

## FUN STUFF FROM PENGUIN INDIA

**Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne: The Magical World of Upendrakishore Roychoudhury**, translated by Swagata Deb. Puffin Books. 167 pp. Rs. 199.

**Abol Tabol: The Nonsense World of Sukumar Ray**, translated by Sampurna Chattarji. Puffin Books. 172 pp. Rs. 199.

**Corridor: a graphic novel**, by Sarnath Banerjee, Penguin Books India, 2004, 112 pp. Rs. 230.

### KHADEMUL ISLAM

Rare is the literate Bangali who does not smile at the mention of Upendrakishore Roychoudhury and Sukumar Ray. About *Goopy Gyne and Bagha Byne* Satyajit Ray, grandson of Upendrakishore and son of Sukumar, wrote to Marie Seton, "It is extraordinary how quickly it became part of the popular culture. Really, there isn't a single child in the city who doesn't know and sing the songs (from the film)." The same can be said of Sukumar's *Abol Tabol*, although his work has more adult resonance than Upendrakishore's: Sukumar's satirical characters include children who have been forbidden from smiling (a dig at the extra-seriousness of the members of Brahmo Samaj), and an anglophile cow that loves everything English (a depiction of the black sahibs who viewed with contempt anything Indian). In a dig at the laws of the then British government, Sukumar also described a land where one

can be punished for coughing or sneezing or slipping on the road. Puffin India, which is a subsidiary of Penguin India, has published these two very good translations of both the writers—especially of Sukumar's *Abol Tabol*, whose translator Sampurna Chattarji notes that, "The most marvelous thing about Sukumar Ray's poetry is, of course, the sound. What we call onomatopoeia in English suddenly starts seeming pale in comparison to the whole riotous caboodle of effects that he conjures up in Bengali. My effort has been to get that experience across, even if it meant resorting at times to outrageous word making." The reader can read the results for him/herself.

The third book is something with which our readers may not be familiar. It's a 'graphic novel,' the term usually meaning full-length, stand-alone (i.e. not a series), original stories presented in comic book format. Though mainly for young adults, at times they have evolved into something rich and strange—as witness Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus I and II* about the Holocaust, or Joe Kubert's *Fax from Sarajevo*. They are huge in the United States (an alternate universe with its own terminology, collectors, enthusiasts, artists, cults, etc. which also provides material for Phds in popular culture), and where they came mainly by way of Japan, France and Eastern Europe. While buying chewing gum in the store

across my office in Washington D.C., I would always linger by the comics/comix rack, flipping through the pages, fascinated by the difference in drawings, plot lines and characters between my boyhood—when princesses flitted through palace rooms trailing talking dachshunds—and now—where princesses clad in scanty alligator skins drag a man into a spaceship and zoom off towards a bedroom far far away. Like fashion-conscious maulvis on MTV, I suppose it's a sign of the times!

Still, I thought I was too old to enjoy a graphic novel. That is, until I opened Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor*, which is set in Delhi and Calcutta, and has Brighu, Digital Dutta and Jehangir Rangoonwalla as the main characters—proof that the senses respond more fully when art incorporates the familiar and local. I also have to admit that I don't know whether this is a first, or whether other 'novels' in this genre have been 'written' by Indians. Its theme is urban anomie and angst, and it's very funny in places. The book's drawings are great—stark, mostly gritty black and white, with occasional bursts of cut-outs and colour, as befits its theme. If there is one fault of the book it may be that of terminal hipness, but this presumably first try by Banerjee is fun to go through. Parents, however, should be warned that despite the cartoon book look of the 'novel,' its language is R-rated.

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"Who are you?" he asked.  
"I am Bagha Byne. Who are you?" said Bagha.

"I am Goopy Gyne. Where are you going?" asked Goopy.  
"I'll go wherever I can find a place to stay," Bagha replies. "All the people in my village are idiots. They can't appreciate good music. That is why I came to stay in the forest. But there is a terrible beast here. If I stay here, the creature will surely eat me, and my drum too. That is why I am going away."

