

November/December 2006

The Horn Book

Magazine



About Books for Children and Young Adults

Foreign Correspondence

Anushka Ravishankar's Indian Nonsense

BY MICHAEL HEYMAN

In the West, we have become familiar with the genre of literary nonsense through works such as Edward Lear's "The Owl and the Pussy-cat" and, of course, Lewis Carroll's Alice books. But in India this often unrecognized genre is finding new audiences through the work of Anushka Ravishankar, an Indian children's author, poet, and playwright. Literary nonsense is the world turned upside-down, the Mad Hatter's twisted flights of logic, and the Jabberwock's linguistic adventures. Usually part parody and part fantasy, it transcends these modes, leading us down a path of sense, only at the last moment to turn away from the expected destination. And yet nonsense is at least as creative as it is destructive—as meaning-*full* as it is meaning-*less*.

Ravishankar takes up this tradition in half a dozen nonsense-flavored picture books in India, where she is published by Tara Publishing, a brilliant but woefully underdistributed publisher. Her nonsense comes from gut instinct, from her childhood reading of Lear and Carroll, and, like Lewis Carroll himself, from her background in mathematics. Ravishankar has been writing nonsense for quite some time in a market where it is a rarity. Though nonsense has a rich history in India, in both folk and literary forms, it is only popular in a few limited regions, particularly West Bengal and Maharashtra. Even there, however, nonsense is rarely translated into English or Hindi, the two languages that would allow much of the rest of India to enjoy it. No other contemporary Indian nonsense author writes in English, the only other English material coming out of India being translations of the early twentieth-century Bengali master of the genre, Sukumar Ray.



Ravishankar may not yet have the devoted following that Ray has, but her books are finally beginning to gain some well-earned recognition.

Ravishankar has a style all her own. Her texts are usually in energetic verse; and, while not always thoroughly nonsensical, they can't resist at least tipping their hat to absurdity. Indian children's literature, even up to the present day, is often of low quality in text, illustration, and production, and rarely digs into Indian culture's multiple layers. Ravishankar's books, in contrast, lay out an integrated word/image feast, in collaboration with her illustrators, who range from tribal Gond artists and Indian commercial pop-art creators to established Indian and European artists. And through the unique typography of the books, usually designed by Rathna Ramanathan, Ravishankar's quirky, rhythmic verse becomes a graphic, narrative force, wrapping itself around images, becoming characters, taking falls, and generally slithering and dithering or thumping and bumping along.

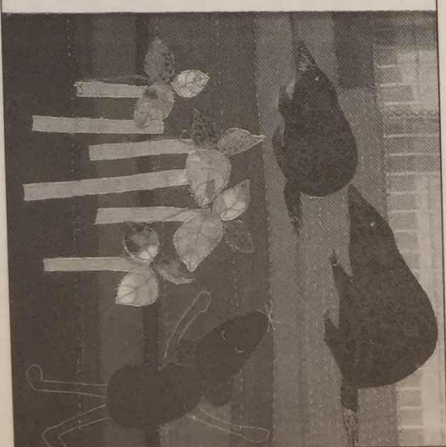
Her success began with the ALA Notable Book *Tiger on a Tree* (published in India in 1997 and in the United States in 2004), created with celebrated Indian illustrator Pulak Biswas. It's one of my favorites, along with the thematically and stylistically similar *Catch That Crocodile!* (published in India in 1999). Both stories deal with a wild animal that has found its way into a village. In *Tiger on a Tree*, a happy-go-lucky tiger is chased by a goat up a tree. By playing loud instruments, the villagers frighten him into a net:

Shoo him!
Boo him!
Make him jump!
Dum duma dum dum
Thump.

After he *thumps* into their trap, they're not sure what to do with him. They wonder if they should "send him to the zoo? / Stick him up with glue? / Paint him an electric blue?" Luckily for him, they decide to let him free, and he wanders off again. The crocodile fares worse, as various villagers try wrestling with him or dragging him out of town. Again, the humane solution works, and he is lured back to the river by a trail of fish. The spare, rhythmic verse in both books blends perfectly with Biswas's bold folk-art style, all of which fits in with the Indian village setting. We get a glimpse of village life, complete with dhotti-clad locals, police, fruit-sellers, and washermen. In the illustrations we see the villagers' fear, but also their compassion and sense of humor. And in both books the unique, playful typography augments the action, plunging the tiger into the sea with a huge *splash* or being chomped in half by the crocodile's dangerous jaws.

