Reviews of Books

Oyama Shiro, *A Man with No Talents: Memoirs of a Tokyo Day Laborer.* Translated from the Japanese by Edward Fowler. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005. 139+xx pp. ISBN 0-8014-4375-X. US$ 21.00 (hdb).

If you take the Hibiya Line in the Tokyo Metropolitan Underground system and alight at Minami-Senju station you will arrive at a location which does and does not exist—San'ya, Japan's most notorious *yoseba* (day labor market). There are other *yoseba* in Japan—Kamagasaki in Osaka, Sasashima in Nagoya, and Kotobuki-cho in Yokohama—but none has captured the imagination like San'ya, even though the name will appear on no official map, nor will it be included in local government list of wards or suburbs. Despite its existential uncertainty San'ya is the meeting place for two unlikely collaborators: first, *biographe extraordinaire* Oyama Shiro, a long-term resident of one of the countless San'ya doss houses for day laborers, a group placed just above the bottom rung on the Japanese social ladder reserved for the totally destitute; second, Edward Fowler, a non too robust literature professor from the University of California at Irvine, whose fascination with San'ya began unceremoniously in late 1989 when he was punched in the face by an outraged laborer. He objected to being photographed by the eager academic who was, for the first time, exploring the darker corners of the neighborhood. The experience left an indelible impression on Fowler, who went on to develop an almost Quixotic interest in the neighborhood and its people. While this is ostensibly a review of Oyama's truly remarkable and ironically titled memoir, *A Man with No Talents,* it is also part of the unusual story of his translator, a man who eschewed his conventional literary interests in order to bring to light the character and complexities of a place unmapped and unknown to most Japanese, and in the ken of only a handful of foreigners. This review is really the tale of two men and a place.

Very few Westerners have written about San'ya. A major sociological study by academics from UCLA's Center for the Study of Urban Poverty was completed in 2001, but this was an extension of their study of day laborers in their own region. Prior to that, in the mid 80s William Wetherall's expose of the neighborhood appeared in the *Far Eastern Economic Review,* concentrating on the struggle not of individual workers, but on the street riots between extreme right-wing *yakuza* job brokers and anti-imperialist union leftists. Sato Michio, an independent film maker, was stabbed to death as he approached completion of a telling documentary on the then 7,000 day laborers who called San'ya home. The day laborer and union leader who completed the film, Yamaoka Kyoichi, was also assassinated by a member of the *yakuza* shortly after its completion. Wetherall's article is an informative one, but dwelling on high drama it fails to describe the life of the ordinary worker there, something much closer to the heart of Oyama's memoir which deliberately downplays the role of both the unions and the *yakuza*.

Wetherall, of course, wrote his article long before the burst of the economic bubble (really a misnomer for gross corporate and governmental economic mishandling) when no one would have dreamt of blue tent cities along the Sumida river in Tokyo, or filling Osaka Castle park. What incensed Wetherall was not just murder on skid row, but Japanese ignorance of Japanese poverty at the time. He cites the example of a tourist agency for school excursions which advertised tours to India which would, among other

things, show students what poverty is in the slums of Calcutta. Justifiably, the Indian government's tourist authority would not go along with the plans. Deprivation, when locked away in an unnamed suburb, is easy to ignore—and that has been the history of San'ya.

The San'ya area has been the repository for the unclean and the unacceptable since the Edo period: butchers lived there; it contained the old Tokyo gay quarters and was the place where destitute prostitutes saw out their days; it was the centre of the Kanto leather industry, staffed by untouchables; the geographical heart of San'ya, near the Bridge of Tears intersection, was the place where executions were carried out. The post-war boom has changed the nature of the population there. Burakumin still form a part of the population but they were joined by poor, unemployed agricultural workers coming to Tokyo for a better life (mostly from Eastern Japan) and also by other minorities such as Ainu and Koreans, the mentally ill, or the disabled, or criminals on the run—petty or otherwise. Disappearing into their ranks was a minority of highly education failed salarymen, middle-class workers who have gambled away family money, or drunk it, or like Oyama, men psychologically incapable of playing the part demanded in the well-regulated, convention-bound world of Japanese business.

In the 1950s and '60s there were about fifteen thousand day laborers in an area of little more than 1.5 square kilometers. They worked on such projects as the Tokyo Tower and facilities for the 1964 Olympic Games. The 1990s saw the number drop to about eight thousand and after the bubble burst and work was difficult to get, the number declined drastically to the point that there would only be about 400 men looking for work on a given day instead of thousands—Fowler described San'ya in these days as a "ghost of its former self".

The San'ya day laborers are know by a variety of words, some of them delightfully euphemistic and almost poetic, and others insulting: *dokata* (literally "ground side" or road worker); *ninpu* (coolie); *putaro* (child of the wind); *anko* (angler fish); *tachinbo* (standby); or simply *hiyatoi rodosha* (laborer employed by the day). Whatever they are called, these day laborers whose life expectancy is in the mid 50s—mix with a mélange of petty gangsters on the make, do-gooder Christian sects, prostitutes, the staff of two municipal hiring centers who provide work and attempt to control the workers, and an increasing number of the totally destitute, to produce a community unlike any other in Japan or even beyond. Some live on the streets, but most find a niche in one of the 200 or so flop-houses that provide a variety of very basic accommodation.

Oyama vividly records his quest for acceptable accommodation. When he arrived at San'ya he lived in a bunkhouse with eight people to a room—the lack of visual privacy was more troublesome to him than the smells or the noise. Because human beings are territorial animals they must have their own space mapped out, however modest. This is the room into which he moved for most of his 12 years as a day laborer there:

> When I heard about another doya where the bunks were enclosed by curtains that blocked the occupants' view of each other, I located it and moved in. Each bunk also had a television set... and a good-sized locker with a key. The latter was most convenient, for it meant that I had one mat of space entirely to myself without being cluttered up with odds and ends. If anything, it felt too spacious. When I lay down on the upper bunk, my belongings in the locker and a curtain to partition me from the outside, the enclosed space—as long an as wide as a tatami and as high as I was tall—actually gave the impression of vastness. A cubicle measuring 1.8 meters long, 1 meter wide, and 1.7 meters high... is indeed quite sizeable. I had no quarrel with dimensions. The problems lay elsewhere.

Enter Fowler into this unusual milieu in the late 80s, a year or so after Oyama decided to leave his attempted return to mainstream life in Tokyo and return to the day-laboring class. Their paths,

however, were not to cross for many years. In the meantime Fowler was working on a seminal study that would ultimately be published as *San'ya Blues: Laboring Life in Contemporary Tokyo* (1996). Based in California he returned to San'ya many times while working on the book, even for a summer living in one of the flop-houses and working as a day laborer himself on construction sites. Of course, like Margaret Mead in Samoa he is going to have a difficult job getting the locals to show themselves as they really are, but he did make every effort to do so.

