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## And Other Stories

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**Griffin Ondaatje, ed.**

*The Monkey King and Other Stories.* Harper  
Perennial \$18.00

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**Yasmin Ladha**

*Lion's Granddaughter and Other Stories.* NeWest  
\$10.95

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**Shauna Singh Baldwin**

*English Lessons and Other Stories.* Goose Lane \$16.95

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Reviewed by Vijay Mishra

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These three collections all carry the same half-title: "and other stories." The point is that there are always other stories, stories beyond the title pieces, stories not bound by the covers of books. This is particularly true of the first book, *The Monkey King and Other Stories*, which is basically a collection of stories adapted from the massive epic and mythic traditions of South Asia. In this collection other stories also become a kind of "othered" stories, stories retold by people who are linked to the original stories only through memory. The editor Griffin Ondaatje asked a number of people in Canada (and one or two outside of Canada) with Lankan or Indian roots to retell tales that are either traditional folktales or part of canonical texts (epics, *kathas*, *jatakas* and so on). The retelling results in some wonderful versions, many radically rewritten and recontextualized to take into account modern anxieties (like Judith Thompson's "Mouthful of Pearls"). Other stories are fine-tuned at the hands of some of Canada's best contemporary writers: Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai and M. G. Vassanji. Michael Ondaatje retells two tales from the Pali and Jataka legends: "The Vulture" and "Angulimala." Both these tales are well-known in the Buddhist-Hindu tradition and I remember my father telling me these when I was young. But what a surprise to hear them afresh through Michael Ondaatje's spirited, and sometimes comic, retelling. In "The Vulture" the story-teller's

keen eye gives the old narrative a few extra touches, gently adding an anecdote here, a description there so that as the vultures steal clothes and drop them in the merchant's shop, we read, "Mrs G—lost several sarees left to dry on the bushes of her front lawn" and "The famous actress M—R had her blouse removed as she lay sunning herself on her porch." And since the contraption with which the vultures were caught was so secret that the narrator cannot describe them (as it fell under the "Official Secrets Act of Banares") he can only give us a highly complex diagram. The more straightforward moral tale "Angulimala" gets a wonderful didactic ending:

The fletcher trims the arrow shaft.  
 Water carriers guide a river through gardens  
 and through places of drought.  
 The carpenter shapes wood.  
 The wise one tames the self.

The Hindu/Buddhist karmic cycle produces a great story which is told by M. S. Vassanji ("The Cycle of Revenge"). But the interest here is in the narrative as much as in the way in which yarns are interwoven in the moral itself. And so the Wise Man concludes with the words: "The next time remind me and I shall narrate the story of the lust of the hunter and his gun." And the next narrative too would be linked to the previous ones as the same characters get reborn as a consequence of their karma. Not all tales are as tightly focussed as these, many more are inconclusive (and they are meant to be—"The Camel who cried in the Sun" is one such story). Many others meander through a number of high points to arrive at the central message—the title story ("The Monkey King"), for instance. And then there is "Mouthful of Pearls" a variation on an early story but this time set in Toronto. Judith Thompson's version completely recasts the story and presents it as the paradox of desire, referring as this version does to all those wonderful epic

heroines who were always desired by impossible men only to find that, in the end, they were physically and spiritually "dismembered." There are many more stories in this collection well worth reading. They are all written with a feel for the art of story telling and unlike many collections that really have no more than just exotic value, here is a collection that allows readers to relive what it must have been like for an earlier generation to hear stories from grandmothers who also added the anecdotal, the contemporary reference, either for dramatic effect or to keep the attention of hyperactive grandchildren.

Yasmin Ladha's collection is an inter-linked series of stories (same characters, voices cropping up in most of them) about memory and dispossession. Its unusual feature is, however, a high degree of (post) modernist consciousness of the fictive/"frictive" nature of writing and, not unnaturally with this kind of writing, a continuous engagement with the reader. In a highly original creative mood, she calls her (implied) reader "readerji" a common reader endowed with some special guru-like authority through the Hindi/Sanskrit honorific "ji": "'Sir Reader' might I interest you with my diasporic wares." Obviously there are many thank-yous here, notably to Rushdie who figures in the polemical discourses but there is also something rather unusual and original about Yasmin Ladha's work. It would be too easy to bracket her originality with what may be called the female diasporic sublime, the special voice of a woman resisting the highly patriarchal discourses of the diaspora, a point not lost when, as in the case of Yasmin Ladha's East African Indian diaspora, people move to liberal democratic states such as Canada. In aesthetic terms Yasmin Ladha writes with a high level of originality and force, weaving narratives through memorial constructions that capture both a lost place but also the underlying sexual and political tensions of an Indian

community in East Africa in the post-independence period. There is little here that is celebratory of the “post-colonial” struggle (as an oppositional moment); and a lot more nostalgia for an old order marked by a very vibrant and multicultural way of life. The figure of the “lion’s granddaughter” (Shil/Chiku/Aisha) stalks many of these stories and, in slightly different avatars, emerges as a powerful individual in the other stories. Yet these are not to be seen as ethnic tapestries, multicultural writing self-consciously addressing a rising literary/cultural field. Here Yasmin Ladha’s address to her readerji is put in unequivocal terms:

*Readerji, is this binary inevitable? One is the colonizer, the other, the colonized. Then whoa, whoa Readerji. Now, please pick up speed and move! Chapa chapa, tout-suite (clap clap), fatafat, out of my text because I shy/sly from any confinement/circle/missionary position. Friction/fiction between mates facilitates ousting of hierarchical positions. I don’t want to be the sturdy alphabet to set a novice at ease in Other literature—a vaccination prior to his/her flight into the Third World. But sometimes this has to be done, then I can’t help it ....*

The search for freedom for the “Sita-woman” confined within a circle drawn by Rama’s half-brother Lakshman is not just a demand for female empowerment but also one for freedom to define writing beyond the confines of the circle. The point, as made in the last sentence of the passage quoted above, is that it is for the writer to decide, strategically, where and when and how to define her work as “ethnic” or “other” or even “mainstream.”