"You are right," said Goopy. "I was also running away from this beast. Tell me, where do you hear it roar?"

"From the east," said Bagha. "From the bamboo thicket."

"Why, that was me!" cried Goopy. "You heard my songs! That wasn't the beast! The beast roars on the western side of the forest, by the big banyan tree."

"That was the sound of my drum!" said Bagha. "I was playing it under the banyan tree."

As they realized that they had got scared listening to each other's music, they burst out laughing.

Then Goopy said, "I am a Gyne and you are a Byne. I am sure that the two of us can do great things together."

Bagha agreed. They decided that they would go and play for the king. Who knows, pleased with their music, the king might even give them each half his kingdom and a daughter as bride!

Goopy and Bagha felt very happy now that their future was sorted. They laughed and sang and danced on their way to the king's palace. After some time, they reached the bank of a wide river. The palace was on the other side.

There was a boat to take people across the river, but the boatman wanted money. Goopy and Bagha had spent the last few days in the forest.

Where could they get money?  
"We can't pay you," they said to the boatman. "But we can sing and play music for you. We are great musicians, we are going to play for the king. Please take us across the river."

The other passengers liked the idea. "We'll pay for them. Let them come along," they told the boatman.

The boatman was also eager to hear their music. He agreed at once. Goopy and Bagha got on the boat, and the boatman started rowing.

