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My Village

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Media type:

Book

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Just over seven years ago, Julie Burchill attracted severe criticism for an article in the **Guardian** which consisted of a vitriolic attack on all things German. 'When abroad,' she opined, 'Germans make one popular with the indigenous people ? EXTREMELY popular?, and 'Germans make one feel thin ? REALLY thin?', while German children were described as 'dead-eyed mini automatons who may one day unquestioningly carry out undreamt of atrocities?'. What a surprise it was to receive a beautifully illustrated children's picture book in which similar sentiments, though more mildly expressed, are found on almost every page.

First published in 1913, and created by Alsatian nationalist artist and war hero Jean-Jacques Waltz (known as Hansi, or 'little John?'), this book is intended to be a celebration of traditional Alsace community life and its resilience towards the Germans who had annexed the province following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. The pictures of indigenous village life and customs provide an extremely pretty and nostalgic idealization of a vanishing culture. The German occupiers who threaten this idyll are consistently depicted in text and print as arrogant, bullying buffoons. No doubt there was some truth in this, but I disagree with the publisher's claim that 'Hansi's satire' is always humourous (sic), and the book is a joy throughout.?

The historical context may provide a rationale for the xenophobia of the author (a man who was subjected to a German army assassination attempt which eventually killed him) but, for me, this aspect of the text remains as ugly and troubling as any other manifestation of nationalism.

The book is richly illustrated, and richly thought-provoking. It made me wonder about how, in future, Palestinian and Iraqi children's books, for example, might depict the forces currently occupying these nations? How should the oppressors of now be represented to the young descendants of the oppressed? There are of course no answers to these questions, but similar ones may need to be considered by anybody deciding to share this book with children.

Running Order:

45

Links:

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/my-village>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/175>

[3] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/george-hunt>