The value of *San'ya Blues*—a song title borrowed by Fowler for the occasion of the book's publication—lies in its being the first serious description of the location by a Westerner, and in the intimate portraits of many of the day laborers he interviewed and described—he allows them to speak for themselves, or at least attempts to do so. Ultimately, *San'ya Blues* is neither a sociological study, nor oral history; it is not simple ethnography; it does not try to generalize on difficult social and economic issues. It does, however, force the reader to rethink the clichés which the Japanese themselves and foreign commentators have perpetuated since the war, ones about universal economic miracles, about supposed homogeneity, about the absence of individuality, about life employment. He also shows how much of Japanese development happened not just because of unified middle class productivity and an excess of money, but because there was a huge underclass of laborers to be exploited at will. But, as Fowler himself would admit, his is a picture of San'ya from the outside looking in—even his portraits of the workers are focalized through him.

On the other hand Oyama's *A Man with No Talents,* delicately translated by Fowler, is a reflection of one life in San'ya very much from the inside out. Oyama Shiro is a pen name; the author like many of the men he describes in the book are avidly private and more than a little keen to keep their former friends and family in the dark on their identity or whereabouts. We know nothing of his real identity, and little about his history. He was born in Kagawa Prefecture on Shikoku, the sixth child in a family of seven. His father was a small business holder who changed direction two or three times. His siblings have led typical lives for those from the baby boom post-war generation: his sisters married, and his brothers took up management positions in banking or production. His last contact with any family member was with his niece, and that was more than twenty years prior to the publication of the English edition of his work. This is how he introduces his own potted life history:

> I remember being an unremarkable and awkward child. Ever since puberty I felt completely ill at ease with myself and with members of the opposite sex. I have never slept with woman who is not a prostitute. I am, in short, a man with no talents who is incapable of relating to women or coping with work. I do not say this out of self-reproach.

Oyama belongs to that minority in San'ya with university education and some experience in the corporate world—several of the memorable characters he describes also share this kind of background, so it has to be said from the onset that he does not articulate the experience and feelings of other kinds of workers who remain as much a mystery to him as to casual onlookers. He was in his early fifties when he submitted the manuscript of his memoirs for consideration in the prestigious Kaiko Takeshi literary prize as a "lark" in the same spirit, suggest Fowler, as buying a lottery ticket. The book was also short listed for the 2006 Kiriyama Prize, Oyama joining such luminaries as Peter Carey, Rohinton Mistry, Tim Winton, Michael Ondaatke, and Ruth Ozeki. Winning such awards has obviously made things financially easier for Oyama—the book's world-wide sales are brisk—whose collected savings over the boom years whittled down to almost nothing when work was more and more difficult to find. But it has not tempted the writer to come in from the cold; he is more determined than ever to preserve the secret of his identity.

Oyama attended what he calls a good second-level university in the Kansai area. He worked there as

a junior salaryman after graduation, desperately trying to be a square peg in a round hole. It did not work. He spent a handful of years as a casual laborer in Osaka's *yoseba* at Kamagasaki, then moved to the Tokyo region to try to re-enter the white-collar workforce. "Inevitably," he admits "the cycle would repeat itself: my compulsion towards conformity would eventually break down, after a period of anywhere from three months to a couple of years." Around the age of 40 he gave up and gave himself to San'ya, "the perfect hiding place". His penultimate move to San'ya (he was to have one further major change of domicile three years after the 2001 publication of the original book) liberated him. As a day laborer he would spend less time on the indulgent extravagances of "frustration, anxiety, despondency, and failure"; he could "go about the business of accommodating his own fecklessness and ill luck" without remorse or too much narcissistic uncertainty.

Oyama's memoir has few literary antecedents in Japanese or any other culture. Some critics have compared it to Orwell's *Down and Out In Paris and London*. Certainly readers of Oyama will come to the same ethical conclusion that Orwell does at the end of his ordeal: "I shall never again think that all tramps are drunken scoundrels, nor expect a beggar to be grateful when I give him a penny, nor be surprised if men out of work lack energy...." That said, while Oyama's work has many political ramifications they are incidental, whereas Orwell's socialist agenda is rarely far from the surface of his account. You also get the sense that in Orwell's case he is writing about his *other* life—Oyama writes about the only life he has.

Other commentators have compared Oyama's memoir with Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground* but the narrative in the latter is characterized by cryptic urbanity, a profound self-contempt and, if I remember rightly, a overtly expressed loathing for his readers. By comparison, Oyama is seen throughout to be in the process of escaping from self-contempt rather than indulging it, working through the dim view of himself rather than bemoaning it; furthermore the almost elegant tone of his clean, conversational prose has an inbuilt respect for his audience (even when describing various levels of body odor or the early morning stampede to be first at the job window in the employment agency). It is also not without humor.

This extract will show what I mean. Not being able to find work in the bad days, Oyama now has time to look after his health more. He takes a "daily constitutional" which he wryly notes has become an "obsession":

> I had begun taking a greater interest in my diet as well, especially my calorie intake. Whenever I learned about some nutritious food (from the television or a magazine), I would invariably give it a try. For a time I lived a life dedicated to good health. I can't speak for the ordinary citizen, but I imagine that a man who goes to a place like San'ya in search of the healthy life is, well, something of a rarity. The custom of taking walks is highly unusual among San'ya day laborers. But I am quite aware of my eccentricity.

Being an outsider in a world of outsiders might be considered the worst possible in existential nightmares, but not for Oyama.

His description of other outsiders in the book is one of its great strengths—he treats his fellows with a remarkable warmth or even-handedness which never borders on the sentimental or outright condemnation. He may admit throughout the book as having few social skills but this has not stopped him demonstrating a deft talent for the character sketch. The cast of characters he presents is unlike any other in the history of fiction or biography. Kodama is a man in a mask, known to the author for about five years. Not once did he see his face uncovered, such was his desire for inscrutability or such was the depth of his shame. Kato-san is an angry idealist, whose lament is not based on the lowliness of his status, but the fact that the union movement belongs to younger men with no place for an ageing frustrated idealist. Saito-san (only in Japan would one homeless man refer to another through the honorific Mr.) was a junior executive in a bank, but

a failed labor dispute resulted in his permanent change of status. Then there is Tsukomoto whose strong body and equanimity had a calming effect on other workers. His very nature steered the group away from conflicts and petty squabbles. Yet under this calm mask lay the terror of being rediscovered by relatives, both in this life and in the next. In life he can run and hide and be anonymous, but how does he manage to remain so when dead?

> The decision he arrived at was to take his own life in the primeval forests of Aokigahara. Even the Japanese police... would be unable to ascertain who he was. If, in fact they were able to do so, well, that was that; he'd resign himself. (Resign himself to what, I wondered?) .... But something had shaken his resolve: namely the fear of ghosts (or rather, the possibility of ghosts) hovering over Aokigahara's primeval forests....
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> "So what's wrong with that?" I said. "You're going to become an evil spirit yourself, you know. You'll have plenty of company, too, and at least you wont be lonely. Things could get a lot worse." So I argued, but the cloud on Tsukamoto's face did not dissipate.

