

Helena Nelson reviews Daljit Nagra, Sarah Salway and Amy Acre

Indiom

Daljit Nagra
Faber £14.99

Learning Springsteen on my language app

Sarah Salway
Indigo Dreams £9.50

Mothersong

Amy Acre
Bloomsbury Poetry, £9.99

Having enjoyed Daljit Nagra's previous collection, **British Museum**, I opened **Indiom** cheerfully. This beautiful hardbacked volume might teach me something useful about 'indioms' I thought, assuming they were ... Indian-English dialects maybe? (I suppressed anxiety about my own white, Raj-tainted background.)

What did I find? Much cleverness, a warm welcome, and an author clearly enjoying himself. "Indioms" I quickly learned in *Prologue by Screenwriter's Companion* (Canto 1:1), "flow from the mood engagement between English / & Indian. Babu & Coolie are both indioms".

So I was in the right ballpark, then. I set off on my way through the four and a half cantos (it's a mock-epic), each in sections prefaced with mini prose summaries and a graphic resembling Poirot's moustache. The author exploits multiple poetic – often syllabic – forms, with many changes of style and tone. The context for the drama is a movie set. The cast of the movie is a group of poets of Indic-heritage (a term I didn't know but soon worked out). There are innumerable implicit and explicit literary allusions.

As things swing into action, the poets perform their work in different 'indioms', while the director, screenwriter, camera crew etc. comment and converse. A 'chorus' periodically chips in. Cultural references surge past: Barrett Browning, Eliot, Pound, Ezekiel, Escher, Da Vinci, Austen, Homer, Kipling, Orwell, Rushdie, Wilde, Mew (and this is just by the end of Section 2 of the first Canto). Satire is clearly on the agenda. In *Mr Desani's welcoming speech* (Canto 1:2), he tells his fellow poets:

Our windfall abounds! I say it is here with my yellow
crossed garters, with the camera crew decked in
pink dayglow,
with our Clee Hills, there, where Shropshire lads are
buried

& hope

for rebirth in our Babu tongue! I can no more
compos
mentis far-off Bodo Babu than Coolie Telugus
hawking. Each mulligatawny is a milieu music.

There's an all-embracing manic joy to this as it sweeps over you. I can't see that it's possible to follow the narrative in a conventional sense, but periodically you twig what seems to be going on (the section summaries help), and sometimes, if you are a poet yourself, you laugh, as in *The role of heritage for Poets of Colour* (Canto I:4):

Camera Operator whispers to Director:
How should the viewer read each POC,
should Poets of Colour be read for content?

Director whispers:
Read weak POC for content, but quality POC –
read them for the way style can rocket heads clean
off.

This is as nutty as a fruitcake, as intense as halva, as intoxicating as a whisky-drenched plum pudding. Many of the workshop poems are intentionally unintelligible:

coolie coolie hum hum
gully gully gum gum
me no badmaash lafunga
me no bandicoot dungar

(*Ms Begum Jaan & Coolie language*, Canto I:5)

Oh, and two of the poets fall in love. It is fun, yes, but it's the kind of fun that requires serious concentration: "Let's [...] not chew the cud of how, at best, this talkie / is an elite of elite talkie of a talkie critique of critique" (*Sound poem by Mrs Japprey's servant*. Canto IV:35).

Sometimes I felt I was with Lewis Carroll at his wildest. A tip for the intrepid: reading from beginning to end may not be the best route. Dipping in and out proved the most enjoyable approach for me. Back to front could have certain advantages; the tragi-comic *Finis* is fascinating and haunting, and the concluding *Acknowledgeability* page is wonderful.

Sarah Salway's *Learning Springsteen on my language app* is a more straightforward read, although it has its own zany take on life, and frequently ventures into the surreal. The opening poem, for example, has the author licking the covers of two library books on either side of where *A Dictionary of How to Live Properly* ought to be shelved. I slipped instantly inside her 'improper' head, and I enjoyed being there.

More than once, she made me laugh, as in *Why it's no fun being me at night*, which allows the reader to ride on a totally unpredictable train of thought:

Just yesterday I could have had a last swim
with my husband, my husband
who is snoring now as if he doesn't know
he's just been murdered. I should have leapt
into the sea with him while I could,
instead of sitting on rocks
pretending to watch while all the time
I was writing a poem about death

This single-block poem typifies the way utterly ordinary background details are suddenly transformed with extraordinary twists and roller-coaster line-breaks. It also demonstrates how well this poet can match a poetic form to a central idea. *Ignition*, for example, opens "Late again for yoga". This is a haibun that pursues an imaginary journey. I'm with the poet every step of the way in the prose section: "[...] all I can think about is that radio interview, a woman saying how she always tells at least one friend where she is, when she is leaving, where she is going, in case they need to find her body". The closing haiku summons "red dots on phone maps". I shiver.

On a lighter note, *Skull*, one of my favourites, is set in Italy, with the relics of a dead saint on view, including the titular skull, which "stares back at us / through an iron grille". Then the "it" of the skull suddenly shifts into "you":

But you (because you've become
our skull now) have caught us
by surprise so you come with us
as we walk out into Pisa, carried