While *Tiger* and *Crocodile* depict quintessential Indian culture, many of Ravishankar's other books are cultural hybrids. In *Excuse Me, Is This India?* (2001), Ravishankar writes nonsense verse to the art of Anita Leutwyler, a Swiss artist who creates stunning quilt work from Indian textiles. The story is a Western child's dream about going to India as a blue mouse. The mouse, an outsider,

I met two furry bandicoots
Running in the garden.
"Excuse me," I called to them.
They answered, "Beg your pardon?"
"Could you tell me where I am?
And where I ought to go?"
They twitched their noses and they said,
"We're sorry, we don't know."
We might be at the Equator,
Or even the North Pole.
It doesn't matter much to us,
We live inside a hole."



wanders through the hustle, confusion, and beauty of urban and rural India, gathering bits of tantalizing philosophical nonsense in its quest to find out exactly where it is. In a village, for instance, the mouse asks a girl for directions:

She drew a map without a place
And said, "Let me explain the case:
If you were standing on your head
I'd say you're on your hair.
But since you're standing on your feet
You could be anywhere."

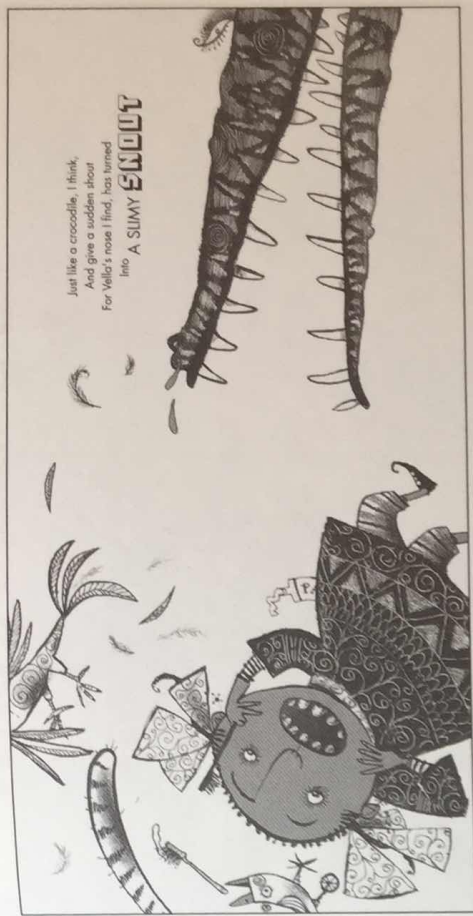
Even though the mouse is the dream-self of the Western child, by its very nature it is neither Indian nor European. To emphasize the point, near the end of the book the little blue mouse flies home on a plane, sitting between an Indian girl and a German man. The book, likewise, sits between Indian and European art, showing a dual outside-inside perspective of India.

Today Is My Day (2003) shows pure, imaginative wish-fulfillment for Tala, one harried little girl. During this one day, decidedly *Tala's* day, her imagination disposes of family and school authority figures, transforming them into cows, statues, or anthropomorphic multiplication signs. The text is illustrated by Piet Grobler, an accomplished South African artist, whose illustrations are edgy, jagged, and full of subplots and quirky details, including Tala's mischievous cat and a strategically incontinent bird with a prosthetic wheel for a leg. Ravishankar's verse explodes adult pretensions and absurdities with satisfying, whimsical retribution, such as when Tala's older sister lectures her on teeth-cleaning:

"Firstly, soak them
For an hour
In some lemon
That is sour
Then go outside
And facing South
Stand for an hour
With an open mouth."

Just like a crocodile, I think,
And give a sudden shout
For Vella's nose I find, has turned
Into a slimy snout.