As fine as these sketches are, the main subject of the work is, of course, himself, the man who has an "inability to interact with other people" but who can interact with his readers almost intimately. His character is filled with contradictions and complexities as he presents it. He can be arrogant and humble, judgmental and accepting, hating humanity and embracing it, prejudiced and open-minded. He can describe his getting up at 2:00 or 3:00 am to get in the queue for work when there is little to be had; he records the petty squabbles and frustrations within the sub-class itself; he sees his meager savings disappear over the six years of declining opportunities; he can show others treating him as a non person, like the doctor who treats him regularly but never says one word to him, not one. The sights, sounds, smells of the flop-house are graphically included. Men disappear for no reason. Despite his psychological crises and the sheer ugliness of the world around him he never allows his book to decline into a pitch for sentimental sympathy. He is at pains to conclude that his "has been far from the worst of lives...." At the risk of sounding patronizing, he appears almost noble at times, a Nietzchean hero. Reading this book will be deeply touching for the reader; then at other times we cannot avoid claiming he is just too disingenuous to be believed: "If I may disclose a secret hope, it would be that this record of my life be read with only the slightest and mildest of interest, and then be forgotten as quickly as possible." For this reader, at the very least, that will simply not happen.

Readers of the English edition of the book have an author's postscript which is yet to appear in the Japanese language edition. In it he brings his story up to date with the information that, despite his financial recovery, from July 2003 he left the doya in San'ya to live on the streets. He remains there to this day. Several times throughout *The Man with No Talent* he alluded to the inevitability of this kind of move, but it was usually because he would be too old to work, or too poor to pay the rent for his bed in the doya. But financial independence afforded by ever increasing books sales and the original prize money itself means there are other reasons for his decision to live on the streets. "Money," he concludes, "had given me a kind of freedom: the kind of freedom to disassociate myself from my fellow man." He lives in the middle of a greater metropolitan area of some forty million inhabitants, yet celebrates his almost total isolation within it. He does not need to forage for food since he can buy meals, but admits to "a desire welling up inside me for the kind of thrill that scavenging would provide."

He does, ultimately, disarm the reader with his contradictions, his obfuscation, his prejudices, his desire for egocentric assertion and his desire for its loss. As a character he is elusive and in (or even through) his confession remains secretive. It took Fowler a year of correspondence before Oyama agreed to meet him. They met in the middle of a bridge over the Sumida River which overlooks a parallel river

of blue plastic tents inhabited by one of the most populous of "homeless" communities in Japan. One ironic assumption we can come to, in a book that refuses conclusion, is that Oyama is as much an stranger there as he would be behind a bank manager's desk. The other supposition we can make when leaving his memoir is this: as Oyama describes his acceptance of his fate he unwittingly turns on its head a dominant existential assumption which runs from Kierkegaard to Sartre. Oyama wryly demonstrates that *Angst* need not ultimately be the central reaction to the voracious demands of individuality, nor must we perforce feel lashings of anguish in the face of an oncoming Nothingness which is going to destroy it. But this should not surprise us, since the Buddhists—ever the experts on the philosophy of suffering—have been saying this for a long, long time.

George Watt

Jung Chang, and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2005. 832 pp. ISBN 9780099461552. £25.00

'Il n'y a pas de vrai, il n'y a que des manières de voir.'
Gustave Flaubert

After *Wild Swans*, Jung Chang established herself as the superstar of a new market feeding the growing interest in China, the superpower, and its darker side: a cover girl for those who fear its rise. With her husband, Jon Halliday, she has written a new biography of Chairman Mao Zedong China that will win her few friends in Beijing, and indeed has already been banned there in her native country.

Mao Zedong vies for the ignominious title of greatest tyrant of the twentieth century and the jacket statistic of this new work stakes his claim: 70 million Chinese were to perish under his rule and that in peacetime. The former Chinese leader is a fascinating subject for a biography and Chang and Halliday's effort is a page-turning thriller. They depict the comically grotesque Mao with great verve and the narrative drive comes from the large catalogue of villainous scenes, where the great one manipulates, bullies and tortures his way to the top. The reader is left quite astounded by the tricks and ruses of the revolutionary leader and the idiocy and cowardice of those who surrounded him. Unfortunately, while this makes for great reading, it seems a shame to reduce this towering figure of twentieth century history to a caricature rather akin to that presented of Kim il Jong in Team America.

That is not to say that this study is ill-sourced: their work is backed up by an impressive dossier of references to interviews recorded with many influential players in world politics, including two former US presidents and scores of other high level politicians and diplomats. However all these people are used to provide evidence for the fact that Mao was a man with no redeeming features whatsoever. The list of references to interviews extends to somewhat gratuitous inclusions: Michael Caine's inclusion (yes, the British actor) seems misplaced in a political historiographical study and added for name-dropping effect. He is used as the sole source to resurrect the tendentious Pentagon claim, since rejected by most academics, that the marines suffered defeats during the Korean war due to the sheer weight of the Chinese "human waves." Caine's inane comments suggest that his initial working class sympathy towards communism was halted by his firsthand contact with the Reds in the Korean War (so what?). Not a lot of people know that.

This biography has been the subject of debate among many Sinologists who, rightly in my opinion, highlight that there is very little way possibilie for the reader to appraise the validity of many of the sources. And there lies the major criticism of the book: that anonymous sources are used as the basis for revisionist accounts of certain key events in Chinese history. While these episodes certainly deserve investigating, the somewhat childish way some of these sources are presented makes for uncomfortable reading. The Sinologists argue that most of what Chang and Halliday present in the *unknown* story is in fact well-known and documented and that most of the new stuff is based on very tenuous assertions often supported by sources of questionable reliability, such as a little old woman they happened to meet by the roadside (one of two sources used to argue that the most famous battle on the Long March, at Dadu bridge in 1935, never took place) as well as countless others (anonymous and therefore unverifiable) including "interviews with Mao's girlfriends", "interview with a local Party historian" and "interviews with people who had been told." Some of these sources are used to give credence to revisionist interpretations of history for which there is extremely weak circumstantial evidence, such as the argument that Chiang Kai-shek deliberately let the Red army get away on the Long March. Other assertions are completely un-sourced and seem to be rather frivolous, such the suggestion that Mao was a key factor in causing Stalin's fatal stroke. This is somewhat indicative of the manner in which the pair tell Mao's story as omniscient narrators when so much of the history of his reign is decidedly murky.

To be fair to Chang and Halliday, the same rules for citation of sources does not and cannot exist in Chinese scholarship. Sinologists are faced with a great difficulty when it comes to researching documentation as the guardians to the gates of history are not only safeguarding dark national secrets committed by a previous regime but ones committed by their own. To allow free access to this information would doubtless raise a lot of questions among the Chinese, the majority of whom continue to adhere to Deng Xiao Ping's famous apology for Mao: that he was seventy percent right and thirty percent wrong (if the figure of 70 million is accurate then that would make 49 million of the deaths justified). This apology, pardon, and absolving action at once underlines all that is wrong with the way historical discourse is conducted in China. Our leader has deemed it so and thus it is the case. Objectivity and academic freedom are not really necessary in China's Peaceful Rise To Greatness and indeed are actively discouraged. Access to documents is therefore a difficult and often dangerous enterprise and witnesses for the most part refuse to go "on the record" for fear of reprisals. There are frequent moans from Beijing on the subject of Japan addressing the less auspicious moments of its past and "facing up to history" squarely. With each accusatory message from the Middle Kingdom comes endless navel-gazing and chat-shows arguing the issue in Japan, yet the same sort of debate would be unthinkable in China.

