



All About H. Hatterr

G.V. Desani, Anthony Burgess (Introduction)

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Wildly funny and wonderfully bizarre, *All About H. Hatterr* is one of the most perfectly eccentric and strangely absorbing works modern English has produced. H. Hatterr is the son of a European merchant officer and a lady from Penang who has been raised and educated in missionary schools in Calcutta. His story is of his search for enlightenment as, in the course of visiting seven Oriental cities, he consults with seven sages, each of whom specializes in a different aspect of “Living.” Each teacher delivers himself of a great “Generality,” each great Generality launches a new great “Adventure,” from each of which Hatter escapes not so much greatly edified as by the skin of his teeth. The book is a comic extravaganza, but as Anthony Burgess writes in his introduction, “it is the language that makes the book. . . . It is not pure English; it is like Shakespeare, Joyce, and Kipling, gloriously impure.”

All About H. Hatterr Details

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Author : G.V. Desani , Anthony Burgess (Introduction)

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Genre : Fiction, Cultural, India

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From Reader Review All About H. Hatterr for online ebook

Melanie says

"Imagine a schnockered Nabokov impersonating The Simpsons' Apu while reeling off tales of an Anglo-Indian Don Quixote, and you get some sense of Desani's wacko masterwork—a hilarious mix of slapstick misadventure and philosophic vaudeville, voiced in a manic Hindu-accented English so jagged and dense it makes you dizzy. A 1948 bestseller in England, sporadically reissued since then, and now in the NYRB home of the almost-forgotten, the author's only novel follows the idealistic naïf H. Hatterr on his wisdom-seeking quest, in which he encounters (among other nuts) the malaria-mad mystic Giri-Giri, a scheming sage who deals in used clothes, and Charlie, the steak-loving lion. To paraphrase T.S. Eliot's view: It's the goddamn weirdest book you'll ever read. ROBERT SHUSTER" -- Village Voice

Jonathan says

Short review - This is bona-fide Shandian Spawn, full of wonderful textual fun and games, an early entry in the Indian post-colonial literary movement, and a bloody riot of words.

It is subtitled:

Being also a mosaic-organon of life, viz., a medico-philosophical grammar as to this contrast, this human horseplay, this design for diamond-cut-diamond...H.Hatterr by H.Hatterr

And, for your delectation and enjoyment, here is a lengthy quote from the start of the text which I found online. If you are anything like me, this will be enough to get you reading this post haste.

"The name is H. Hatterr, and I am continuing...

Biologically, I am fifty-fifty of the species.

One of my parents was a European,

Christian-by-faith merchant merman (seaman). From which part of the Continent? Wish I could tell you. The other was an Oriental, a Malay Peninsula-resident lady, a steady non-voyaging, non-Christian human (no mermaid). From which part of the Peninsula? Couldn't tell you either.

Barely a year after my baptism (in white, pure and holy), I was taken from Penang (Malay P.) to India (East). It was there that my old man kicked the bucket in a hurry. The via media? Chronic malaria and pneumonia-plus.

Whereupon, a local litigation for my possession ensued.

The odds were all in favour of the India-resident Dundee-born Scot, who was trading in jute.

He believed himself a good European, and a pious Kirk o' Scotland parishioner, whose right-divine Scotch blud mission it was to rescue the baptised mite me from any illiterate non-pi heathen influence. She didn't

have a chance, my poor old ma, and the court gave him the possession award.

I don't know what happened to her. Maybe, she lives. Who cares?

Rejoicing at the just conclusion of the dictate of his conscience, and armed with the legal interpretation of the testament left by my post-mortem seaman parent, willing I be brought up Christian, and the court custody award, the jute factor had me adopted by an English Missionary Society, as one of their many Oriental and mixed-Oriental orphan-wards. And, thus it was that I became a sahib by adoption, the Christian lingo (English) being my second vernacular from the orphan-adoption age onwards.

The E.M. Society looked after me till the age of fourteen or thereabouts.

It was then that I found the constant childhood preoccupation with the whereabouts of my mother unbearable, the religious routine unsuited to my temperament, the evangelical stuff beyond my ken, and Rev. the Head (of the Society's school), M.A., D.Litt., D.D., also C.B.E., ex-Eton and Cantab. (Moths, Grates, and Home Civ), Protor par excellence, Feller of the Royal Geographical, Astronomical and Asiatic Societies (and a writer!), too much of a stimulus for my particular orphan constitution. (The sort of loco parentis who'd shower on you a penny, and warn you not to squander it on woman, and wine, and song!)

"Help others! Help others!" he used to say. Knowing that the most deserving party needing help was self, I decided to chuck the school, get out into the open spaces of India, seek my lebensraum, and win my bread and curry all on my own.

