

referring in his discussion to *Advaita Vedānta*, *Sāṃkhya*, Śāktism and *Śrīvidyā* philosophy. These two chapters are not easily accessible, which is partly due to the very nature of the subject matter and partly due to Coburn perhaps wanting to explain too much in not enough space. The resulting discussion is dense and slightly overwhelming, especially for the reader not familiar with the abundant terminology used. I make this point because on the whole *Encountering the Goddess* can be recommended for anyone with an interest in religious studies and should not be restricted to students of this particular strand of Hinduism. The last chapter is particularly useful, as it clearly illustrates Coburn's points about the place of scripture in religious life. On the basis of fieldwork, he introduces us to three men involved with the *Devī-Māhātmya* from different perspectives: a scholar, a *pūjari*, and a devotee.

Coburn is a scholar of great integrity, and his work is insightful, clear, and without extraneous adornment. His observations on gender, scripture, and the traditional approach to both of these subjects are stimulating and courageous. This is a model of scholarship, worthy of great respect.

The book includes thirty-five pages of notes, a glossary, index, and an extensive bibliography.

Lalita DU PERRON
New Delhi

HOWER, EDWARD. *The Pomegranate Princess and Other Tales from India*. Collected and retold with an introduction by Edward Hower. Original translations by M. K. Mukerjee. Illustrated by O. P. Joshi. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991. 134 pages. Cloth US\$29.95; ISBN 0-8143-2329-4. Paper US\$14.95; ISBN 0-8143-2330-8.

This slim, elegant little book, attractively bound and illustrated, is tailor-made to flip through for a short trip to the Indian countryside. Reading this book, one goes into the ocean of the past—a past that is the present for the Indian masses, who still enjoy folktales. People repeatedly tell stories heard from elders, parents, and others for the benefit of any interested listener. Hower is lucky to have been able to understand and appreciate these tales, with the able help of Mrs. Mukerjee and Mr. Joshi. Together, they have done justice to the richness of the Indian oral tradition.

The magic of folktales is the product of idleness and leisure. Scholars of past traditions must know that people today have less time for telling and listening to folktales than they did in earlier times, when they lived closer to nature and were surrounded by familiar sights and sounds. This book freshened memories of my own youth decades ago, when I collected hundreds of folktales, songs, and sayings from villagers. In the beginning it was a hobby, then later my first professional love and the subject of my Ph.D research. In Rajasthan such tales are told not only by the folk but by the educated classes as well. The art of the folktale flourishes both in the villages and in pockets of the cities.

The appendix, with cross references and notes, is very helpful for understanding the details of Rajasthani society and culture. It also indicates the parallels in human emotions and expressions in various times and places. I wish to stress, however, that the folktales are more delicate and, at the same time, forceful in the original Rajasthani dialect than in English translation (the same problem exists with any translated

work, of course). These folktales sparkle not only for the Rajasthanis but for anyone who takes the time to listen. There is much sociology, psychology, religion, and culture hidden in their content. Millions of people believe in them and enjoy their escapist power.

Today the thrill of the storytelling art has been much diminished by cinema and television. Still, it is too early to write storytelling off entirely, as it retains its effectiveness as a means of entertainment, education, and the imparting of wisdom, knowledge, and tradition. People in the countryside are especially attached to folklore, where little guys can fight giants and win, where heroes and gods intermingle, where life is hard without mechanical gadgets, and where even the best parents can't always protect their children. Hower provides a variety of whimsical experiences in this book, with tales from literates and illiterates alike. Most of the stories need no explanation, revealing their character of themselves.

The title story, "The Pomegranate Princess," is a beautiful expression of the classic theme of victory for the truthful and punishment for the wicked. However cruel and calculating one is, one day the end comes and justice prevails. Almost every culture possesses this belief, in order, perhaps, to encourage people not to lose faith in hard work and the justice of the Absolute. Such stories lead the listeners into a special world where the heroes are all role models, where life is governed by principles, and where the good always survives the bad.

"The Princess and the Witches" is a story of intrigue. In the end the fortune of the princess rises and that of the witches falls. It is believed, not only in Rajasthan but all over India, that witches live in trees and have twisted feet. Tree worship is a common belief among desert people, to whom trees and plants are very dear. To water plants is considered a meritorious act by rich and poor alike.

