BOOKS
Category : June 1998
Published by Anonymous on Jun. 01, 1998

BOOKS

Kids Korner

Visionary publishers vend books for boys and girls--full of fabulous fables and visual pearls

By Tara Katir, Kauai

How many times have you scoured bookstores for quality Hindu storybooks, only to come away weary, wishing that someone would get serious about writing for today's Hindu youth? Newsweek recently stated that "'Need' is never an issue with kids' books," due to the approximately 5,000 new children's titles published every year in the US. But it seems they never asked a Hindu mom. In response to this latent need, a diverse group of artists and authors have recently produced stunningly beautiful books for children and young adults. These are US productions that soar above similar Indian tomes, and many of the creative talents are Westerners. Their rich and powerful stories, with striking illustrations and deftly written prose, will capture your child's imagination, teach a moral (not haughty) lesson, and provide them with fanciful friends and role models.

Want to become an armchair traveler to India? Read and enjoy Sacred River (36 pages, Clarion Books, US$14.95) written and illustrated by Ted Lewin. Lewin's powerful and majestic

watercolor paintings coupled with his unadorned prose will transport you to the ancient holy city of Banaras. From the boatman to the bathers seeking religious purification in the holy waters, the religious solitaires meditating on its banks, to the cremation grounds and to the final journey of the ashes of the departed, Hinduism's most sacred river is lovingly depicted in Lewin's sumptuous work. The Gift (28 pages, Wisdom Publications, us$14.95) written and illustrated by Isia Osuchowska, is a magical story of a modest gift of cloth and its far-reaching effects. An impressive lesson in the use of resources interpreting the ethic of "waste not; want not," The Gift serves up a potent declaration of how we can use what we have for the benefit of many, now and into the future. In the Heart of the Village: The World of the Indian Banyan Tree (28 pages, Sierra Club Books for Children, us$16.95) written and illustrated by Barbara Bash, presents a visually rich window into the complex world that grows around the magnificent banyan trees of India. Through vividly sensual and lush paintings, Bash takes us into the swirl of life surrounding a giant banyan, the village centerpiece. From dawn worship in the modest shrine at its base to the mid-morning market; from a playground's shady respite from mid-day heat to the evening's cool meeting-ground for village elders; and with the plethora of animals living in its far-flung branches, the world of the Indian banyan is lovingly protrayed for us all to enjoy.

Departing the breathtaking banyan, we delight in the savory sweet Cherry Tree (32 pages, First Boyds Mills Press, us$7.95). Written by Ruskin Bond and illustrated by Allan Eitzen, we are delivered to the Himalayas to follow a village girl,

Rakhi, as she plants a cherry seed, nurtures it and marvels as it grows to bear its delicious fruits. All the while, Rakhi grows and matures into womanhood. Her sweet and sometimes sour lessons of life follow the simple planting of a cherry pit. A suspenseful tree tale of another sort (notice a trend here?) is Aani and the Tree Huggers (30 pages, Lee & Low Books Inc., us $14.95). Written by Jeannine Atkins and illustrated by Venantius J. Pinto, this tale is based on actual events in India from the 1970s. A young girl, Aani, inspires the women of her village to hug the trees to prevent them from being cut. Pinto's vibrant, attractive illustrations, from the colorful clothes and jewelry of the women to the rangoli decorations on the village houses, will wisk you into the world of the tree huggers as they offer their lives to preserve what they value.

Values of another sort abound in Victor, the Vegetarian: Saving the Little Lambs (52 pages, Aviva Press, us$6.95). Written by Radha Vignola and illustrated by Julia Bauer, this book sends a forceful

message to non-vegetarian parents. While Bauer's illustrations are not as colorful as others, being done in a simple one-color format, they lend themselves agreeably to Vignola's powerful story. They also serve well for coloring. After hearing his father's plans to have the family lambs for dinner (not as guests), Victor sets out to liberate them. All ends well when Victor, the lambs and his family reunite. "Eat vegetables instead of our animal friends" is Victor's message!

Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore [1861-1941] gave the world many messages through his literature, and now he gives two fine books, Amal and the Letter from the King (32 pages, Boyds

Mills Press, ᵘˢ$14.95) retold by Chitra Gajadin and illustrated by Helen Ong and Paper Boats (28 pages, Boyds Mill Press, ᵘˢ$14.95) illustrated by Grayce Bochak. In Amal we are introduced to a small boy confined to his house by illness. His world comes to him as he peers outside his window and dreams of traveling with time to an unknown land. Tagore's lyrical language makes this a perfect book to read aloud. In Paper Boats Tagore's simple poetry leads us into the imaginative mind of a child dreaming of what lies beyond his small world. Paper boats, drifting down a stream with "blooms of dawn" will evoke memories of your

own childhood and its simple pleasures. The unpretentious, yet expressive torn-paper style illustrations are the perfect vehicle for Tagore's elegant poetry.