And one warm Indian autumn night, I bolted as planned, having pinched, for voluntary study, an English dictionary, the Rev. the Head's own-authored 'Latin Self-Taught' and 'French Self-Taught', the Missionary Society's school stereoscope complete with slides (my second love after my mother) and sufficient Missionary funds lifted from the Head's pocket to see me through life.

From that day onwards, my education became free and my own business. I fought off the hard-clinging feelings of my motherlessness. I studied the daily press, picked up tips from the stray Indian street-dog as well as the finest Preceptor-Sage available in the land. I assumed the style-name H. Hatterr ('H' for the nom de plume 'Hindustaaniwalla', and 'Hatterr', the nom de guerre inspired by Rev. the Head's too-large-for-him-hat), and, by and by (autobiographical I, which see), I went completely Indian to an extent few pure non-Indian blood sahib fellers have done.

I have learnt from the school of Life; all the lessons, the sweet, the bitter, and the middling messy. I am debtor both to the Greeks and the Barbarians. And, pardon, figuratively speaking, I have had higher education too. I have been the personal disciple of the illustrious grey-beards, the Sages of Calcutta, Rangoon (now resident in India), Madras, Bombay, and the right Honourable the Sage of Delhi, the wholly Worshipful of Mogalsarai-Varanasi, and his naked Holiness Number One, the Sage of All India himself!' (pg. 31-33).

And here, with her kind permission, is a short bit from my wife's PHD thesis which dealt with an interesting section of this book. I have put it in spoiler as it deals with events about halfway through the story: (view spoiler)

Harry Rutherford says

All About H. Hatterr is a novel I bought after seeing it recommended somewhere — the complete review, I think. It is a modernist novel written in 1948 in a colloquial Indian English laced with bits of slang, Shakespeare, legal jargon and so on. I'm not in a position to judge the relationship between the language of the book and the English of India, but Salman Rushdie is quoted on the back cover:

Hatterr's dazzling, puzzling, leaping prose is the first genuine effort to go beyond the Englishness of the English language.... This is the 'babu English,' the semi-literate, half-learned English of the bazaars, transmuted by erudition, highbrow monkeying around, and the impish magic of Desani's unique phrasing and rhythm into an entirely new kind of literary voice.

It would be interesting to read the whole article which that comes from, but it's hidden behind the New Yorker's pay wall.

The book is narrated by the H. Hatterr of the title, the son of a European merchant seaman and a woman from Burma, raised and educated in missionary schools in Calcutta. It's anecdotal and episodic in structure; there isn't, at least for me at first reading, any kind of overarching plot. Picaresque might be a good word for it.

It is somewhat 'difficult' — it's not for people who like their prose plain. But googling around while writing this post I've seen it compared to *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, and it's certainly not that difficult. The prose is sometimes elaborate and colourful but otherwise fairly conventional: it's not all stream-of-consciousness or anything. And there's not a great deal of vocabulary from Indian languages. There's more English public-school slang than there is Hindi.

PRESUMPTION: 'Kismet', i.e., fate — if at all anything, and as potent as suspected for centuries — is a dam' baffling thing!

It defies a feller's rational: his entire conception as to his soma, pneuma, and psyche!

Why did a feller like me commit matrimony with a femme fatale like Mrs H. Hatterr (née Rialto), the waxed Kiss-curl?

A personal query, but I don't mind answering...

If only I could!

All I know is that I wanted to raise a family: add to the world's vital statistics and legitimate: have a niche in the community, for my own kid, to hand out the wager till the end. And since you can't achieve this without a wife — the neighbours wouldn't let you! the police wouldn't let you! — I equipped myself with the blarney-phrases, convinced this female that she was real jam, had me led to the middle aisle and gave the ready 'I do' to the amenwallah her brother had hired for the occasion. This I did, knowing, hell, that between us was all the temperamental difference in the world!

Till death us do part! this museum-piece and I! And that promise — what a stingo! — after a conflict dating back to the donkey's Sundays!

The female — contrast? — was poles apart: though, between the cur Jenkins, me and the Duke Humphrey, it did seem once that she was going to win my regards for good, by delivering me an heir-presumptive — my own piccolo le fils — to survive me (and be added to the looney-bin). But despite days and days of biological observation and anticipation — the wasted reference to the obstetric table and pre-occupation with the signs of labour — it didn't come off. (Backed the wrong filly, or, maybe,

something the matter with me as create-or!)

You probably have a pretty good idea whether that's the kind of thing you like. Personally I enjoyed it, stylistically; occasionally there would be a particularly dense paragraph or two and I would glaze over a bit, but more often it was lively and funny.

My only reservation really is the one I have about a lot of these less traditional novels: I think perhaps the whole is less than the sum of its parts. I think people often overstate the importance of plots, but they are at least one way of holding a book together. Still, I'm glad I read it.

