

Book Reviews

The Tenth Rasa: An Anthology of Indian Nonsense. Edited by Michael Heyman, Sumanyu Satpathy and Anushka Ravishankar. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2007. 223 pages. USD 10 (paperback).

All anthologies are arguments. Every literary anthology can be seen as a thesis, a critical work arguing for a specific view of the literary and cultural landscape. However, some anthologies make better arguments than others. Michael Heyman's *The Tenth Rasa* is definitely one of the better instances. His introduction is a clear, rigorous statement on the value of Indian nonsense. It also refigures the international literary landscape, explaining how the anthology makes room for a host of texts previously unavailable to English-speaking readers. Academics studying literary nonsense and lay-people who love well-placed incongruities and scumbugglies will delight in this impressive and modestly priced collection.

Heyman maintains a blog for his anthology (<http://tenthtrasa.blogspot.com/>), on which he offers the following characterisation of nonsense:

Nonsense texts usually exist somewhere between perfect sense, on one hand, and absolute gibberish on the other. They achieve this by maintaining a balance between elements that seem to make sense and elements that do not. Nonsense texts often revel in topsy-turvyness and inversions of natural laws or hierarchical laws of order and place. They are chimerical constructions typified by excessive randomness, often celebrating the impossible and playing with temporal and spatial confusion. Nonsense can be poetry or prose, and it can appear in the guise of any genre or form, including but not limited to short story, novel, travel writing, ballad, sonnet, limerick, song, folk rhymes and tales, lullaby, recipe, and alphabet.

The Tenth Rasa crystallises our understanding of nonsense, even as it surveys the diverse landscape of Indian nonsense, providing insight into Indian culture, folk-traditions, and literary history.

The works that populate *The Tenth Rasa* come from a variety of Indian traditions and languages. Heyman notes that India boasts 'eighteen main languages, around 100 minor ones, over 1000 documented dialects, twenty-eight culturally distinct states, seven territories, a significant north-south-east-west divide and over a billion people', a situation that makes 'easy generalization' impossible (xxi). The careful selection of texts, again, is an articulation of a tradition – or several traditions – of Indian nonsense. In India there is a greater

acceptance of the fact that nonsense literature can be for both adults and children. Therefore, the anthology provides scholars of Western children's literature, with its rich history of nonsensical literature, the opportunity to position their tradition in relation to India's. It raises the questions why nonsense and childhood are so closely linked in the West, and what this cultural assumption says about Western ideology. The anthology also provides us with the occasion to investigate more closely the complex cross-fertilisation of Indian and English nonsense traditions prompted by English colonialism.

Ultimately, however, it is the nonsense of *The Tenth Rasa* that is most notable. The works are ably translated by Heyman and, as he writes, 'an army of hardy, generous folk who put in enormous effort not only in creating the translations but also in helping with notes and dealing with one persnickety, pickity, pedantic editor' (xvii). The epigraph to Heyman's 'A Note on the Translations' aptly characterises the difficulty with translating nonsense, reminding us of the unanswerable question that Lewis Carroll's Red Queen put to young Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*:

'Do you know languages? What's the French for fiddle-de-dee?'
 'Fiddle-de-dee's not English', Alice replied gravely.
 'Whoever said it was?' said the Red Queen. (quoted in Heyman xvii)

The translations are marvellous, despite the difficulties, or, perhaps, because of them. Nonsense elements in the translated texts forced the translators to attend closely to language *as* language, as signifieds in and of themselves, and signifiers secondly. Take, for instance, this sharp translation of a Bengali nursery rhyme, also called a *chhoda*:

Nitter-natter
 Son-in-law's chatter
 A spider fell down splitter-splatter.
 The spider fought all arms and legs
 Seven pumpkins laid seven eggs. (139)

Or this verse, from the bawdy wedding song called 'She will Come':

She will come
 She will come
 She's just busy
 Shaking her bum. (168)

Although poetry predominates in the anthology, we also find fine examples of prose-nonsense throughout. Since the formal concerns of rhyme and metre are not an issue, prose affords the translators greater freedom. I was struck by the complexity of the prose selections, which, by their nature, often resist excerption. However, Heyman has a knack for choosing the best passages from longer works. Also of note is the appendix, 'Edward Lear's Indian Nonsense', which features nonsense texts Lear composed 'on a trip to India in 1873-74' (199).

Provocative, well-designed, and expertly edited, Michael Heyman's *The Tenth Rasa* is a fine addition to nonsense scholarship, and a must have for children's literature scholars interested in the subject of nonsense.

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DOI: 10.3366/E1755619808000343

British Children's Fiction in the Second World War. Owen Dudley Edwards. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007. 744 pages. £150 (hardback).

In Dudley Edwards's huge work, one bit of criticism stands out: he describes Denis Gifford's *Comics at War* as 'invaluable but irritating for the higgledy-piggledy assemblage and want of provenance' (78). This description fits Edwards's own volume perfectly: he has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the period and has soaked himself in its literature for the young, including its ephemera. But this intelligence is allowed to run unfettered, so that the book is far too long and no aside is allowed to escape. The key authors discussed are certainly welcome, though: Frank Richards (*Billy Bunter*), 'Capt.' W. E. Johns (*Biggles*), Richmal Crompton (*Just William*) and Enid Blyton (who probably gets more space than anyone). But the cast is far larger, with (to give a flavour), Noel Streatfeild, Elinor Brent-Dyer, John Buchan, Richard Hughes, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, William Golding, Malcolm Saville, Percy Westerman, Hergé, and P. L. Travers also discussed. Readers might note that some of these authors did not actually publish children's works during the war, which raises an important question about the book. Edwards's definition of the field proves to be problematic when he claims, 'Arthur Ransome made no contribution to Second World War literature at all, his excellent adventure story *Missee Lee* actually opening with its British child protagonists in a very friendly Japanese port' (163). Incidentally, this quotation provides but one example of the book's repetitive nature; thus, 'Ransome practically opened *Missee Lee* [...] on a Friends-of-Japan recruitment' (267), with another reprise later (336). But the main point is that Edwards tends to downplay writers not contributing directly to the war effort – though not, strangely, Blyton. Even her nature books are described as 'a godsend to evacuees trying to make sense of the country' (290). She 'strengthened her child readers' in this way, as though this were her deliberate ploy, albeit she had been publishing nature material for a dozen years before the war began.

Edwards is certainly no literary critic, ascribing intentions and causal influences to writers with gusto: 'The obvious origin for [Lewis's] *White Witch* is Hitler' (141) – not Andersen's *Snow Queen*. He also insists that *Animal Farm* is a children's book (84), though George Orwell himself, when he found it in children's sections, would reshelve it. Orwell's book, he claims, was 'to politicise children's literature' (59). Edwards also maintains that all children's literature had 'fairy origins' (25), with the aeroplane providing 'the strongest link' (27), thence adducing Greek mythological figures, and then seeking significance in Nesbit's