While there are no western historians who continue to labor under the delusion that Mao was some benevolent Confucius-like sage, this work leaves us no better informed. Mao certainly deserves to be condemned, but modern political and historical biographies should at least try and understand who he was and what he was, and how he was able to succeed in dominating the world's most populous country for three decades and indeed beyond the grave. There has, after all, been no real attempt by the party to face up to the misdeeds of Mao (in the way Khrushchev famously denounced Stalin) and he continues to enjoy a God-like status in China, where his smiling face continues to adorn coins and public buildings. This is surely what needs to be examined. Napoleon biographer Frank McLynn raises this point in a review for the Independent:

"[…] just as "Hitler was a simply a madman" makes for poor history and unintelligent biography, so this one-sided rant leaves us with no understanding of modern China or its helmsman."

McLynn continues by correctly arguing that one must 'enter into his [Mao's] mental world (while condemning it) and provide a detailed social, economic and political context.' McLynn's excellent biography of the French emperor manages to successfully strike this balance although one criticism of this work is the engagement in pop psychology that sees Napoleon as under the influence of many Freudian defined complexes. Jung Chang effectively spares the reader these apologies and instead prefers the harsh and unequivocal language of the denouncements infamous in China and catalogued in this book. She is, it would seem, far better equipped to deal with the unsubstantiated tirade than the cool analysis of a detached historian. And that is another key criticism: Chang lived under Mao's reign and personally suffered during the Cultural Revolution. She has naturally been influenced and shaped by her upbringing, where things are presented as either black or white, and where there are no shades of grey. This is Chang's personal revenge for the indignities suffered by her and her family during the Cultural Revolution: an eye for an eye and a public denouncement of Mao *à la chinoise*.

The criticisms of this work are right: it does not seek to justify or ask questions but rather produces page after page of condemnable actions that resulted in disaster after disaster. And this is where Chang does no help to her cause because it is too easy to allow one man to personify the blame. It also effectively allows the current Communist Party of China (CCP) off the hook. This is like condemning Hitler but allowing the Nazi party to continue in power. Too little of this work is dedicated to showing how the party organs operated and how power was so unaccountably wielded by the few. The institutional corruption is not really addressed but it is contemporary and extremely important insofar as much of the organizational structure conceived by Mao is still in place today. And it is used to exercise the same control through intimidation and fear as it was in his time.

To give credit to the authors, *Mao: The Unknown Story* is well written and will doubtlessly be far more widely read than more cautious scholars' works. This effort belongs to the burgeoning category of books of popular history and this is the story that both Chang and Halliday wanted to tell. With missionary zeal it wishes to contribute to the popularization of the destruction of the Mao myth. It does not allow dodgy sources or circumstantial evidence to get in the way of a good tale and that is arguably what most people want from their history, not the weighted prose of the specialist.

Read it, enjoy the stories, and then ask for a book by Philip Short.

Joseph Haldane

Frederick Crews, *Follies of the Wise: Dissenting Essays*. Emeryville, CA Shoemaker & Hoard, 2006. 405 pp. ISBN (10) 1-59376-101-5. $26.00

Frederick Crews, Emeritus Professor of English at U.C.-Berkeley, is popularly known for the brilliant satirical essays published as *The Pooh Perplex* (1964) and *Postmodern Pooh* (2003), and for his contributions to the dissident press. His particular targets there have been the intellectual and clinical inheritance of Freud. Crews was originally a disciple of Freudian psychoanalysis as applied to literary criticism, and his subsequent apostasy might have been manifest only within the ranks of the MLA except that he has sought a wider audience for what must be seen as some of the most cogent and wide ranging attacks not only on psychoanalysis, but more crucially, on its theoretical foundations, and the practices and abuses it has spawned. The present book is a collection of essays originally published in *The New York*

Review of Books, *New Republic* and *Skeptic*, amongst others, and talks given to MLA conferences and at various universities. They span a ten-year period, and though some topics are dated, all are a delight to read.

The wise referred to in the title are those persons in academia, who for various reasons, take seriously and even defend ideas that Crews believes to be either nonsensical or contradictory. Readers with an interest in the persistence of public gullibility will share Crews' scorn for follies surrounding topics of UFOlogy, alien abduction, spiritualism, theism, Rorschach ink blots, theosophy and Californian style Zen Buddhism. Yet this nonsense is harmless enough compared with the main target of the book, the faulty diagnosis of trauma, hysteria, paranoia and other psychotic conditions. Much of the argument in the book has its focus on the intellectual inheritance of the 19th century writers Darwin, Marx and Freud.

The book has five sections comprising nineteen chapters. The content of the sections may be inferred from their headings: The Antiscience; Modern Deviltry; More Diagnostic Follies; The Will to Believe; and, A Discipline in Crisis. There are two Appendices and an Introduction. The first pages of the introduction immediately engage the reader to Crews' powerful thoughts and prose. In speaking of the December 2004 tsunami, he surmises that the scale of charitable donations to the victims and their governments,

> ...bore an aspect of self-therapy—of an attempt, however symbolic, to mitigate the calamity's impersonal randomness and thus draw a curtain of decorum over a scene that appeared to proclaim too baldly, "This world was not made for us".

This thought leads to the more serious consideration of the claims made by spokespersons of several different religious creeds, to the effect that the calamity was divine punishment, or alternatively a warning from on high.

The first four chapters of the book assess Freudian theory, and recent challenges to the clinical practices it has spawned. That the latter have moved so far from the classic cases described by Freud seems to bother few of his current disciples. A sympathetic comprehension of this part of the book would require extensive knowledge of the literature referred to. There persists, however, the feeling that the whole Freudian package is a load of toxic rubbish. One is left with a picture of a world of psychotherapy based on multifarious theories and recycled clinical practices that share little in common with Freud's accounts of his practices, though in most sense they are an improvement on them.

The next section, of four chapters, deals mainly with "recovered memory". This term refers to the practice of interrogating children and adults, leading them to "recover" memories of sexual abuse by their fathers, with their mothers' connivance in some cases, and recollections that they were subjected to demonic rituals (15 percent of all the "molested" recalled Satanic abuse as well). These recovered memories were readily taken up by psychological counselors, social workers, police, the courts and radical feminists (some of the latter claimed that more than half of all women have been raped as children). The phenomenon provided support for a prominent sociopolitical movement in the 80s and 90s, spurring feminist writers Andrea Dworkin and Susan Brownmiller to claim that all fathers regularly raped their daughters to teach them what it means to be inferior. The notion of a "recovered" memory is mostly rejected now (perhaps in no small part due to Crews' militant stance against it), but its affect on the lives of those in families where parents were convicted of sex crimes against their children will last for the rest of their ruined lives. From the distance of 15 years it is scarcely believable that such a flood of mass delusion could have occurred.