Nelson says

Another one of those less-often-read than it should be somewhat obscure classics. Almost everything that the subcontinental magic realists do (Rushdie, foremost among them) was pulled off in terms of sheer linguistic facility several decades before by the all-too-imitable G. V. Desani. The novel details the (mostly mis-) adventures of one H. Haterr. Most of these encounters ends with him naked or nearly so in some utterly compromising situation--perhaps the most entertaining of which involves a raw steak and a lion. Framed (lightly) as life lessons, these encounters are prefaced in each case by an exchange between an acolyte and an Eastern mystic. The ensuing tale from Haterr's life is meant to illustrate or comment on whatever question of moment has come up between the acolyte and the mystic. These seven tales involve various idiotic schemes for prosperity (in love or hard specie) that inevitably go awry. Some are prompted by Haterr's hilarious Shakespeare-quoting friend Bannerji, others are solved by Bannerji's timely intervention. In every case, the linguistic pyrotechnics are alone worth the price of admission. Desani puts his hero in one wickedly funny situation after another, so the story as well is richly rewarding. Ought to be far better known.

Taleem says

The greatest English language novel from an Indian writer. Yes, it's even better than Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. First heard of this jewel back in 2003. Have read it several times since then. Couldn't believe this is Desani's only novel!!!....English language writers from India barring Rushdie and maybe Amitav Ghosh can polish Desani's shoes.....check this website out www.believermag.com/issues/200806/?re...

Alik says

Desani G. V. is a lofty lion of literature. The best work on cultural *receptio* that ever has been written by any feller Oriental or Occidental.

And any suggestion to the contrary will be reviewed by Y. Beliram, *legum vir*, and published as an appendix.

Tallulah says

No.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

DAMME, READ THIS. READ THIS NEXT. READ THIS NOW. READ THIS TODAY.

WARNING!

'Melodramatic *gestures* against public security are a common form of self-expression in the East. For instance, an Indian peasant, whose house has been burgled, will lay a tree across a railway line, hoping to derail a goods train, just to show his opinion of life. And the Magistrates are far more understanding...'

--*Anglo-Indian writer*

Indian middle-man (to Author) : Sir, if you do not identify your composition a novel, how then do we itemise it? Sir, the rank and file is entitled to know.

Author (to *Indian middle-man*) : Sir, I identify it a *gesture*. Sir, the rank and file is entitled to know.

Indian middle-man (to Author) : Sir, there is no immediate demand for *gestures*. There is immediate demand for novels. Sir, we are literary agents not free agents.

Author (to *Indian middle-man*) : Sir, I identify it a novel. Sir, itemise it accordingly.

.....clearseeing indicator that we swim among the Shandian Spawn. And further evidence that the langwich of a post-coi(t)loneal world is Wakese.

Heather Ames says

If there was less than one star, I would give it to this book. I couldn't get further than the first chapter, and I really tried to do so since it was the monthly selection for the Eclectic Readers on Hawthorne. Arriving at our meeting, I found out I was not the only one who couldn't get through this book. There was only one member who read it, and he was far from impressed with what he slogged through.

Stephanie Marie says

"This is the Twentieth Century! This is the Medical Man's Century. No sentiment, no dog-cat or Romeo-Juliet imaginative stuff, but realistic brutal true-to-life pictures! What dam' use is there in reading what the Stratford-on-Avon feller wrote so long ago, and is himself dead and gone? Besides, hell, they say Bacon did it! I tell you, the Bacon-Shakespeare pictures won't tally with Life today! I know Life. I have experience..."

Some of the most gorgeously textured words to come out of modern literature. Desani has been rightful hailed as the grandfather of the "global novel" -- and thank heavens to all subsequent literature. T.S. Eliot (my hero) and Salman Rushdie have both uttered praise and garnered inspiration from Desani and Hatterr. This lusciously worded "gesture" may advocate for Life, but it also cements the importance of literary history, the study of literature while showcasing the modernist convention of fragmenting the traditional

literary canon for an altogether new style of narrative.

Tommie says

A book written it seems for the pure delight and playfulness of language.

Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says

I am through reading this book. Now I will go back to its first page. I will start searching and copying by hand, with my pen and my Kama Sutra journal where I keep similar treasures.

I have seen several novels already with a lot of word plays. Some engage in word plays with apparent uncaring whimsicality; others deliberately seek obscurity to confound the readers and be talked about. This one does neither. The author Govindas Vishnoodas Desani(1909 - 2000)--haha, couldn't resist putting his years, read the book and you'll know what this chuckle means--plays, he laughs, you laugh with him, and the words and sentences he created jump up and down happily with you.

I am therefore going back, in search of these words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs which brought me joy, my eyes popping out every single time in wonderment, aghast with surprise and merriment that these things can be done with letters (the capitalizations!), words and sounds.

Everything seems to be here: malapropisms, hilarious dialogues, comic hyperbole, literary allusions (Shakespeare! Blake!), irony, syntactical games, absurdity, metatextuality and even deliberate misspellings.