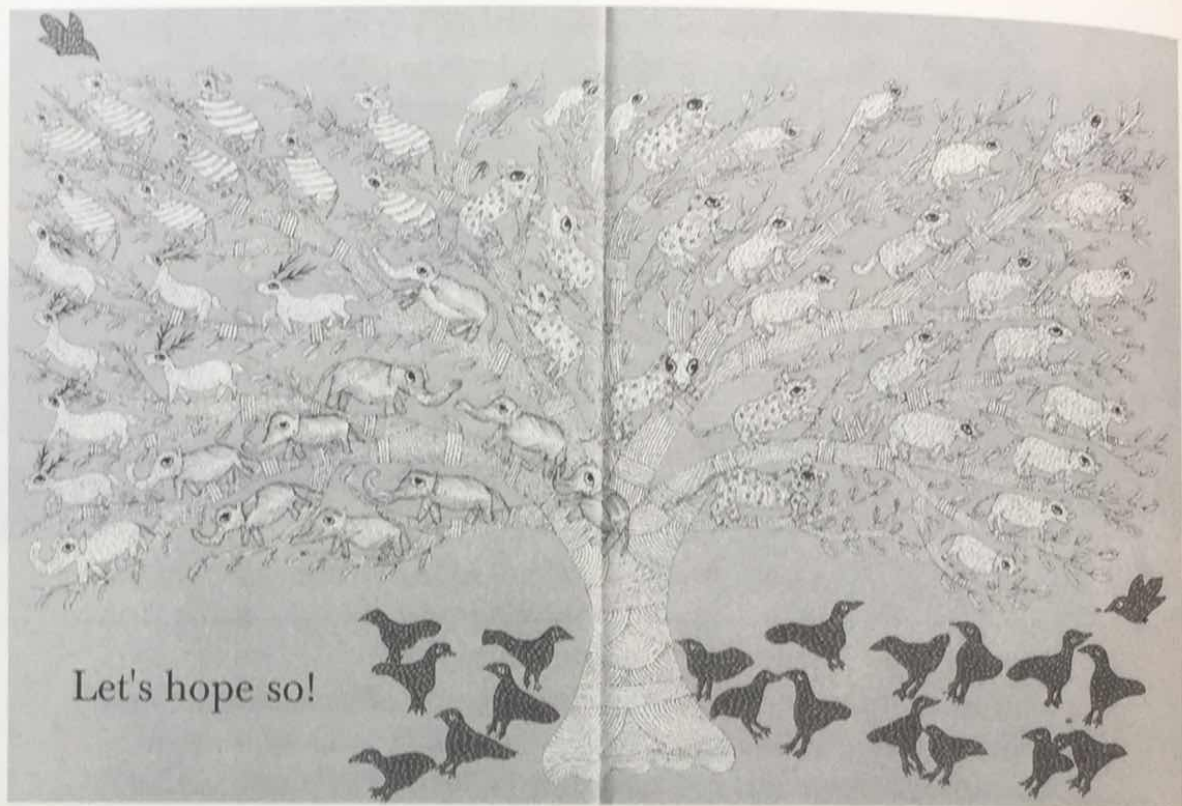
Ravishankar and her illustrator collaborators distinguish their work by sounding a variety of cultural voices, producing interest-



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ing cultural confluences, as in the combination of Indian and South African artistry in *Today Is My Day* and in the combination of Indian and European art in *Excuse Me, Is This India?* Ravishankar's *One, Two, Tree!* (2003) is also an important collaboration, but it is a distinctly Indian cross-cultural experience. Tara Publishing has found an extraordinary artist in Durga Bai, a woman from the Gond tribal community in central India. Bai paints in an ancient tradition of women artists who decorate the walls of their homes with elaborate paintings. In *One, Two, Tree!*, she teams up with Ravishankar and Sirish Rao to create a delightful counting book, showing increasing numbers of animals all crowding into an ever-growing tree. In the tale, for example, "Five grumpy dogs climb up and wonder why" and "Nine drowsy cows squeeze in and start to snore." Ravishankar and Rao's text, written to accompany the illustrations, captures Bai's humor with great economy. Looking at the huge, overflowing tree in the end, one might see a reflection of the sometimes chaotic extended family homes common in India, the overflowing state of India itself, or, for those most in tune with the nonsense world, the politic proliferation of extra-fizzgibbinous Indian bandicoots. In any case, the book as a whole is an illuminating, harmonious meeting of vastly different Indian classes—something almost unheard of in the production of Indian children's literature.

The ability to cross class and culture lines is natural for nonsense: it is a form that germinates equally in nurseries and scholarly discourse, in bawdy folk songs and elitist Enlightenment "Nonsense Clubs." Regardless of place, time, or class, children



and adults alike seem to delight in rebelling against their tendency to codify and sanctify, even against their innate nature as meaning-making machines. In India, where venerable traditions in religion, philosophy, and aesthetic theory are taken so very seriously, Ravishankar's nonsense literature is particularly poignant, even subversive. And yet the "spirit of whimsy," in Sukumar Ray's words, has been there all along; nonsense only taps into this equally ancient, if unacknowledged, layer of Indian tradition, one that with any luck will find recognition in India and beyond.

*Michael Heyman is an associate professor of English at Berklee College of Music in Boston and a founding member of the Society for the Prevention of Sense. He is the head editor of the forthcoming *The Tenth Rasa: An Anthology of Indian Nonsense* (Penguin India).*