Crews sees the evil of "recovered memories", and other clinical follies reported in this section, as supported by Freudian ideas about childhood trauma and the affects of its repression. He repeats the general line of attack on Freud found in the first section, citing the powerful contra-Freudian literature, including his own contributions to it. Aside from the circumstantial ad hominem character of his impugning of Freud, the graver problem is that it is difficult to clearly ascribe to Freud all the heterogeneous views that present day psychoanalysts hold in his name. Yet if Crews is fairly assessing the literature, we could conclude that present-day psychoanalysis is an improvement on the clinical practices of Freud, compounded as they were with blatant contradictions and grave inconsistencies in his diagnoses. Though many psychoanalysts would probably dissociate themselves from the misogynistic character of the Freud portrayed today, it seems deliciously ironical that the social workers and clinicians who so wildly conjured up fantastical memories from children, might be reminded by a Lazarist Freud to consider instead the subconscious sexual desires of the child. Most importantly, however, an attack on Freud is not crucial to debunking psychoanalysis as presently practiced. Crews is aware of this and is able to separate the man from his disciples. His greatest scorn is directed towards present-day psychoanalytical practice with its pseudo-scientific pretensions.

By any measure of empirical science, Freudian theory falls down, especially in impugning any attack on it as proof of the existence of psychotic symptoms in the opponent. More damningly, Freudian theory is so vaguely formulated that it could be consistent with any etiology or diagnosis, and hence, on Popperian grounds, as Crews notes, it cannot be empirically validated (a criterion Popper proposed in *The Open Society and its Enemies, Vol.2*). Crews also invokes Ockham's razor to dismiss Freudian theory for its proliferation of untested or un-provable assumptions. A more generous analysis might be made in terms of Imre Lakatos's (1970) characterization of scientific research programs. Taking his perspective, Freudianism is a grossly degenerative research program, its chief energy being devoted to manufacturing subsidiary hypotheses to strengthen its protective belt, the main tenet of the Freudian program (which could be presented as the claim that psychological disorders can be ascribed to repressed memories of traumas suffered in childhood, that dwell in an unconscious mind). No clinical studies of trauma give any validity to the idea that the greater the offence to the victim, the more deeply the memory of it is suppressed. In fact the opposite case obtains; the vividness and explicitness of memory usually being proportionate to the offence, as testified to by survivors of the holocaust. This is not to say that those suffering traumatic experiences never attempt to forget them. Crews notes ironically that according to Freud's own view of what we now call recovered memory, the child should be seen as the seducer of one parent as a form of revenge against the other.

Although the excesses of recovered memory have long abated, arguments over Freud and psychoanalysis will continue for some time. Crews, however, believes that psychoanalytic practice is generally in decline, though true believers will continue to plug leaks in the vessel, in his view, further widening the range of possible interpretations of the misogynist's gnomic claims. That clinical psychoanalysis has persisted for so long is probably due to the force of Freud's personality and the power of his prose, just as much as it due to the changes forced upon to save it from the inconsistencies evident in Freud's own practices. It is also not unrelated to the lack of adequate treatment for persons suffering mental disorders. Freud's concept of an unconscious mind permitted the attribution to it of a mechanism contrary to the governing power of conscious and deliberate thought. In divining the content of the unconscious mind, impalpable as it might seem, he resorted to a form of interpretation of his patients' dreams or reported feelings, for example, wherein every object reported in them might signify itself, its opposite, or any other thing. Crews cites evidence for this lucky-dip form of logic from Freud's published account of

the Wolf Man.

The unconscious mind is of course a philosopher's black box. We cannot see inside it. To take a materialist point of view, there may be nothing there. The success of pharmacological intervention in treating "psychopathological" disorders, gives ample room for the recognition that what is being treated is chemico-physiological. An intellectually refreshing antidote to the Freudian research program can be found in the works of Thomas Szasz. In dismissing mental illness altogether, Szasz claims that what we describe as "mental illness" is a medical problem and the appropriate treatment of, for example, symptoms of what psychiatrists call schizophrenia (incidentally, regarded by Freud as caused by repressed homosexuality), is best done through pharmacology. In Szasz's view the problem is in society's perception of and non-acceptance of what he regards rather as aberrant social behaviour. His view is consistent with that of Foucault, writing about the same time on the history of asylums (in *Madness and Civilization*).

The third section of the book reprints Crews' articles on hysteria, Rorschach inkblots and mind-snatching aliens, all perceived as "diagnostic follies" that, though not directly attributable to Freud's influence, suffer from the same or even more extravagant challenges to common sense. Crews' concern about aliens is not that people believe that they have been abducted and experimented upon, but that academics are prepared to indulge and defend such beliefs. The mass delusion concerning alien presence (64% of Americans believe that we have been visited by aliens according to a poll by CNN) is of course partly understandable in the face of unexplained aerial phenomena together with the popularity of science fiction, X-Files and conspiracy theories generally. The problem is the credibility and even respectability given by prominent academics to such delusions.

The fourth section of the book consists of five essays entitled The Consolation of Theosophy, The Esoteric Unconsciousness, The New Creationists and their Friends, Darwin Goes to Sunday School, and Zen and the Art of Success. These essays lack the moral earnestness of the preceding essays, offering instead a degree of constrained satire. The first is an analysis of the absurdity of Theosophy as seen from a century's distance. The only wonder that remains is how this version of the occult managed to attract so many of the prominent literati of the time. The spur for this and the next essay was the publication of Peter Washington's book *Madam Blavatsky' Baboon*.

His chief adversary in the third essay of this section is his counterpart in the Law School at Berkeley, Philip Johnson, a critic of Darwinian evolution and defender of "Intelligent Design". Contemporary critics of Darwin have seized upon any refinement of Darwinian theory as revealing its weakness, rather than recognizing that the Darwinian research program is expanding (witnessed in its subsuming molecular genetics for example). The essay reveals the futility of arguing from different premises; notably science versus the Bible.

The backbone of Crews' criticism of all the follies he exposes is an appeal to rationality, which he fairly equates with empirical science, and in particular with Humean skepticism. Such a critical attitude leads perhaps to overvaluing the solidity of most empirical disciplines. One need only regard the current state of particle physics or cosmology to realize that the speculative is not far removed from the determinative in these areas that are often regarded as the epitome of science. The empirical temper, previously regarded as hypothetical and deductive is now more appropriately seen as inductive and probabilistic. Thus the only weak point in Crews' general critique of pseudo-science is in his casting it against a model of empirical science that may not really characterize the enterprise as it is regarded by

contemporary philosophy of science or most scientists who have written about scientific discovery and validation.

Another problem in Crews' critiques is in his assumption that the explanatory models of empirical science can be extended to the social sciences. The difficulty with the latter is principally conceptual. As constructs, the concepts in social science are ideational (not in the Spenglerian sense, but in the sense in which Peter Winch, strongly influenced by Wittgenstein and Evans-Pritchard, employs the term). They are based on ideas we have about our selves, our behaviour, motives and mental states, and our cultural practices. The constructs in science by contrast, are based on general agreement to call a visible object, or effect, this or that. Debate there is based on the structure and meaning of empirical tests. As most of the constructs of social science are based on ideas, they cannot escape from the cultural, moral and linguistic net we have drawn around them. Much mental vocabulary indeed has descended from 5th and 4th Century BC Greece, and consists of concepts that philosophers refer to as "intensional" (as opposed extensional). The states they refer to are peculiarly immune to rational analysis. Thus the most contentious areas of the social sciences are conceptual rather than empirical; the conceptual has raced ahead of any form of empirical validation in almost all disciplines. Psychoanalysis is a paradigm case of this tendency, and an appeal to rationality with regard to it will win few converts. This reviewer believes Crews over-values the strength of an appeal to rationality. An alternative to the problem of the social sciences is to adopt a reductionist or materialist point of view. This means eschewing any concepts that make inference to mental states or social values in favor of identified properties of central nervous systems, DNA chains or amino acids. Richard Dawkins has demonstrated this kind of reduction in *The Selfish Gene*. Such a resort is a return to a kind of structuralism or new enlightenment, a stance that would be rejected by many of the luminaries referred to in the last section of the book.