Less overtly political and more realist in their organization, Shauna Singh Baldwin’s stories continue the strong trend in Indian diasporic writing towards the construction of female voices. Where Yasmin Ladha’s narratives are the product of what may be called a twice-displaced diaspora, first in

East Africa and then in Canada (and a twice-displaced diaspora I would argue may be read as a diaspora with its own distinctive qualities), Shauna Singh Baldwin’s stories are about initial displacement from India to North America. Her stories are largely about closed Indian communities, whether in North America or in India. Her richest stories are, however, like “Nothing Must Spoil the Visit,” “English Lessons” and “Devika,” those where two narratives and experience collide. In “Nothing Must Spoil the Visit” Arvind’s Canadian wife Janet visits India and is faced with the figure of the long-suffering, unhappy Chaya, once engaged to Arvind, but now married to Arvind’s younger brother Kamal. What emerges in this very tightly composed narrative (and Shauna Singh Baldwin’s stories are all very gripping with a cinematic quality about them) is a reading of culture and of women that, at first glance, leaves no room for understanding between two people from very diverse cultural backgrounds. From Janet’s point of view Chaya is incapable of self-hood since she has no freedom of action; from Chaya’s point of view Janet has failed precisely because of her sense of freedom and capacity for independent judgment which, as Chaya mistakenly thinks, has also meant that she has failed in her duty to give Arvind a child. Shauna Singh Baldwin develops these stories much in the manner of Satyajit Ray’s neo-realist films as she touches on questions of the mail-order bride, marriages of convenience to get citizenship, unhappy, lonely women on the verge of nervous breakdown in Toronto apartments, to create powerful images of communities of the “hyphen,” diasporas grappling with worlds that, finally, do collide, sometimes with tragic consequences. Often diasporic lives are lived within the confines of communities that recreate an India in North America, where men, in particular, simply fail to acknowledge the “labour” of women and the very different

socio-economic and familial structures that affect their lives. In "The Cat Who Cried" Prem has no qualms in simply directing his wife's boss to deposit her wages into his account although his wife desperately needs to free herself from the suffocating shackles of her husband's world and its values.

At one level both Yasmin Ladha's and Shauna Singh Baldwin's stories are versions of ethnological narratives that give many readers a glimpse into the life of the Indian diaspora in North America. It is a diaspora that clearly has two rather different forms. The first, as I have said, already has a diasporic past and engages with India as a nation whose general idiom it shares; the second connects with India as a source of familial (and marital) continuity. There is clearly, in the books reviewed here, an emergent writing of great sensitivity and skill that belongs, generically, to a growing body of Indian/South Asian diasporic work that continues to enrich Canadian writing.

personnes pour bien montrer qu'il a oeuvré au sein des populations autochtones et que les jésuites n'ont pas seuls droit au mérite de l'apostolat missionnaire, écrit pour faire valoir les mérites de son ordre. Aménagé en ce sens, le texte révèle comment le religieux est amené à mettre son rôle en valeur et à devenir en quelque sorte le héros de son récit.

Ce texte s'adresse au grand public, même si l'apparat critique ne laisse en rien à désirer. Aussi Réal Ouellet a-t-il pris soin de le rendre accessible au plus grand nombre de lecteurs en corrigeant certaines phrases trop longues, embarrassées ou incorrectes, en modernisant l'orthographe et en revisant la ponctuation. Il a ainsi réussi à rendre la lecture facile et à mettre en relief le style souvent naïf mais toujours captivant de Sagard. En signalant en notes les nombreux *loca paralla*, il attire l'attention sur la façon dont le relateur enrichit son récit par ses nombreuses lectures. L'édition que prépare Jack Warwick pour la Bibliothèque du Nouveau Monde diffèrera de celle-ci en ce qu'elle donnera le texte original tel que les manuscrits permettent de l'établir.

Pour sa part, Dominique Deffain publie à Tübingen une étude sur les relations du père Paul Le Jeune sous le titre *Un Voyageur français en Nouvelle-France au XVIIe siècle*. Des 157 pages qu'elle contient, cette étude en consacre le tiers à la biographie du missionnaire, à sa bibliographie et aux Relations des jésuites en général et à la situation en France à l'époque des Relations. Ce survol d'éléments déjà connus des spécialistes n'apporte rien de nouveau, mais il aurait pu fournir un fil conducteur à l'analyse. Le mysticisme qui alimentait alors une certaine spiritualité française aurait pu expliquer l'attitude qu'adopte Le Jeune dans ses relations. Mais par la suite, l'auteure ne tient plus compte des prémisses qu'elles a invoquées. On dirait que soucieuse de correction politique, elle se garde d'évoquer tout élément conflictuel.