



Book Review: *The London Jungle Book*
Written and Illustrated by Bhajju Shyam
Translated by Shiris Rao
Tara, 2014, 48 pp.
ISBN: 9788192317120

An artist goes where there is work. (np)

Rudyard Kipling's narratives from his time in India became favorites for Westerners who viewed India through his British cultural lens. Shyam gives a view of London through his Indian cultural and artistic lens, a view that answers Kipling and gives readers pause as to how we each view cultures outside of our own. Shyam, who is from a small village in central India, was apprenticed and eventually became a gifted artist within the Gond tradition of painting. Commissioned to paint a mural on the wall of a London restaurant, Shyam made his first visit to London, resulting in *The London Jungle Book*, first published in India and then the United Kingdom.

Through Gond style illustrations, Shyam transports readers from his home village in India to London. He uses his distinctive illustrations to document his first adventure to the wider world, and by doing so shows how humans connect and accommodate differing cultures. He provides a Gond overlay of London, transforming the city into a jungle inhabited by a host of wondrous creatures that reflect Shyam's own cultural understandings. Using dots and dashes, Shyam creates mythical beasts and intricate renderings of flora and fauna that reflect the dominant themes and motifs of the animated lives and recorded histories of the Gond people. By bringing this artistic styling to *his* expressive memoir, Shyam invites readers to explore not only his geographical home and culture, but the city of London and its cultural practices through his eyes.

This is a terrific book for anyone who has experienced travel to unfamiliar places. The newness—and strangeness—of a place is often overlaid with the patina of one's own life experiences and values. Travelers often compare their travel locations to what is familiar and that is what Shyam had created with this book. The juxtaposition of how the world changes through traveling to a new location, including the environment, the language used, and the author's cultural experiences allows readers to ponder how culture is an essential part of a place and cultural understandings change according to location as well as the traveler. The book can facilitate discussion about how any place could be viewed as a cultural experience, whether one is an insider, outsider, or someone transitioning from one position to the other. The book has colorful illustrations that are often humorous and give a strong sense of the Gond artistic tradition.

Bhajju Shyam was born in Patangarh, which is located in the forests of central India. He became an artist by helping his mother paint the house, which is the tradition of the Gond people. As an adolescent, he needed a job so moved to a larger city and that is where he perfected his artistic talent. He currently lives in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India. One of his books, *That's How I See*

Things was the first book by an Indian honored by the International Board on Books for Young People. More information about Mr. Shyam can be found at the websites Resurgence and Paper Tigers.

This wonderful book simultaneously celebrates both one's home culture as well as the new, and their connections to each other and so would pair nicely with books such as *Migrant: The Journey of a Mexican Worker* (Mateo, 2014) and *Hope is a Girl Selling Fruit* (Das, 2014), both of which reflect unique illustration styles. Older students might enjoy reviewing Kipling's stories of India in comparison, while still other readers would enjoy adding this to their collections of books highlighting other artists.

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