Crews' essays in the last section of the book will be of interest to professors of literature, who in their turn might violently disagree with or warmly applaud them. It proposes a Götterdämmerung for post-structuralism in literary criticism. This prediction was already being substantiated when Crews wrote these essays. A significant part of this section, entitled *A Discipline in Crisis*, also contends with the social and literary consequences of Freudian theory. The poststructuralist move in literature, lately begotten of its parents in sociology and philosophy is important for its drawing attention to the tenuousness of structuralist thought in general, seen as the culmination of the enlightenment "project". Crews thinks that poststructuralism in literature has had its day, though he acknowledges a place for it in the history of literary criticism. His general stance is well represented in the claim that

> ...the literary enquiries conducted under the banner of this movement appear fated to produce mostly circular and monotonous pseudo-discoveries.

He notes a "dissatisfaction" that

> ...can only redouble as more and more academics from the left end of the political spectrum perceive the connection between flawed methodological premises and hollow and dogmatic findings.

In the chapter, "The End of the Poststructuralist Era", Crews points out that he is not going to conflate political correctness and poststructuralism, a tendency he perceives in some critiques. He believes on the contrary that,

> ...the relation of post structuralism to the radical sentiment now dominating "advanced" academic thought is parasitic, replete with ironies and, above all, transitory. To miss that fact is to be abandoned to a quite unnecessary fatalism about the irreversible decline of the humanities,

> conceived as a loss of ground to the joint forces of trendiness and programmatic leftism.

He also believes that the epistemological critique of poststructuralism, in theory, has been so devastating that "one wonders how it has survived as long as it has". Poststructuralism will probably not be defeated by epistemology, argument or logic however. As Max Planck noted, schools of thought change only because their adherents die, not because of losing the arguments. The staying power of poststructuralism may be accounted for, in Crews' view, by its sharing

> ...some of the adaptability shown by two dubious, but curiously hardy movements, Marxism and psychoanalysis, that acquired survival value from the passions they aroused and from the pliability of their concepts and propositions.

This claim is well supported in the text.

Crews claims that poststructuralism is,

> ...less a reaction against dubious scientific pretensions, than an accentuation of a grandiose strain that was already discernible in the most influential of French structuralists, Claude Lévi-Strauss". Moreover, by battening on radicalized versions of psychoanalysis while even formally disavowing the essentialism and foundationalism that inhabit the entire psychoanalytic tradition, poststructuralism has manifested a cavalier scientific attitude for which, once again, Lévi-Strauss offered a precedent.

The Sokal hoax may have shattered poststructuralism on its own ground, or at least revealed its absurdity, but reading Crews is a more satisfying way to put to rest this theory which rejects theory. This essay may now seem somewhat outdated to many in the English Literature industry. In two further essays, Crews resuscitates Kafka and Melville from the morbidity imposed upon them by the poststructuralist critiques, though one ought to be an expert in the field of literature to fully appreciate the essays in question.

Two appendices both carry on the high level of skepticism and clarity of thought evident throughout the book. They are transcripts of discussions in which Crews defends his opposition to creationism, and attacks Lacan's Freudianism. It is no surprise to see that his rhetoric carries the same force as his prose. The passages quoted above are representative of his general style and clarity of thought, mixed as it is with wryness, irony and humorous conceits. The engagement begins immediately in the Introduction and continues to the last word. In reading any of the essays one experiences the somewhat rare opportunity of simply relishing the power of Crews' prose, in its fineness, balance and dignity. When to these are added his extensive knowledge of seminal works in science and the humanities, and his clarity of argument, the essays stand in marked contrast to much of the writing they oppose, with its contorted vocabulary, elusive shifts and hermetic certitude.

The endnotes are unusually detailed and the list of works cited is impressive. Even the index is a source of some wonder as it reveals the vast number of references to works of others, though not even all those mentioned get a citation. Above all one can recognise throughout the book the sincerity and intensity of Crews' concern for the social effects of follies perpetuated in the name of therapy and the misguided defence of nonsense, whether it be relatively harmless (the Harvard professor who defends people's belief that they were abducted and experimented upon by aliens) or socially harmful (churches trying to control the curriculum of public schools, or the American Psychological Association refusing to counter the abuses perpetrated by some of its members in the name of science).

Michael Herriman

Sonia Sonoko Strain, *A Friendly Approach to English for Academic Purposes*. Tokyo: Shohakusha Publishing Inc, 2006. xiv + 246 pp. ISBN 4-7754-0118-1. JPY2500 + tax

The number of Asian EFL students taking courses in British, North American and Australasian (BANA) universities keeps on increasing. However, students from such a different academic culture often don't know what to expect. What will the lectures be like? What sort of reading will be required? How should an essay be written or a presentation be made?

A Friendly Approach to English for Academic Purposes answers these questions in a clear, step-by-step fashion. Rather than focus on one academic skill in isolation like many other EAP texts, this book integrates speaking, listening, reading and writing skills, often drawing on methodologies used in other well-known EAP textbooks. It is designed with Asian learners in mind, and it presents a variety of strategies for written and spoken discourse, as well as model scripts to help students visualize what is required.

There are six modules, each dealing with a separate facet of EAP. The first module is a basic introduction to academic life: the layout of a university campus, how to make an appointment with a staff member and so on. The second module advises students on how to participate in academic discussions, and focuses on small-group discussion skills such as topic-managing and appropriate turn-taking. Also described are skills such as how to agree, disagree, interrupt, and state opinions. Clearly EFL students need to know how rules of speaking will differ and how they may need to adapt in order to contribute, so the author highlights the contrast between turn-taking norms in Japan, where only one person speaks at a time, and the back-and-forth verbal interplay of Western discourse.

The skills needed in academic lectures are covered in the third module, including note-taking and summarizing skills, and listening for general understanding. To give students an idea of how lectures are structured, the author provides an outline of the usual lecture framework (e.g. introduction, main points, summary, conclusion).

The fourth module is concerned with reading academic texts in English. Since EAP students need to know how texts may differ from the ones they are used to, the author examines the differences between texts used in BANA countries, which begin with a clear statement of purpose (deductive), and texts used in Japan, which do not reveal the purpose of the article until the end (inductive). Practical speed-reading skills such as skimming, scanning and making inferences are also outlined in this section.

The fifth and sixth modules deal with the style and structure of academic writing. They describe some common patterns of written organization, such as "comparison/ contrast", "cause/effect", and "definition/ example". The author then demonstrates how a single paragraph can be expanded into a five-paragraph essay, before moving on to more complex formats such as empirical survey reports and research papers. Because the work is aimed at EFL students, there are numerous examples of the grammar used in academic writing: sentence patterns, reported speech, dependent clauses and so on.