An unbelievable, unforgettable, comic and linguistic tour-de-force!

Cody says

A layered and complex text that launches a scathing critique aimed at both colonial India and the British Empire via picaresque, pseudo-18th century philosophical treatises, mimicry, doomed spiritual journeys, and a magnificent hybrid language that often matches the heights of Joyce's wordsmithery (and to which Salman Rushdie is admittedly indebted). A powerful postcolonial argument, it's also, perhaps, the funniest book I have ever read thanks to H. Hatter's series of (mis)adventures throughout which he wallows playfully and intensely in the absurdity of life, ultimately reminding us that, even when "innocent fellers get foxed," and "regardless of the unanswerable what is truth?," we really have no choice but to "carry on, boys, and continue like hell!"

keith koenigsberg says

A tour de force, one of the great obscure books of all time. Desani wrote this wildly funny short novel in '48, a post-colonial Indian shaggy dog story. You will immediately recognize that you are reading something new here. The language is a paste-up, a farrago, a dog's dinner of the "'babu English,' the semi-literate, half-

learned English of the bazaars, transmuted by erudition, highbrow monkeying around, and the impish magic of Desani's unique phrasing and rhythm into an entirely new kind of literary voice.

" (Salman Rushdie)

The character travels the subcontinent, seeking enlightenment he consults 7 gurus and their teachings send him on seven adventures, each one ending in beating beaten, humiliated, imprisoned, or otherwise taking a comic fall. The book is hilarious. The language is outrageous. This is one of my favorite books of all time.

Anirban Nanda says

It is matter of utter despair that a book like this, of such caliber and quality, is long forgotten. This is the first major attempt to break the pure English and mix it with oriental colloquial. Desani did something for Indian literature as Joyce did for Irish literature. Though Desani never wrote another novel, and though he published few short stories and a poem (Hali) apart from this, he was immediately recognized by the likes of T.S. Eliot and Saul Bellow.

This novel is essentially a polyglot one, but it goes on to break the general assumption that anything polyglot is bound to be difficult (the major reason of this, obviously, none other than *Finnegans Wake*). I have never read a funnier book than this. Desani's innovative play with words makes you read a page again and again and chuckle each time.

The reviewer at the Los Angeles Times rightly says,

""I write rigmarole English," Desani taunts, "staining your goodly, godly tongue." Bless him, he does mash it up, bending orthography, stretching syntax, mixing in shards of Hindi, Hungarian, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, German and a goodly dose of balderdash, whilst tossing in references to Whitman, Shakespeare, Socrates, Freud and appeals to Kama and Laxmi as well as to Allah and Christ. Only a quasi-outsider (an Irishman, say) could have such an irreverent ear for the Anglo-Saxon tongue. But "Hatterr" is more readable by miles than "Finnegans Wake," and a lot more fun."

To introduce to the style of this novel, let me quote H. Hatterr (Desani) himself in chapter III, page 120.

(...*Wherefore, pious brethren, by confessing I lie, yoiks! I tell the truth*, sort of topholy trumpeting-it, by the Pharisee G.V. Desani: see the feller's tract All About ..., publisher, the same publishing company): a language deliberately designed to mystify the majority, tempt 'em to start guessing, and interpreting our real drift, and allegory, what the hell we mean: pursue our meaning on their *sthula* (gross), the *sukshana* (subtle) and *para* (supreme) planes, and levels, and still miss the issue and dash their heads against the crazy-paved rock of confusion.

We are getting the drift. Though the book seems pointless rambling (allusion to one of the characters in the book Y. Rambeli .. Why rambling?) of a person who loses in every adventure he goes to, the book is intricately structured. To quote from the paper: *Chaudhury, Sarbani. "All About H. Hatterr – Desani's*

‘Novel Gesture’.” *Glocal Colloquies 1.1 (2015): 38-53.*

The subterranean method in madness, mentioned earlier, becomes more pronounced as we encounter the making of fiction. Despite his numerous disclaimers, Desani’s novel-gesture (as I shall persist in calling it) has a rigorous structure: the two epigraphs labelled “Warning!”, and the production account followed by a “Mutual Introduction” of the inscribed author (Hatterr), serve as a kind of combined prologue for the seven chapters recounting Hatterr’s encounter with the seven sages. The rear is brought up by an epilogue labelled “An Afterthought” supposedly penned by another fictional character in the work, a lawyer who, as mentioned previously, prefixes the pompous title of “504 SrimanVairagi, Paribrajaka, Vanaprasthi, Acharya” to his more simple but nevertheless comic name “YatiRambeli” (giganticbelly) to suit the lofty task of providing a worthy defence for the hapless Hatterr. Apart from undermining the very defence it intends to uphold, the ‘naming ceremony’ is a dig at the aristocrats’ and god-men’s tendency to legitimise and iterate their political/ religious status by claiming a long line of descent from royal/ holy forbears.

