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Review: *Goodly Is Our Heritage: Children's Literature, Empire, and the Certitude of Character* by Rashna B. Singh

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Goodly Is Our Heritage: Children's Literature, Empire, and the Certitude of Character by Rashna B. Singh. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004. 329pp. ISBN 0-8108-5043-5

Given that critical analyses of children's literature have not always been taken seriously, one could certainly interpret the growing body of work in this genre as indicative of a revolution that Thomas Kuhn (1962) would find reassuring. This departure from the more descriptive and historical has, in recent decades, heralded a more sophisticated and decidedly critical variety that now includes Rashna B. Singh's exceptionally candid study of character in literature written for children. Her discussion is set within the context of empire and presents a strong case for the significance of character in children's literature as a purveyor of colonial ideology; however, it begins with the business and binaries of race and geography.

Historically cast in opposition to the *organized* and *civilized* west, Singh proposes that the *wild* and *savage* east provided fertile ground for the dichotomous thinking that thrived in the literature of British empire builders. But, cautions the author, it was a different time. She acknowledges that during the colonial period "goodly" citizens were less aware of the racial and cultural underpinnings of their actions, and in fact felt a moral obligation to "take up the white man's burden," as Rudyard Kipling beseeches in his 1899 ode to Americans upon their acquisition of the Philippines (p. 3). And while it was imperial ideology, fueled by racial superiority that burdened the white man with the responsibility of civilizing and/or saving the lesser races, it was his character, says Singh, which made him capable of fulfilling his manifest destiny; he was of the right sort. Character, she asserts, upon which the binary distinctions awarded race were quickly bestowed, became "critical to the well being of the empire" (p. 8). Thus, even though predetermined by race, character needed "careful nurturance" and was "consciously promoted" by the British during the period of empire building (p. 41).

In *Goodly is our heritage: children's literature, empire, and the certitude of character*, Singh provides an examination of selected "literature for children as an imagining agency that worked with and within the colonial agenda," and looks at what she terms "the typology of character," (p. 1) and how the "construction of character became cultural imprints that served a functional purpose in the wider context of race and power" (p. 1). Her contention is that "character building became one instrument of colonial discourse and practice, and children's literature one instrument of its inculcation" (p. 2). In other words, Singh's main focus is on how the notion of ideal character propagated in 19th and 20th century children's literature not only served the British colonial agenda, but also evolved to form the dominant cultural context within which the self was/is conceptualized.

Her focus is on the past as well as the present, aiming to show that the two are related. To this end, she pays particular attention to the literature that is still being read today; of these, many have come to be regarded as classics or at least staples of a well balanced children's literary diet.

Singh's knowledge of children's literature is as broad as it is unquestioned. Her meaningful and detailed readings cover works that range from the *Babar* series to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, including Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, RM Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, as well as Rudyard Kipling's *Stalky & Co.*, and *The Jungle Book*. However, it is in her impressive discussion of the works of Enid Blyton, to which Singh dedicates an entire chapter, and also those of G. A. Henty and E. M. Forster that her contention of the function of ideal character in children's literature is truly brought to bear. While Singh concedes that the notion of ideal character, or at least ideal qualities, is a fundamental aspect of all cultures, she finds that not many were as vigilant in its pursuit as those who participated in building the British Empire. Courage, strength, determination, honesty, vitality, and physical prowess were not simply desirable characteristics, but were believed to be genetic attributes of the white races. These qualities were diametrically opposed to those inherent in the benighted races, which not only lacked these traits, but were thought to share a set of deficiencies that one explorer quoted by Singh describes as including "stagnation of mind, indolence of body, moral deficiency, superstition, and childish passion" (p. 8). The author does not make these assertions lightly and offers the racial theories of Spencer, Knox, Gobineau, and others as contextual evidence that this kind of thinking was "pervasive and internalized by a wide spectrum of the population, not just those who considered themselves scientists" (p. 22).

So, it was inevitable, says Singh, that these qualities were celebrated in British colonial writing as well as those of the American West, and subsequently in children's literature where writers such as Henty, Buchan, and Blyton extolled these very qualities through their popular heroes. This is not to say that the less ideal traits of the white races were overlooked anymore than ideal qualities in noble natives went unnoticed. Singh notes that the British respected and even admired the Sikh and the Gurkha, as they recognized in them many of the qualities they admired in themselves. In much the same way, a Tecumseh or a Black Hawk possessed qualities similar to those of the pioneers of the American West; even so, she finds in the end that "that does not change the narrative. Native good guys were as much the exception as white bad guys..." (p. 283). But, it was a different time.

Today enlightened citizens walk the politically correct tightrope and are advocates for tolerance and the leveling of the playing field. Nevertheless, Singh insists, residual effects of colonialism persist in popular culture through

depictions of nondescript jungle-lands where, for example, aspects of Africa and India are interchangeable and sometimes commingled. Singh points to Disney where she says imperial notions of culture and character are perpetuated on and off screen and (though it seems a bit of a stretch) that “When Osama bin Laden appeared on our television screens repeatedly after the events of September 11, 2001, we recognized him, not because we had seen his particular visage but because we had seen his typology” in the villainous Jafar of *Aladdin* (p. 68). Unfortunately, this and similar leaps of faith, which the author asks us to take, weaken her argument. But, when Singh continues this line of discussion later in the book, it requires less faith. That Disney fuses different cultures and characters to form stock images and characters of undetermined origin, Singh explains, lays the foundation for a particular type of racial/cultural stereotyping that can be evoked with mere words, because “The groundwork will already have been done. People fed on a diet of Disney and similar image factories will fill in the blanks” (p. 309).

In addition to scholars and students, Singh states clearly that her audience is meant to also include mothers, fathers, teachers, and future teachers. Here the author is successful in striking a balance that academics, as well as those outside academia, will appreciate. She offers a straightforward and provocative narrative that attempts to answer the question, “What are these books really teaching children in terms of how they should be and how they should see?” (p. xxxix). In light of the fact that character education is becoming more and more popular in the world of education today (Findlay, 2001; Minchew, 2002; Pfeffinger, 2003; and Stephens, 2004), this is indeed a question that justifies Singh’s endeavor. After all, even the most cautious of parents would never dare think that many widely regarded children’s classics should also carry the warning – parental guidance required!

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Reviewer

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