The illustrative power of simile is used in an attractive story entitled "The Songs of Naina Bai": "Her teeth sparkled white the way a stream does as it goes rushing into a patch of bright sunlight." In another story there is an airplane, called in Rajasthani folklore a *cheel-gadhi* (literally, "flying machine vehicle"). "The Coconut Lady" conveys the lesson that scheming to harm others one day results in bad luck for oneself. "The Leper Prince" teaches that one should help any creature of God regardless of what it might be, since it may have a part to play in one's own fortune. Another message of this tale is that even the darkest night ends at sunrise; one must be patient and trust in oneself to pass through trials. "The Clever Rat" is about a rodent who often succeeds, but fails in the end (unlike in most stories, where the hero wins).

The eleventh story, "The Two Kings," is unusual in that its subject is the cannibalism of Durga. This is the first I have ever heard of such a tale in either the oral or classical traditions. The sacrifice of King Karna is a popular subject in Indian legends and myths. (*Bers*, incidentally, are not small apples but small berries.) "The Golden Bird" and "How the Well Was Purified" repeat the lesson that kindness to birds and animals has its advantages, as the one who is gentle to all creatures receives their help in times of difficulty. Many stories, like "The Great Hunter," concern hunting, which was a great pastime among the Rajasthani aristocracy. "The Hungry God," in which a simpleton defeats a crafty, crooked opponent, teaches that honesty and purity of heart are rewarded by prosperity.

This book proves that in rural India "there is always time after work to visit the temples, to decorate houses with designs of white lime, to join the neighbors for festivals and weddings." Not only do the tales have a powerful influence over people,

their telling has also become a ritual in itself.

Manju BHATNAGAR
Bombay

NARAYAN, R. K. *Gods, Demons, and Others*. With decorations by R. K. Laxman. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993. iv+241 pages. Illustrations, glossary. Paper US price \$12.95; UK price £10.25; Export US\$12.95; ISBN 0-226-56825-3.

“He is part and parcel of the Indian village community” (1). So begins the introductory essay, “The World of the Storyteller,” in this new reprint of the author’s 1964 classic. These words ring true even today, when cable TV and a wide assortment of other electronic media have flooded the Indian entertainment market. The telling of tales remains a strong force in India, and R. K. Narayan, heavily steeped in the lore of a culture pervaded by oral tradition, is a storyteller *extraordinaire*.

In this book, the author presents “retellings” of some of the best-known stories of India culled from epic, mythological, and courtly literature. True, the fifteen tales he relates come from the written, Sanskrit tradition, but Narayan has this to say: “If he [the storyteller] keeps a copy of the Sanskrit text open before him, it is more to demonstrate to his public that his narration is backed with authority” (3). The text is thus an icon, and not necessarily a vehicle of communication and instruction. Narayan’s view is similar to the working hypothesis of many folklorists: a “report travels, like ripples expanding concentrically, until it reaches the storyteller in the village, by whom it is passed to the children at home, so that ninety percent of the stories are known and appreciated by every mortal in every home, whether literate or illiterate” (7). Such a romantic vision, while still plausible to a degree, might be challenged in the post-modern world we live in. A new and critical introduction addressing issues such as these would have been useful. Having stated this, I must add that the book is still a good read for anyone who likes a well-written story.

What makes this book unique, and still interesting to ponder thirty years after its initial publication, is the deftness of Narayan’s prose, for both the academic and the general reader will find him equally erudite. He communicates with a style that translates the verbal skill of the storyteller into writing. This is precisely how the author began his project. After listening to narrators tell the stories, he checked them against the Sanskrit versions and eventually transformed them into renderings of his own. In Narayan’s words: “My method has been to allow the original episodes to make their impact on my mind, as a writer, and rewrite them in my own terms, from recollection, just as I would write any of my other stories normally out of the impact of life and persons around me” (9-10). This technique allowed the author to add his distinctive trademark to the “timeless tales” presented, while conveying some of the contextual dimensions of Indian storytelling by allowing him occasional room for exegetical digression. As we read these stories, then, we are constantly reminded that a narrator’s voice lurks behind the written renderings.

The stories chosen for the volume provide a broad, representative sample of Hindu mythology, drawing on “the pressures exerted by . . . different types of beings on each other, and their complex relationships at different levels” (6-7). Aside from