Jump from the ethereal to the analytical and land in the world of learning and cultural exchange. Interested in how people live and celebrate life's important milestones, or just what went into those tasty curries you ate last night at your neighborhood restaurant? We have a few delectable

treats to satisfy your appetite. A Taste of India (48 pages, Thomson Learning, us$14.95) by Roz Denny from a series, Food Around the World, takes you from marketplace to kitchen with the creation of several standard Indian recipes (unfortunately not all vegetarian). From fifty color photos, maps, illustrations, to cultural cues on eating with your fingers, this is a nifty book for classroom use, grades 3-5. Your fifth to sixth grader may also find elucidation in The Ganges Delta and its People

(48 pages, Thomson Learning) by David Cumming. Topics range from early history, floods, droughts, to geography, lifestyles and social concerns of the present populations. This is a sure way to give young readers useful information about this region of the world.

Have you ever wondered what ceremonies Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, Hindus and Jews perform at life's

important junctures, what foods are considered sacred or profane, how youths (like Ravi on page 33) are initiated into adulthood and what sacred journeys are ritually undertaken? You can find answers to these and more from the Thomson Learning series on Comparing Religions (30+ pages each, Thomson Learning): Marriage Customs by Anita Compton, Initiation

Customs by Katherine Prior, Food and Fasting by Deirdre Burke, Birth Customs by Lucy Rushton and Pilgrimages and Journeys by Katherine Prior. Each gives simple yet fairly complete descriptions of the rituals and beliefs which enrich and empower the lives of each adherent. Photographs presenting ceremonial customs, places, food and people enhance this series, making

it a valuable tool for teachers or parents interested in sharing the observances of other faiths with children, and to foster tolerance through understanding.

Customs, clothes and food choices are hot topics of conversation among adolescent NRIs growing up outside India, with the core

question being whether "to be Indian or American?" Aruna's Journey (134 pages, Smoothstone Press, us$6.95) by Jyotsna Sreenivasan and illustrated by Merryl Winstein broaches the subject in the tale of a Hindu youth experiencing life in America. Aruna is an eleven-year-old whose family is from Karnataka. Ashamed of her Indian origin and trying to become

a "normal American," she journeys to India to visit her relatives. Culture shock! Adapting to and eventually accepting life in India, Aruna in turn accepts herself. This is a multicultural book with a message.

A message of another sort comes in Binya's Blue Umbrella (68 pages, Boyds

Mills Press, us$12.95), a little book about a blue umbrella and the joy it brings. Written by Ruskin Bond and illustrated by Vera Rosenberry, this is a modern parable on desire and the illusiveness of happiness. The tale of Binya, the humble mountain girl, a blue silk umbrella and the people who covet it unfolds into an adventure with a surprising conclusion. Rosenberry's

telling black-and-white illustrations draw us into Binya's mountain world and its people.

Last, but surely not the least, is Count Your Way through India (20 pages, Carolrhoda Books, Inc.) by Jim Haskins, illustrated by Liz Brenner Dodson. Numbers one

through ten in Hindi will be your guide on a trip through India. Colorful and charming modern illustrations highlight each page. Hindi script is introduced along with a pronunciation guide and a short story about the illustration which relates to the number being studied. A nice read-aloud book with

upbeat illustrations, Count Your Way is a sure win for young readers (4?6). So head back to your favorite bookstore, you'll have better luck this time.

Publishers: CAROLRHODA BOOKS, INC, 241 FIRST AVE. NORTH, MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA 55401 USA;

SMOOTH STONE PRESS, P.O. BOX 19875, ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI, 63144 USA; BOYDS MILLS PRESS, INC, 910 CHURCH STREET, HONESDALE, PENNSYLVANIA 18431 USA; THOMSON LEARNING, 115 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10003 USA; LEE & LOW BOOKS, INC, 95 MADISON AVENUE, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10016 USA; CLARION BOOKS, 215 PARK AVENUE SOUTH, NEW

YORK, NEW YORK, 10003 USA; AVIVA, P.O. BOX 1471, SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA 95061-1471 USA; WISDOM PUBLICATIONS, 361 NEWBURY STREET, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02115 USA; SIERRA CLUB, 85 SECOND STREET, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA 94105 USA.