Seven chapters form the mainstay of the book where Hatterr, seeking lucre, lust and illumination, encounters seven sages across India who take on increasingly presumptuous names as the work progresses – sages of Calcutta, Rangoon (now resident in India), Madras, Bombay, “right Honourable sage of Delhi,” “wholly worshipful of Mogalsarai-Varanasi” and “naked Holiness number One, the Sage of All India himself!” – matching the ludicrousness of the ‘life experience’ encountered and the lesson learned thereof. Save for one, where Hatterr gains a princely sum of Rs 1000/- (Chapter IV), all the escapades conclude in inevitable disaster with Hatterr, very much the modern prototype of the ‘gull’ in classical drama, barely escaping by the skin of his teeth.

Each of the seven chapters is given an intriguing and often half-finished title – Chapter I. “The Sage, He Spake...,” Chapter II. “...Versus the Impressario,” Chapter III. “Archbishop Walrus versus Neophyte the Bitter-One,” Chapter IV. “Apropos Supernatural Agent...,” Chapter V. “Assault below the Belt,” Chapter VI. “...Salute the ‘Kismet’” and, Chapter VII. “Punchum and Another, with Contempt” – that literalise the ensuing content. For instance, Chapter V. “Assault below the Belt,” is literally an assault on Hatterr’s loincloth by a demented Naga sanyasi to relieve Hatterr of his hidden stash of money so as to release him from the clutches of “Evil-Triumphant” green monster (223)!

To show you some example of ultra-creativity of Desani, few small excerpts are presented below.

Excerpt 1:

“The name is H. Hatterr, and I am continuing...

Biologically, I am fifty-fifty of the species.

One of my parents was a European,

Christian-by-faith merchant merman (seaman). From which part of the Continent? Wish I could tell you. The other was an Oriental, a Malay Peninsula-resident lady, a steady non-voyaging, non-Christian human (no mermaid). From which part of the Peninsula? Couldn’t tell you either.

Barely a year after my baptism (in white, pure and holy), I was taken from Penang (Malay P.) to India (East). It was there that my old man kicked the bucket in a hurry. The via media? Chronic malaria and pneumonia-plus.

Whereupon, a local litigation for my possession ensued.

The odds were all in favour of the India-resident Dundee-born Scot, who was trading in jute.

He believed himself a good European, and a pious Kirk o' Scotland parishioner, whose right-divine Scotch blud mission it was to rescue the baptised mite me from any illiterate non-pi heathen influence. She didn't have a chance, my poor old ma, and the court gave him the possession award.

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blood sahib fellers have done.

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Excetpt 2:

PRESUMPTION: 'Kismet', i.e., fate — if at all anything, and as potent as suspected for centuries — is a dam' baffling thing!

It defies a feller's rational: his entire conception as to his soma, pneuma, and psyche!

Why did a feller like me commit matrimony with a femme fatale like Mrs H. Hatterr (née Rialto), the waxed Kiss-curl?

A personal query, but I don't mind answering...

If only I could!

All I know is that I wanted to raise a family: add to the world's vital statistics and legitimate: have a niche in the community, for my own kid, to hand out the wager till the end. And since you can't achieve this without a wife — the neighbours wouldn't let you! the police wouldn't let you! — I equipped myself with the blarney-phrases, convinced this female that she was real jam, had me led to the middle aisle and gave the ready 'I do' to the amenwallah her brother had hired for the occasion.

This I did, knowing, hell, that between us was all the temperamental difference in the world!

Till death us do part! this museum-piece and I! And that promise — what a stingo! — after a conflict dating back to the donkey's Sundays!

The female — contrast? — was poles apart: though, between the cur Jenkins, me and the Duke Humphrey, it did seem once that she was going to win my regards for good, by delivering me an heir-presumptive — my own piccolo le fils — to survive me (and be added to the looney-bin). But despite days and days of biological observation and anticipation — the wasted reference to the obstetric table and pre-occupation with the signs of labour — it didn't come off. (Backed the wrong filly, or, maybe, something the matter with me as create-or!).

After writing this novel, Desani got deeply involved with spirituality and Buddhism and didn't publish another book. He nonetheless inspired Rushdie to take the lead and expound upon the newly invented babu-vernacular and write another Indian masterpiece, *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie's essay "Damme, This Is the Oriental Scene for You!" is based upon this very novel).

I wanted to type and present few more wonderful excerpts but what can I do? Every single page of this book is shouting brilliance and I can't choose! Desani was so sure about the importance and genius of this work that he had the following conversation with Khushwant Singh:

"Can you recommend me for the Nobel Prize?"

Khushwant was dumb struck: "But you've only written that one book!"

"So?" countered Desani softly, "Eliot's written very little also!"

