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Screech, Ben ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8644-9607> (2024) Book Review: How the 'Just So' Stories Were Made: The Brilliance and Tragedy behind Kipling's Celebrated Tales for Little. *Modern Language Review*, 119 (2). pp. 261-262. doi:10.1353/mlr.2024.a923566

Official URL: <https://www.mhra.org.uk/publications/Modern-Language-Review-119-2>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/mlr.2024.a923566>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/14030>

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How the 'Just So' Stories Were Made: The Brilliance and Tragedy behind Kipling's Celebrated Tales for Little Children. By John Batchelor. New Haven: Yale University Press. 2021. xii+240 pp. \$25. ISBN 9780300237184.

On the back of his biographies of Conrad, Tennyson, and Ruskin comes John Batchelor's *How The 'Just So' Stories Were Made*. This study takes a fresh stance in exploring Rudyard Kipling's much-loved cycle of children's stories, by interweaving each story's genesis with an examination of a correlating period of the author's life. In this way, Batchelor skilfully aligns the various tales' allegorical concerns with Kipling's own trials and tribulations, as his life shifted from India to England and back again, via the United States.

The book states that it will explore 'the brilliance and tragedy behind Kipling's celebrated tales for little children' (p. iii) and it is these twin poles of 'brilliance' and 'tragedy' that ultimately come to define Batchelor's illustration of Kipling as a writer of clear talent and innovation, albeit a figure for whom protean, 'conflicting identities' frequently threatened to disrupt a prodigious literary life. Batchelor writes movingly of how Kipling's numerous bereavements, most notably his son John, killed in a trench in the First World War, came to 'haunt' (p. 165) both his poetry and prose—the latter grief finding voice in 'My Boy Jack', one of the defining poems of the Great War.

Kipling is characterized by Batchelor as both brilliant and brittle. For example, while describing the process by which the rhinoceros acquired his toughened hide, Batchelor gives contrasting glimpses of Kipling's distinct lack of a thick skin. In this regard, for example, his pedantry led to a pyrrhic victory in an 'unwise' (p. 46) Vermont court case centring on a trivial dispute with a neighbour. This ultimately resulted in 'lampoons' in the local press and his ousting from the 'sane, clean life' (p. 15) he had envisioned for himself upon arrival in the United States three years earlier. Similarly, amid the tender descriptions of Kipling's family life and his coming of age as a storyteller with the ability to enchant child audiences (one photograph shows Kipling orating to his enraptured charges on the deck of a South African steamship (p. 42)), Batchelor does not shy away from those aspects of Kipling's character that are, in our era, problematic. Kipling's occasionally cruel, racist streak is not, as in other biographies, glossed over and neither are his views on the 'beastliness' (p. 96) of homosexuality.

The darkness of Kipling's early years in England marred by bullying and abusive adults in dreary rural lodgings and boarding schools is engagingly explored in relation to their inspiration of *Stalky and Co* and his masterpiece, *Kim*. However, the eponymous 'Just So' Stories are the hook on which this volume hangs. Batchelor considers the stories' provenance in Aesop's Fables and Rudyard and his father Lockwood's love for 'jaw' (p. 96)—retelling and innovating on these tales. Peculiarly, however, discussion of the Sanskrit collection of animal fables *Panchatantra* is missing in contextualizing Kipling's work within a specifically Indian canon of comparable tales, in which it is likely he was steeped, given his early years living in the Punjab under the care of a verbose Indian nanny.

Batchelor succeeds in situating the 'Just So' Stories, sometimes erroneously dismissed as juvenilia, amid both the wider oeuvre of Kipling's writing, as well as the emerging 'golden age' of children's literature, to which these stories were a crucial early contributor. Despite their origin in the Indian subcontinent, Batchelor's Epilogue suggests the way in which these stories would ultimately inspire some of the most bucolically English of childhood books,

helping to 'create the climate' (p. 192) that gave rise to the animal-rich successes of Edwardian authors such as Beatrix Potter and Kenneth Grahame, as well as the 'recognisable social types' (p. 193) of A. A. Milne's Winnie the Pooh. Batchelor's portrayal of Kipling is that of a man beset by life's slings and arrows, as well as the 'collective anxiety' (p. 206) inherent to the end of Empire. Yet, the volume ultimately proposes that out of the various 'conflicts' (p. 205) in which his life was enmeshed arose these 'jewel-like works of art' (p. 206).