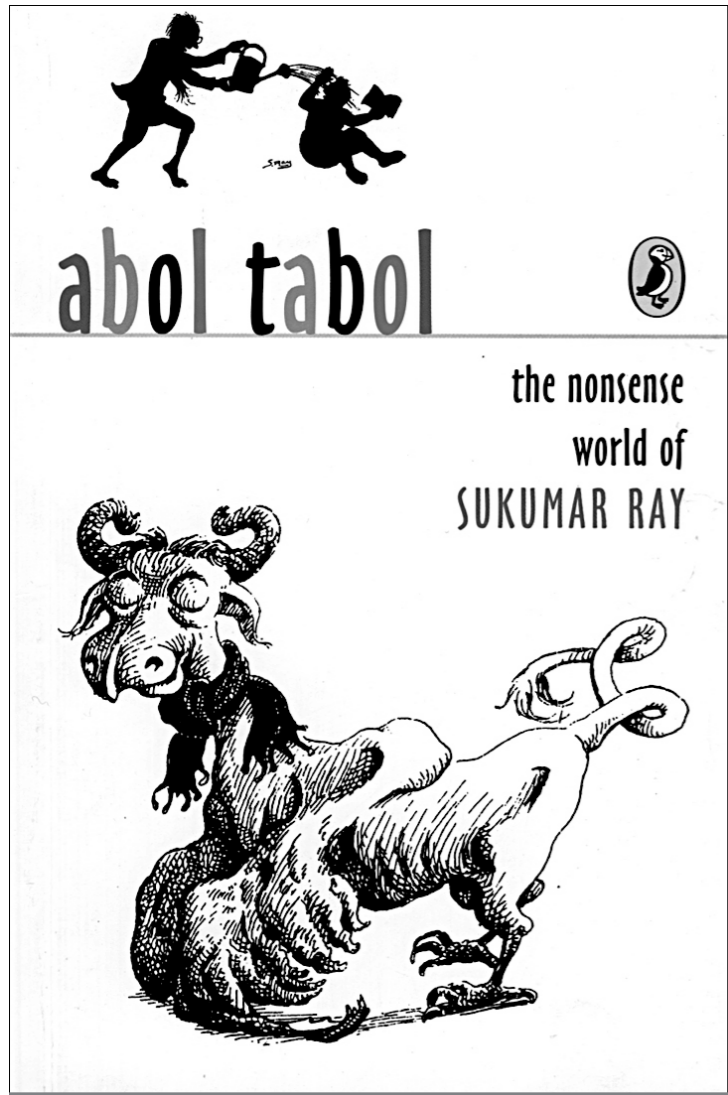
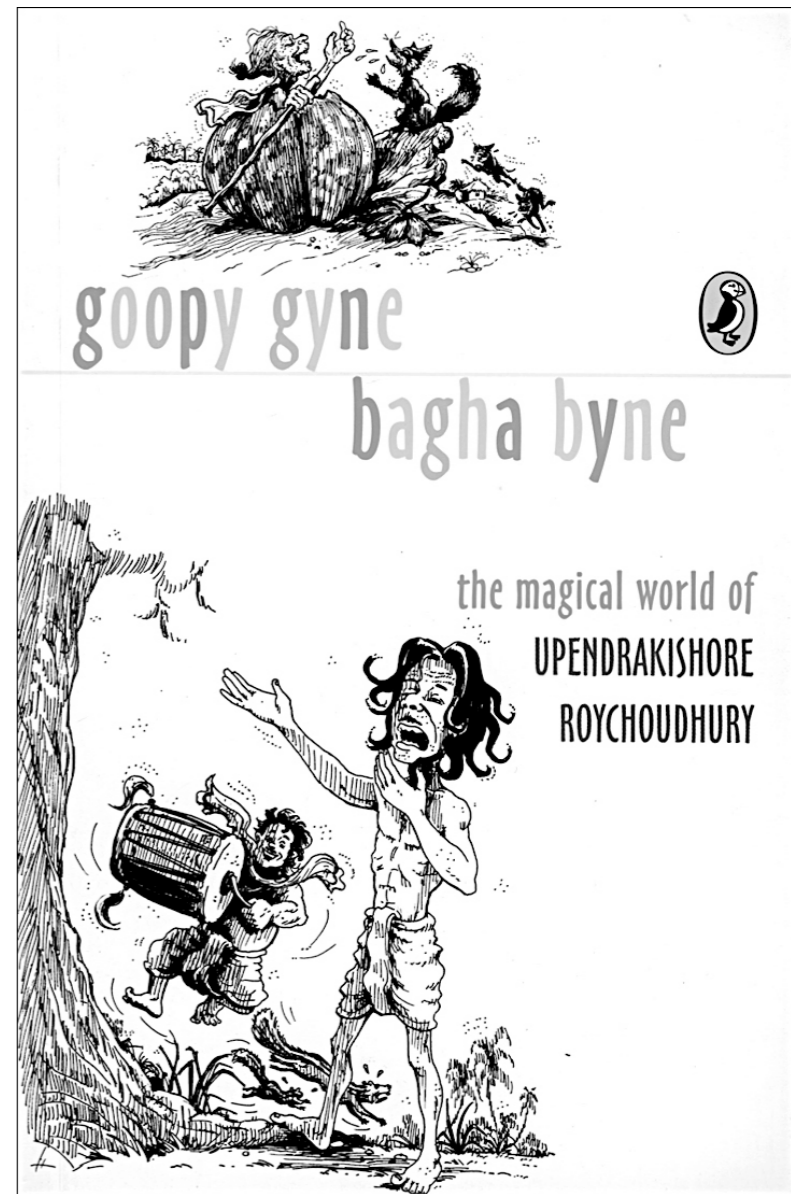
The boat was packed with people. There was no space for Bagha to put down the drum. But once the passengers realized this, they huddled closer and made space for Goopy and Bagha in the centre of the boat.

By this time, the boat had reached the middle of the river. After humming a little to clear his voice, Goopy started to sing his one song and Bagha started playing the drum.

Everyone was so alarmed by the sound that they all jumped up from their seats and the boat turned over, depositing all the passengers in the river.

Goopy and Bagha were now in deep trouble. Luckily, Bagha's drum was so big that they could hold on to it tightly and stay afloat. But they could not guide the drum so it floated down the river with the tide. They didn't reach the king's palace, but as the day ended, the drum came to a stop by a thick jungle.

The jungle would have been frightening enough in the day. An night, it was simply TERRIFYING!