"Only Nobel winners can recommend others," Khushwant protested weakly, taken aback by Desani's total lack of modesty.

"No, even the Government can", insisted Desani steadfastly.

Worn down by his persistence and ingenuous self-belief, Khushwant meekly signed the forms. Nothing came of it of course. The Nobel Committee checked with Dr.Radhakrishnan, Ambassador to Sweden and a nominee for the Nobel at the time. Totally unamused, he ticked Khushwant off roundly and Desani continued to live with his inconvenient loo across the courtyard until he took off for the Orient.

(source: <http://www.dooyoo.co.uk/user/319051.html>)

I'll end my discussion about the book with the praises about it by the greats:

Anthony Burgess: "...it is the language that makes the book. . . . It is not pure English; it is like Shakespeare, Joyce, and Kipling, gloriously impure."

T.S. Eliot: "... Certainly a remarkable book. In all my experience, I have not met anything quite like it. It is amazing that anyone should be able to sustain a piece of work in this style and tempo at such length."

C.E.M. Joad: "... an original and remarkable book. It starts well and continues at the same level ... to my surprise ... the gusto, tempo and style all being maintained until the end."

Edmund Blunden : "... Something remarkable here by this most curious and resourceful among writers. I can't think anybody who pays attention will miss that."

Saul Bellow : "I didn't read many books while writing Augie. One I did read and love was All About H. Hatterr.... So, what about All About? I hate to be siding with T.S. Eliot... but what can you do?"

Salman Rushdie: "This is the 'babu English,' the semi-literate, half-learned English of the bazaars, transmuted by erudition, highbrow monkeying around, and the impish magic of Desani's unique phrasing and rhythm into an entirely new kind of literary voice."

Johanna says

GV Desani: All About H Hatterr Nilanjana Roy review

There are literate, widely-read booklovers in this world who have not read All About H Hatterr. I know of their existence; I have even met some, but the thought that they exist is chilling. It's like meeting people who have never read Tristram Shandy, or Gormenghast, or found themselves hallucinating, as Hatterr fans do,

about swamis and multiple exclamation marks.

This has nothing to do with literary snobbery. GV Desani's 1948 classic appears with dreary regularity on lists of books you must absolutely, positively read in order to be considered truly literary, and his astonishing hero has influenced writers from I Allan Sealy to Salman Rushdie. But the real reason for anyone to read Hatterr has to do with a quality rarely cited in critical texts—never again will anyone write a book with so much exuberance.

Desani, for instance, didn't. His next work was the mystic Hali; and then he retreated into the comfortable life of the author-recluse. And in 2000, in the blurred newsprint of the obituary section of an Indian newspaper, next to the Antim Ardas and In Fond Remembrance notices, a brief postage stamp sized picture of a blurred, young Desani alongside two brief lines informed us of his death. By then, the image of Desani the writer had blurred along the edges as well, and All About H Hatterr had plunged into the obscurity of the remainder bin from which it would need (and receive) repeated rescues from its fans in the publishing and literary world.

Hatterr fans are a lonely breed today. We know not just the famous lines—"Damme, this is the Oriental scene for you!" "Sir, I identify it (the novel) as a gesture. Sir, the rank and file is entitled to know."—but all the lovely obscure bits about swamis who trade in secondhand clothes stolen off their disciples and the fact that Desani managed to fit 13 exclamation marks into one paragraph. There is something slightly deranged about us, and a tendency (as you will have noticed) to digress, that we share with H Hatterr Esquire.

"The Issue: The following answers the question: Who is H Hatterr?" unleashes Desani's torrential prose, and his unmatched ability to beguile you into trickster territory, holding your attention for three pages until he answers the question—sort of—on the fourth. Hatterr, born a year after Independence, was an early example of the only kind of Indian protagonist the Indian novel in English could possibly have: a man on the margins, a hero who belonged to two worlds and to neither. "Biologically, I am fifty-fifty of the species," writes Hatterr, introducing us to his European, Christian father and his Malay, Oriental mother and swiftly kicking them offstage as he does so.

So there you have it: our first bona-fide homegrown, school-of-Indian-writing-in-English literary character was not Indian at all. Decades later, writing in partial homage to Desani, Salman Rushdie's Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children* would also be half-caste—Anglo-Indian, in his case. Hatterr belonged to the same no-man's-land—territory claimed by three of India's greatest writers, Rushdie, Desani and Saadat Hasan Manto, in works spurred by or written about Independence. And Hatterr, with his permanent logorrhea, his rapidfire, utterly Indian English patter, his frantic capering around a world that includes pukka British clubs and ash-coated fakirs, could belong to Manto's lonely lunatic asylum. In Manto's iconic short story, *Toba Tek Singh*, the lunatics occupy the no-man's-land between India and the newly created Pakistan; Hatterr's no-man's-land, between the Orient and the Occident, is wider, but no less lonely.

