

ON WINGS OF FANTASY

WE have often dismissed improbable and unbelievable narratives by saying, "But that's a cock and bull story!" However, sometimes, the dismissal can become a compliment, especially if the story is told well. Manoj Das has earned himself a place in the world of Indian story-telling precisely by such improbable and unbelievable stories well told. This book brings together twelve such rags, fibs, and fantasies.

The longest of the stories, which also opens the book is 'Bulldozers'. It is about a small town hick, Ravi, and his cultural encounters of the worst kind in the Roy-Digamvari Cultural Institute whose li-

brarian he is. The story is a sustained satire on the pretensions and hypocrisies of provincial cultural operators. Ravi is the naive victim of some of these pretensions. The story ends on a surrealistic note with Ravi's dream house being razed to the ground by cranes and bulldozers — hence the title.

The other impressive story, also told at some length, is of 'Sharma And The Wonderful Lump'. The protagonist has a large tumour on his head. This *aboo* of his, as he affectionately calls it, drives him into several complications. He is sent abroad for treatment where the lump turns him into an instant celebrity. He is quickly harnessed into making commercial endorsements and even sup-

porting one of the presidential candidates in the US.

At last, he comes back to India after the rival candidate's henchmen kidnap him and threaten to remove his tumour by unorthodox means. Owing

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to Swamiji's blessings, the lump begins to subside, but not before Sharma's American sweetheart, Marilyn, comes to join him in India.

Three other tales are retold from the *Panchatantra* and a

couple of others are renderings of traditional stories. Das has a wonderful eye for the comic and he is able to see common situations in a new and often hilarious light. However, many of the stories have weak and uncertain conclusions. In both 'Bulldozers' and 'Sharma And The Wonderful Lump', Das seems to falter towards the end, not knowing quite how to wind up the gag. Sometimes, the language of the stories does not rise to the required fluency, making it seem like ineffective and laboured self-parody.

The 'Acknowledgements' disclose that most of the stories were already published in two previous collections, besides appearing in journals and magazines prior to that. This makes their rearrangement and republication somewhat self-indulgent.

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