On the downside, I found that the book could perhaps have been more clearly signposted. Many headings simply say something like *"Part IV"* or *"Stage 2"* where a written, descriptive heading would be more helpful. Another catch is that the text relies rather heavily on direct quotes from other sources, sometimes to the point of obscuring what the author herself wants to say. Nevertheless, teachers looking

for a reference book / textbook that is geared toward the needs of Asian EFL learners and which brings together reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in an academic context will be very happy with this one.

A Friendly Approach to English for Academic Purposes is available on amazon.co.jp. Buyers can also contact the publisher directly at toda@shohakusha.com.

Ian Walkinshaw

Guatam Malkani, *Londonstani.* New York: The Penguin Press, 2006. 342pp. ISBN 1-59420-097-1. US$ 24.95 (hdb).

Londonstani is an effervescent coming-of-age tale set in South Asian Hounslow—the London suburb made visible in *Bend it Like Beckham*. It was originally conceived by its author as a novel to cater for teen readers. "My aim," he admits in an interview with *DNA India,* "is to write for kids who don't read books." A massive target market, I would have thought. But its post 9/11 European publisher, Fourth Estate, with a desperate thirst for a book with a raw ethnic voice (or desperate for million copy sales like *White Teeth* or *Brick Lane*) thought otherwise. It was prepared to pay Guatam Malkani an alleged advance of over US$ 650,000 for the publishing rights. Robert McCrum wryly notes in *The Observer* that with this level of investment, *Londonstani* had to be peddled not as a fun book for illiterate kids, but as 'the literary novel of the year'. It is, he suggests, a Fiat Uno forced to run in a Formula 1 race. That it is, but it is a limited vehicle not without some color and panache.

Four "desis" make up the mini gang at the heart of the action, seen and described through the eyes of narrator Jas, a skinny, socially clumsy "gimp" who is the last to be drawn into the fold. Obviously the other three need a worshipful audience. They get it in Jas. The frenetically changing nature of sub-culture patios plays a sizeable role in the narrative style and in boys' quest for identity: "First we was rudeboys, then we be Indian Niggas, then rajamuffins, then raggastanis, Britasians, Indobrits. These days we try and use our own word for homeboy an so we just call ourselves desis." The gangsters manqué are led by Hardjit (plain Harjit before his gym-fed, designer-labeled apotheosis as super-Sikh) with a self-conscious physicality, one that borders on the homoerotic as Jas presents it. Ravi, on the other hand, a man obsessed with sex and Bollywood is unathletic and forever repairing his own ego through access to Hardjit's. The fourth member of the gang is Amit, whose parents are undergoing a crisis of monstrous proportions. The family of his brother's fiancé won't pay proper respect to the Hindu tradition which, according to Amit's mother, demands that they prostrate themselves several times a day to the groom's parents. This suburban gang of four avoid college where they are repeating A Levels, instead reprogramming stolen mobile phones, preening a lot, and working out exactly what kind Bollywoodism they can ingest without losing too much status. Tight pants, without which no respectable Bollywood hero would appear, are certainly out.

The publishers blurb claims that *Londonstani* is staggeringly original, that it "reveals a Britain that has never before been explored in the novel". It does have an original linguistic content previously unrecorded in fiction—and is quite infectiously arresting when we first get into it—but new the novel is not. It exploits many of the clichés which are stock-in-trade for British South Asian ethnographical fiction—tough street guys who fight it out with the best of them but who are terrified of their domineering mothers; ineffective fathers who have spent most of their time at their often successful small-to-medium

businesses or watching cricket; inter-faith tensions; politically incorrect behaviors seen by the characters in terms of respect and loyalty to race, class, and religion. There is little evidence in the book to support the publisher's claim of originality and authenticity.

The market demand for the so-called authenticity in minority fiction is highly suspect: almost always the writer allegedly giving voice to the voiceless is in reality what the *Londonstani* desis would call a "coconut"—someone culturally white on the inside and brown on the outside, a bit like Malkani himself, an articulate Cambridge graduate and editor of the *Financial Times* Creative Business pages. Thugs of every shape and size, color or religion don't usually have the urge to articulate their cultural longings in fiction, preferring more physical outlets for their constitutional anger. How authentic can "authentic" be? Asked another way, how authentic should it be?

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood… " begins Frost's "The Road Not Taken". This is actually not true. No authentic autumnal wood is yellow. It is orange, muddy brown, pink, chestnut brown, ruby red, and every imaginable shade of gold, green and ochre. Were he being authentic Frost would write "Two roads diverged in an orange, muddy brown, pink, chestnut brown, ruby red, and every imaginable shade of gold, green and ochre wood." It would be breathlessly bad art, or not art at all. Where is suggestion, selectivity, order and form? The prose equivalent of the orange, muddy brown etc. wood is found in *Londonstani*.

Linguistically Malkani over-reaches for a kind of authenticity, enjoying it so much that it runs out of control. Jas's narration is meant to reflect, and does reflect, the kind of language spoken by the "desis" on the street—it is a mixture of traditional Cockney, texting, American gangsta rap, South Asian rock lyrics, and a smattering of Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi.

In the following scene the four "desis" are in Ravi's lavender BMW with its under-chassis lights, chrome plated accessories, mock-wheels that keep turning even when stationary, and its lavender wipers. They are berating a fellow South Asian in the next vehicle for his "coconut" tendencies:

> --Goin bout yo business? Ehh ki hai? Amit goes. –Wat business you got goin? Readin fucking batty books? Take some advice from me, don mess wid us. Cos we b da man round here ni you be da gora-lovin bhanchod who can't even speak his mother tongue, innit. Wat's wrong wid your own bredren, brown boy? Look at us. We's b havin a nice car, nice tunes, nuff nice designer gear, nuff bling mobile. But no, you wanna b some gora-lovin, dirty hippie wid fucking Radiohead playing in your car. Look at m man Jas here. Learn some lessons from him.

Initially this linguistic pastiche gives the novel its breathless energy, pace and character—and provides much of its humor and irony. There is an eight page glossary at the end of the book, so an anxious reader can transliterate if desired. We discover a "fit bhanji" is beautiful, cool, sexy and attractive, and that to "chirp" her is to try to chat her up. "Khota" is stupid, and "kunthe da puther" is son of a dog. But because the glossary is incomplete, unless we go to the streets of Hounslow to find out, we will never know for sure what a "shanky" taxi is, or a "chota dick", or what exactly you feel like when you are "jiggy".

Jas is quite a creation in many ways—and never what he seems. His conversion from gimp to one of the "blud" is ultimately more surprising than Harjit's to Hardjit. Jas is clever and perceptive, and try as he might, his wisdom and powers of observation shine through despite his linguistic decline. It is almost impossible not to see Malkani pulling the strings of his wise desified alter ego who appears a bit like a South Asian gangsta version of Bridget Jones: Rudeboys' Rule No. 1—"My dad always said that you shouldn't ever lie cos you'll have to tell another ten lies to back it up. However Hardjit's taught me that if the back up lies are good enough, then so fuckin what?"