Readers tend to miss the isolation of Hatterr on first reading: the man proceeds from swami to circus act to charlatan fakir with a frenetic speed and an unstoppable energy calculated to shortcircuit introspection. But it's there in All About..., Desani's introduction, showcased as the familiar loneliness of a writer without an audience, a voice rendered loquacious by the fear that he might be talking only to himself.

"Planning a rest, I submitted the manuscript to a typist place, to be typed, three copies please. It came back the same week. The rejection slip pronounced it 'Nonsense'. Besides, the lady said, it wasn't the sort of nonsense young girls in the office ought to see. I apologized, postscripting me a mere slave of the critics.

Then I passed it elsewhere. And he referred it to a well-known psychiatrist friend of his (at a clinic) The doctor posted it, with an invitation to me to meet him—professionally. It was hawked around, three copies please, and finally kept by a very kind person. She typed a quarter and returned it. Her brother, a clergyman, was coming to stay in the house. Chance might lead him to the manuscript. I apologized again..."

This is still the voice of Desani, in character as Desani-the-author, not the voice of Hatterr himself. "In all my experience," T S Eliot wrote famously of the book, "I have not quite met anything like it." (The closest parallel to Hatterr's voice might come not from Eliot, Burgess, or Joyce, or even Laurence Sterne, but from John Kennedy O'Toole's *Confederacy of Dunces*.)

Here is a small sample, from a conversation between Baw Saw and The Sheikh: "I learnt of the ways of the Occidental people from my master Angus.... And I possess the Etiquette-Garter, the Honi! Soot quay Malay-pence! Soot quay Malay-pence! I am the Sheik of the London County Council, the 'Ell See See! Behold, I am wearing my 'Ell See See! Know, this is the source, the device and the secret of my prosperity! With this neck-wear, this mystic material, I am a burrasahib! A man! I am Eaten! I am Westmoreland! I am Shrewsbury! I am 'Arrow! I am Charter's House! I am Rugby-Football! I am Gun Co. Winchester! I am all-in-all! And CLC besides! With the aid of this neck-wear, I have helped others, given countless concrete lessons of pukka Occidental wisdom to the needy, as I myself once was! Verily, O beloved, I am a burrasahib! Listen to me and fathom the world! Pay the fees, and see the world! Ek dum, och aye! Och aye!"

Exactly ten years before Hatterr, Raja Rao had published *Kanthapura*, struggling, as he wrote in the Introduction: "One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own." In the same decade, Mulk Raj Anand had struggled with the "unleavened bread" dilemma in his work, from *Untouchable* to *Across The Black Waters*: the complexities of conveying Indian speech, Indian ways of thought, in a language that was at once ours and alien. (Anand often came off sounding like Kipling in reverse, but he did try.) RK Narayan, from 1935 when *Swami and Friends* was published to 1948 when *Mr Sampath* came out, had found an easy Indian English that still seems neither forced nor dated. But even in the 1940s, after more than a century of writing in English, most Indian writers struggled to loosen their tongues, to find their own voice. Hatterr invented his own: a mongrel hybrid that transliterated Indian phrases, borrowed and mauled Greek and Latin tags, mocked English-English, and turned language into a three-ring circus, shifting from juggler to trapeze artist to clown.

It's been over six decades, and *All About H Hatterr* has dated—in exactly the same way that *Tristram Shandy* or Burgess' *Enderby* quartet has dated, the way any great classic should date. Desani resisted literary ossification—in a brief encounter with a Betty Bloomsbohemia ("the Virtuosa with knobs on") in his introduction, he writes: "As for the arbitrary choice of words and constructions you mentioned. Not intended by me to invite analysis. They are there because, I think, they are natural to H. Hatterr. But, Madam! Whoever asked a cultivated mind such as yours to submit your intellectual acumen or emotions to this H. Hatterr mind? Suppose you quote me as saying, the book's simple laughing matter? Jot this down, too. I never was involved in the struggle for newer forms of expression, Neo-morality, or any such thing! What do you take me for? A busybody?"

But despite his (and Hatterr's) best efforts, the book invited analysis. Saul Bellow found that Desani was one of the few writers he could read while he worked on his own novel. Allan Sealy's *Trotternama*—another classic that bounces dangerously in and out of existence, like Hatterr, revived by one generation, forgotten by the next—romps down the yellow brick road Desani had built for Indian writers back in 1948. "I learnt a trick or two from him," Rushdie said once of Desani, and perhaps, more than the linguistic exuberance, what Indian writers received from Hatterr was permission. The book opens with a Warning! and a conversation between an Indian middle-man and the Author. "Sir," says the middle-man, "if you do not identify your

composition a novel, how then do we itemize it? Sir, the rank and file is entitled to know.” “Sir,” says the Author, “I identify it as a gesture. Sir, the rank and file is entitled to know.” But there is, the middle-man explains, no immediate demand for gestures. There is, however, immediate demand for novels, and the Author gives in.

