twist, Raju stumbles across what appears to be the ghost of a long-dead, beautiful maiden, Savitri, who died heartbroken on the estate. Nobody believes him, but Raju finally finds a friend in this 'spirit'—who turns out to be Savitri, just not the one Raju expected—and saves her family from the wicked Brijba, whose greedy mind rules him. It's the story of a loner who becomes a hero.

Benita Sen's *A Leaf Out Of My Book* was very different, and I really liked it quite a lot. She has a pretty, funny way of writing, and her stories are centred around real people, dealing with real life. The funny stories were funny, and the dramas were believable. I especially liked 'The Legend of Dakoo Singh'—firstly because moustaches greatly interest me (How do they eat?!) and because it's about siblings a little like mine. I also really enjoyed reading 'The Sweetest Love Letter' which was very well thought out and beautifully written.

Another book of short stories was *Role Call* by Poile Sengupta. The stories were written from the point of view of a teacher and I believe that they were based on the author's actual experiences with teaching. This is the kind of book which makes you realize that there is more to people than what figures in your life. Children tend to forget that teachers are also people. These stories were also funny, with a dry kind of humour that I savoured.

When Amma Went Away by Devika Rangachari, is about the time when Nalini and Arun's mother goes to Singapore on a job offer. Nalini's parents decide to call Patti, Nalini's mother's mother in Chennai, to come live with them while Nalini's mother is away—and that is when the fun begins. Patti is not the kind of grandmother Nalini expected, and she feels slightly ashamed of her, though she doesn't admit it to herself. The book is about how Nalini grows to realize that her Tamil background is not something to hide or be ashamed of, and that your friends must like you for who you are. What was really fun about this book was that though it was written from Nalini's point of view, you could actually see what was going on in Patti's mind, too.

Kalpana Swaminathan *Ordinary Mr. Pai* consisted of two stories—'Ordinary Mr. Pai' and 'Bangles for Bansode'. Both stories are related to magic and funny tricks. 'Ordinary Mr. Pai' was very ordinary indeed, though he did not realize it till things became extraordinary. The story was sweet, and short. 'Bangles for Bansode', was a typical story about the reformation of a bad old man. This story's villain was Mr Bansode who owned Africa House, home of 553 sad, dissatisfied tenants. Mr Bansode was challenged the day Megha came to stay at Africa House, and refused to succumb to his greedy demands. Though a bit childish, both stories were funny and entertaining.

The last book I read was *16 Short Stories*. I wondered whether it, too would be about the supernatural, but it wasn't. One story it which I really liked was 'How Thatha got his hearing back', by M.S.Mahadevan, a witty, fast story about Amol's old grandfather who absolutely refuses to get a hearing aid, insisting he is not deaf, while driving everyone else in the house crazy, putting the T.V. on full blast. When he finally does get an aid, he refuses to switch it on—till his family cunningly tricks him into putting it on. The other stories were also interesting, mostly about children. ■

Ishani Butalia is in Class X in Delhi Public School, R.K. Puram, New Delhi.

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C. RAJAGOPALACHARI: THE TRUE PATRIOT
By Mr. R.K. Murti
Rupa Charitavali Series, Delhi, 2003, pp. 63,
Rs. 195.00

This is one of the series of biographies brought out in the Charitavali series of Rupa reflecting the legendary figures of India in all spheres. Written in a lucid storytelling style, it gives you fascinating stories and facts about the persons life. Rajaji as he was fondly called, had brought the voice of logic and reason to India's freedom struggle. A lawyer by profession, he gave up his practice, to become a staunch follower of Gandhiji and later on, became one of his closest associates. He was not only loyal but also very blunt in giving his opinion on any subject and never hesitated to do so. He even started his own political party, the Swatantra Party.

The book narrates Rajaji's early childhood, where he believed that only those who dare and act, achieve what they want, and that thought always stood by him. He was very upset that he had poor eyesight at the early age of ten! But the setback did not make a failure and he was ready to battle it out against all odds. He took his class teachers' help to convince his father that he needed spectacles. His forethought and farsightedness took him a long way to become one of the greatest patriots of the nation.

Son of a village 'munsif', a person who represented the Government, Rajaji was born on 10th December 1878, in a small village near Bangalore. A sharp, observant child in school, Raja's

curiosity had no bounds. He even impressed the Inspector of Schools with his bright reply to a difficult question.

Though mentally very strong Raja's physique was very weak and he was prone to asthma. But that did not prevent him from setting a goal in his life, to eradicate poverty from the masses.

Graduating from the Central College at Bangalore Raja was highly influenced by the works and progressive ideas of Swami Vivekananda, Lok Manya Tilak and Tolstoy. He completed his degree in law from Madras and was very disturbed the rampant casteism of that time.

Rajaji married a young shy and polite girl of his mother's choice, Mangai. He became a reputed figure in Salem as a distinguished lawyer. Soon, he began to take interest in politics. He became a member of the Municipality and gave equal rights to the untouchables for all civic facilities.

Soon, Rajaji became a staunch disciple of Mahatma Gandhi. Sarojini Naidu also became his close comrade. And the rest is history. Rajaji carried the beacon of a true patriot till his dying days. Recipient of the highest civilian award, Bharat Ratna, Rajaji was the first Governor General of free India.

Set in the most crucial and significant era of history, the author has selected with great insight, all those features that would interest a young mind. A lot of painstaking research has been done. The vivid photographs and etchings bring the book alive. Well designed and printed, the book speaks for itself. ■

Alaka Shankar is a writer of Children's Books

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Mitali Mishra

SURESH AND THE SEA

By Raghavendra Rao and Sandhya Rao. Line Art by Ranjan De
Tulika, Chennai, 1998, pp 50, Rs. 115.00

This is the first book in a series that aims to explore the relationship between human beings and their environment in various regions of India. Suresh belongs to the fishing community in coastal Tamil Nadu. The book paints an intimate picture of Suresh as a child and as an adult. More dominantly it talks of how their lives are inextricably linked to Kadalamma, the revered Ocean Mother. Interesting bits of information about proverbial wisdom, environmental and other issues related to the marine ecosystem run parallel to Suresh's story. In fact this is not really a story about Suresh but about the traditional practices of the entire community and also the forays modernity has made into these practices. Not surprisingly, given Raghavendra Rao's credentials the book has memorable photographs. The book is aimed at readers of ages 10 and above but can be useful for teenagers too.

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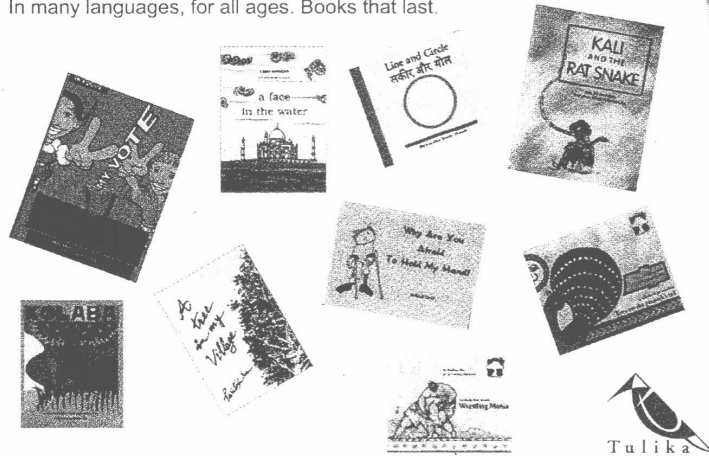
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