What Malkani ignores in *Londonstani* is that speaking and writing are two different communicative

forms that have vastly different functions. You can give the impression in art that one is the other, but only the impression. Zoe Paxton, reviewing for *The Times*, took the unusual tack of introducing the novel to High School students from the same background as the four desis—the audience for which the novel was first intended prior to its high-price hype. Paxton made some interesting discoveries, including the fact that while the students confirm the accuracy of Malkani's dialogue they often deny using such expressions themselves, and that "those who talk like [that] don't do it all the time."

Another perceptive student agrees that Malkani has the demotic down pat, but "it's too exaggerated and you would never, ever, write these words down." Paxton comments: "fixing the dialect in a book—capturing something by its very nature so fluid and elusive—is almost perverse to them." The reader also tires of the barrage—what is fresh and exciting and revelatory in the first part of the novel becomes hackneyed a third of the way into the text. And there is just so many "fucks" and scatological metaphors that this reader is prepared to enjoy. I know it sounds like a bourgeois elitist notion, but the demotic is, by its very nature, superficial and unable to convey emotional or thematic subtlety. It is one thing to reveal superficiality in the four "desis"; it is another to offer some sort of understanding of it. Compared to the invented language in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* which still reads freshly today, and which was also an examination of gratuitous suburban violence, this newspeak will date quickly. Identity in *Londonstani* is based on the latest fashionable street-speak which will change as quickly as the styles of Dolce & Gabbana underwear. Herbert Read, when responding to the new prose of a young writer in the 40s, suggested it failed because it did not *lie* enough. This is also the case in *Londonstani*.

Malkani's characters remain underdeveloped, consequently the novel increasingly has to rely on sensational plotting to carry it forward, such as Jas's dangerous romance with a Muslim girl (her three brothers and his three former desi mates are after him), and his setting his father's telephone emporium on fire. The novel was better in the first half when it felt like a gangsta Bridget Jones. Yet it is clear despite facile plotting that Malkani expects his novel to have sound thematic import.

The characters (especially Jas) will do anything to avoid appearing "batty" (gay, weak or effeminate). As a student at Cambridge, Malkani's social research focused on several questions which, unbeknown to him at the time, were going to lead him to his novel. What was causing the alienation of Asian children from their parents? Why were they inventing a new hybrid identity for themselves based on a fusion of US hip-hop, Bollywood, and bhangra? Why were essentially successful middle-class groups of South Asians increasingly resorting to the kind of violence characteristic of working-class white soccer hooligans? Why was this South Asian violence a middle-class phenomenon?

Central to his thesis, he writes in the *Financial Times,* is the notion that this new ethnic identity "is sometimes better viewed as a proxy for the reassertion of masculinity." Elsewhere he asserts that the novel is "not about race, but how race is used to bolster masculinity." The opening scene of the novel sees Hardjit mercilessly kicking a "gora" (white guy) on the ground, while his three acolytes witness the display and egg him on:

> - Serve him right he got his muthafukin face fuck't, shudn't be callin me a Paki, innit. After spitting his words out Hardjit stopped for a second, like he expected us to write em down or someshit. Then he sticks in an exclamation mark by kicking the wite kid in the face again.

Jas's worship of Hardjit is the worship of male potency with his "designer desiness, his perfectly built body, his perfectly shaped facial hair...." In this sub-culture, any slight to male grandiosity is punished: "He dissed the length of my eyelashes so I knifed him." And in Malkani's thematic scheme of things, who or what is to blame for this sad state of affairs? Centuries of post-colonial oppression? Racial tensions in the UK? Kids with too much money and too much time on their hands? The failure of multiculturalism as a

social model? None of the above. Malkani opts for the Freudian:

> ... one theory that repeatedly jumped off the pages to become central to my thinking was the idea that if a boy's maternal role model is stronger than his paternal one, he likely to overshoot with his own definition of what it is to be a man and develop a form of "hyepermasculinity".... If their mothers also happen to be domineering... then the resulting machismo of their sons might be all the more so.

Domineering mothers are very much part of *Londonstani's* diabolic comedy. The excessively decorated lavender BMW, in which and through which the gang express their potency, actually belongs to Ravi's mother. A staged and crucial bout between Hardjit and the local Muslim gang leader is delayed because Amit has to call in at Boots to buy his mother lavender oil, rose lipstick and a laxative. Because Ravi tells him the latter is "wat gay boys use... to make it easier" he puts a packet of extra large condoms into the basket so the attractive check-out assistant does not suspect him of being "gimpish" or worse.

But if Malkani's Freudian scheme of things is to be convincing, his strong mothers are going to have to be more than cardboard cutouts. Amit's mother is the most voracious in the novel, her excessive demands leading to the suicide of her elder son. Yet she is presented much like many other fictional South Asian matriarchal buffoons. In this scene she laments the purchase of modest jewelry by her future daughter-in-law:

> —Vot you know? Huh? Vot you know? This diamond set my daughter-in-law vill wear for reception, the whole town vill know is from us. She wears cheap set, everyone will think we are cheap people. I know vot's going on. I know. Her mother, bloody bitch, has told her to buy cheap set so to shame us.

An ethnographical, Freudian generalization is difficult to present convincingly on this light fictional plane.

Much confusion and controversy surround this novel, and will continue to do so. Its writer has been dubbed the "Muslim Irvine Welsh", even though he is neither a Muslim nor does he write about the slums and working class white boys with a chip on their shoulders. Malkani himself insists that his four desis are essentially "good boys" and that their rudeboy image is "just a front". Try telling that to the bleeding gora on the ground being kicked mercilessly. They lie, cheat, rob, fawn, threaten, insult and hurt with impunity. And these are "good boys"? Malkani is stretching relativity too far and leaving the reader in an uncomfortable ethical vacuum. In a novel about race, violence, family dysfunction, racial chaos, suicide, and gross materialism there is little sorrow, little poignancy, and, almost no feeling.

Though not the fault of the novel, *Londonstani* inevitably encourages a response from an entrenched position—Rageh Omaar (*New Statesman*) lauds the book for showing members of a cultural minority who avoid the complete ingestion of a Western identity and Western aspiration; conversely, as if she were describing another book entirely, Suhayl Saadi (*The Independent*) describes the book as thinly disguised Said Orientalism since it unremittingly posits Asian-ness as "irredeemably primitive, destructive, and existentially separate from the redemptive state of White-ness."

Choosing between these opposite views, I tend to lean towards the latter, with one qualification—a redemptive state of White-ness cannot be found within cooee of *Londonstani*. Whites in the novel are either bleeding on the ground, or are confused, gutless, ineffective, misled or just plain silly. Take Mr. Ashwood, the tendentious, pullover-clad, naïve school teacher who tries to save the boys by lying to the police and taking them to meet the superbly successful older old scholar, Sanjay. Sanjay's post-Cambridge

success includes the ownership of two or three of the world's most expensive cars, and an apartment filled with space-age gadgetry and with illuminated glass floors under which plentiful fish swim. Unbeknown to Ashwood is the nasty fact that this paragon is a big-time crook. Meeting him launches the erring boys from their Hounslow neighborhood of petty crime into the melodramatic underworld of international fraud.

There is another important "gora" in the novel, but you will have to read it before knowing this person's identity. Only then can you discover a singular kind of White-ness Makani chooses to include in his fictional world, and only then can you work out if redemption has anything to do with it. It is worth reading *Londonstani* to find out—almost.

George Watt