Or perhaps not. Desani’s “novel” is really a breathless, joyful performance, a gesture stretched across 316 pages, and perhaps that’s why it remains unforgettable, despite its periodic descents into oblivion. Over the last few decades, Hatterr revivals have depended on the largesse of Western critics and publishers rather than the growing maturity and changing tastes of the Indian reader. And since the West has its own set of classics, and India is reluctant to claim any story that is not a success story, All About H Hatterr remains not so much lost as not yet quite found. Damme, that’s the Occidental-Orientale scene for you.

Katherine Furman says

I don't get this book. I heard so many great things about it, but I kept reading it and reading it and never once cared even a little bit about it. So I stopped after about 200 pages. This is what I get for listening to the New York Times Review of Books.

The problem is that this book's beauty is supposed to be in the words and not the plot, and I generally don't like books like that. Give me a story, not a poem. It was supposed to be hilarious, but I never got the joke. Some of the situations were indeed wacky, but not in a funny way, just in a wacky way. For instance the main character likes a girl in the circus so he agrees to be a stand-in lion tamer and a lion eats a steak off of his chest. Sounds interesting, doesn't it? It wasn't. So despite how much I hate to put down a book, I put this one down and now I feel light and free.

Razi says

He is back, back in the print, back in literary discussions and back to his madcap adventures, H Hatterr is back. The Good Ol' Daddy of Indian novel in English, the one who added 'post' to the colonial, who took the micky out of everything in the ocean of humanity called India and moved on, crossed the ocean and found himself in "Blackpool, Lancs. The most unimaginable hell-hole I had ever unimagined." I read this book about 15 years ago when a friend lent me his precious but decomposing and dog-eared copy. I was so grateful that I decided to repay his kindness by getting him a new copy but managed to find a good condition second HB after several trips to Charing Cross Road. The book was classified as 'rare'. Now it is available on Amazon.

Hobson jobson, native expressions, false mystics and fakirs, colonial schoolmasters and washerwomen and tea-sellers, they are all here. Here is God's plenty because like Chaucer's pilgrims, Desani's characters show many different aspects of humanity in all its glory and shame.

Jeff says

Damme, what a vernacular explosion! All About H. Hatterr is *sui generis* -- an extraordinary melange of Indian dialect, crass humor, literary references, neologistic extrapolations, postmodern noodling, and

philosophico-religico-moralistico meanderings.

Set in late British Empire India, it tells the story of an Anglo-Indian orphan who engages seven false gurus and loses much for each encounter. But while the story is thin, the language is thick and piquant, sauced with wit, spiced with Indian culture, and drizzled with allusions from Shakespeariana to Aescupaliana.

Here's one taste:

Damme, look at the feller!

He is giving me *contrast*!

I am asking him to play me a Wagner Mastersingers piccolo piece, and he is giving me a lousy the' desant instead! I am begging him for a floricultured bouquet of dew-laden D. Perkins rosebuddies and he is dealing me a tuft of dog-grass! I am imploring him for a fried chicken cuisine-classique continentale, the crispest, instead, he is venturing me a plateful of senna pods, dustbin pips, a virtual dose of Ipecacuanha! I am seeking the sun-kissed Cotswolds and he is consigning me to the Boston deeps! I am applying to him to let me have a go at the peerless vanilla orchid and he is giving me a syphon-wiff of producer gas! I am ordering a ticket to Paris, la France, and he is mucking about with a label to Moskva Russo-Ruthenian territory! I am ringing for a tete-a-tete with the A1 bedmate de luxe Miss Gipsy Smith and this sawed-off runt is giving me the long-distance to mein Deutschland Herren Colonel-Generals Jerry and Fritz instead!

The best parts of the book involve the hilarious dialogues between the narrator and his obsequiously deferential friend, Nath Banerrji. These dialogues are a cornucopia profused with zany merriment and spilling over with ideas, sly allusions, and easter eggs for the knowing.

While the book's language is a wonder, its storyline is not. It's a typical picaresque that never really goes anywhere, and the end of the book (a postmodern pseudo-critique of the rest of the book) isn't as funny or told in as interesting a voice as the chapters that precede it. Nonetheless, reading All About H. Hatterr is still an astounding ramble through a treasure trove of English patois.

You are a paragon among readers for reading this far, and I express from my heart endless gratitude to you. Thank you very much. A thousand times thank you. If I may say so, eternal thanks. All of India thanks you, and the world. We are all in your debt. Truly.

Jeffra Hays says

Nothing no book that I know of is anything like this. English is crunched up and tossed out reformed -- into hilarity. When it is so obvious that the author is enjoying his verbal antics, the reader has to enjoy too. If you like your fiction 'spoon-fed' don't go near this. But if you love wacky with underlying true tongues in cheeks, cheers!