### MISH-MASH

(Original: Khichuri)

A duck and a porcupine, no one knows how, (contrary to grammar) are a duckupine now.



### WORDYGURDYBOOM!

(Original: Shobdo-kolpo-droom!)

Whack-thwack boom-bam, oh what a rackers  
Flowers blooming? I see! I thought they were crackers!  
Whoosh-swoosh ping-pong my ears clench with fear  
You mean that's a pretty smell getting out of here?  
Hurry-scurry clunk-thunk--what's that dreadful sound?  
Can't you see dew falling, mustn't move around!  
Hush-shush listen! Slip-slop-sper-lash!  
Oh no the moon's sunk--glub-glub-glub-ash!  
Rustle-bustle slip-slide the night just passed me by  
Smash-crash my dreams shattered, who can tell me why?  
Rumble-grumble buzz-buzz, I'm in such a tizzy!  
My mind's dancing round and round, making me so dizzy!  
Cling-clang ding-dong my aches ring like bells--  
Ow-ow pop-pop my heart bursts and swells!  
Helter-skelter bang-bang, 'help! help!' they screech--  
Picking up a fight, they say? Quick! Run out of reach!

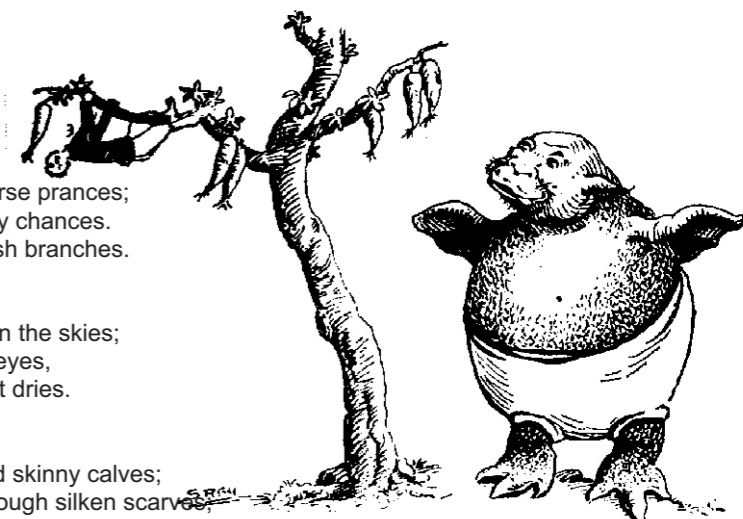
### PUMPKIN-GRUMPKIN

(Original: Kumro-potash)

(If) Pumpkin-Grumpkin dances--  
Don't for heaven's sake go where the stable horse prances;  
Don't look left, don't look right, don't take no silly chances.  
Instead cling with all four legs to the holler-radish branches.

(If) Pumpkin-Grumpkin cries--  
Beware! Beware! Don't sit on rooftops high up in the skies;  
Crouch down low on a machan bundled to the eyes,  
Sing 'Radhe Krishno Radhe' till your lusty throat dries.

(If) Pumpkin-Grumpkin laughs--  
Stand next to the kitchen poised on straight and skinny calves;  
Speak Persian in a misty voice and breathe through silken scarves;  
Sleep on the grass, skip all three meals, no doing things by halves!



(If) Pumpkin-Grumpkin runs--  
Make sure you scramble up the windows all at once;  
Mix rouge with hookah water and on your face smear tons;  
And don't dare look up at the sky thinking you're great guns!

(If) Pumpkin-Grumpkin calls--  
Clap legal hats on to your heads, float in basins down the halls;  
Pound spinach into healing paste and smear your forehead walls;  
And with a red-hot pumice-stone rub your nose until it crawls.

Those of you who find this foolish and dare to laugh it off,  
When Pumpkin-Grumpkin gets to know you won't want to scoff.  
Then you'll see which words of mine are full of truth and how,  
Don't come running to me *then*, I'm telling you right now.

