

Book Reviews

Debjani Ganguly and Kavita Nandan, eds. *Unfinished Journeys: India File From Canberra*. Flinders: CRNLE, 1998. Pp. 308. Aust.\$24.95.

Unfinished Journeys: India File From Canberra, edited by Debjani Ganguly and Kavita Nandan, is a collection of sixteen essays about India as experience and concept by writers who live in Canberra. The contributors are mainly though not exclusively academics, and their responses to India are wondrously varied. Although the quality of the contributions here is distinctly uneven, when the essays are good they are very good, offering intellectual and even visceral pleasure.

Satendra Nandan's "Delhi: Among the Ruins" is a case in point. Ostensibly a personal reminiscence — as a young man the writer spent six and a half years in Delhi and found a vocation, a wife, and an extended family — the essay is also an exploration of the nature and value of writing, both as "a mode of being and becoming" (120). Jawaharlal Nehru's autobiography is a model for Nandan, "the mirror of many mirrors, all . . . repeating the writer's reflections until finally there is only one integrated image, the examined life of a man" (121). Yet, as this lucid essay attests, autobiography is a means rather than an end, a process encouraging the locating of self in time, place, and history. So Delhi, "a city of ruins" (116), "an oven" (125), which "wore a withered, shrivelled face like logs on a funeral pyre" (139), becomes also a catalyst for connection, allowing the writer to enter the rich diversity of India's historical, intellectual, political, sensual, and cultural worlds. In the end, the city gave Nandan himself, engendering a "faith in being Indian, [that] with all its flaws of life and fractures of history, remains for me a marvellous definition of our unfinished, inseparable humanity" (124).

The example of Nandan using writing as discovery has not been lost on his daughter Kavita, one of the collection's editors. Her piece, "Unfinished Journeys," tests the possibilities of meaning in the complex, intermingling lives of her Indian relatives. In compellingly limpid prose, she moves disarmingly yet unerringly from the character

and activities of *nani*, Muriel aunty, and Pansy aunty (among others) to reflections on their larger significance. Here is an example:

To go shopping or to church, anywhere with *nani* seemed like a task. But in walking at her pace and watching her grab the arm of a stranger to steady herself who, on his part accepts this completely as the need of an old woman and continues his business or arranging and rearranging packets of nuts with his free arm, involves a rethinking and rediscovery of that special ability for expansiveness that people have in India, a quality of humanity in what is seemingly an inhumane world. (154)

The Indian diaspora, reflected in the *girit* culture of Indian indentured labourers in Fiji, is the focus of Brij V. Lal's meditation, "Return to Bahraich." Lal recreates the lost world of his grandfather, who came to Fiji to work on the sugar plantations in the years before World War I, and uses his connection with that experience to offer perspectives on contemporary India which he encounters on returning to Bahraich, his grandfather's poverty-stricken village. The ambivalence of his initial response is searingly honest; and at the end, his conclusions on the plight of the peasants of eastern Uttar Pradesh are both provocative and compelling.

Indian literature evokes its own responses, and the collection includes a number of them. David Windsor's "Stories of a Scarred Dawn" considers the history of Partition literature, with reference to particular situations of writers who produced work "in Hindi and Urdu that focus[es] on the turmoil in the West" (51). Stephanie Jones, in "Within and Without History," offers a perceptive analysis of M. G. Vassanji's diasporic novel *The Book of Secrets*, recognizing Vassanji's "novels and stories as acts of restitution; as an ongoing reclamation of the narratives of community structures which have been marginalized by both colonial and post-colonial/nationalistic versions of history" (72). Debjani Ganguly, in her introductory essay, "Ruminations and a Preview," moves seamlessly from a commentary on the writing of *dalits* or untouchables to ambivalent personal responses to familial and professional experience, and offers a convincing justification for the grouping of essays in the collection. Ganguly's ability to elaborate connections between life and art, and her intelligent assessment of the effect of competing cultures inside herself, make this a memorable essay.

The brilliantly original piece by John Docker, "His Slave, My Tattoo," links the autobiographical memoir of Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*, with the work of Shlomo Dov Goitein, a Moravian-Hungarian scholar who spent his life investigating "the thousand-year-old interactions between Europeans and Jews and Arabs and Indians in the mercantile world of North Africa, the Mediterranean, Arabia, and the Indian Ocean" (182). The essay defies summary, though as a teaser, Docker suggests how *In an Antique Land* prefigures Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Both Bill Van Der Heide's "An Image, A Story:

India through its Films" and Subhash Jaireth's "Maps, Photographs, Paintings: A Story-Essay about Seeing and Telling" explore non-literary cultural expression in India. Van Der Heide analyzes the Indian popular cinema as well as Satyajit Ray's work to suggest ways in which "narrative form and structure are culturally inflected" (252). And Jaireth's record of his imaginative reconstruction of nineteenth-century visual representations of Indian canals and bridges, as well as maps of various kinds, suggests new ways to create narratives of Indian experience.

It must be noted that two essays in this collection are flawed. Bruce Bennett's "Glimpses of India" might well have been entitled "Glimpses of Bennett." "I" and "my" appear with insistent frequency, shifting the focus from his observations on India to his own achievements: the "symposium that I organized" (173), "the book which I edited" (173), the conference "where I was invited to give an opening lecture" (176). And names are dropped like condiments throughout the piece, regularly reminding us just how many important Indian writers and critics Bennett has known. The piece by Livio Dobrez, "Premodernity in the Postmodern Present: Readings in Rock Art," is not egotistical; it is simply specious, too frequently making much of little. Here is an example:

My argument . . . begins with the fundamental observation, by no means as transparent as it appears, that rock art is art of place, truly environmental art — accepting, for simplicity's sake, the inaccurate term "art." To understand this art one does not approach it as (rock) art, art that happens to occur on rock; rather one begins with the *rock*. Rock art is that not merely empirically but conceptually: "rock" constituting its conceptual category. Thus it is defined by location. (284)

Make-work projects such as this give academic writing a bad name.

Despite such lapses, *Unfinished Journeys: India File From Canberra* is clearly a project that was worth the undertaking. Syd Harrex and the Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English at Flinders University are to be commended for seeing its value and bringing it to publication.

STAN ATHERTON



Rhonda K. Garelick. *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de Siècle*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1998. Pp. 231. \$32.50

From Beau Brummell to Mr. Peanut, the image of the dandy has found a number of comfortable niches within modern West European culture. Admitting to no particular parentage, the term itself strolled onto the scene in late eighteenth-century Britain, quickly garnering attention in France and other parts of the continent as well. Tightly con-