They say human beings use language to make sense of their surroundings. We frame, categorize and systematize the objects around us with the help of nouns and verbs and adjectives. The sky is blue. The lakes glisten sweetly. The sentence is a ridiculous rhetorical filler. We do this to understand each other, to convey information, give orders, ask for favours. To some, thought is practically unthinkable? (!) without language. If there is no word for mother, then there is no mother—at, or the very least, no mother to speak to at all.

And yet when we’ve finally managed to raise and strengthen these structures enough to allow some sort of conversation, we start picking them apart. We join the toy-scouts to sing gibberish like Geng Gang Coo-coo, we giggle at Smurfs-books with debates about whether an object should be called a “smurf-opener” or a “battle-smurf,” we can’t be bothered with films in (real) languages we don’t understand, but who can withstand the charm of a Klingon conversation?; we play computer games in simlish, listen to hopelandic and scat; devise made-up languages of our own—pig Latin, rhymes-ar-y-ppa-dy— to cloak our darkest secrets from our parents and/or the police.

There are many theories about divine languages spoken by God, angels. All ancient, Eugene, languages of this universal harmony. Some Pentecostal Christians speak in tongues— “glossolalia,” it’s called—which is believed to be a holy language, perhaps from Eden and perhaps from Heaven itself. These people fall into some sort of trance and start speaking something which resembles a language, and indeed has linguistic structures, although the sounds usually originate from the speaker’s native tongue. These divine languages sound mostly like gibberish—like complicated pig-Latin or simplified Klingon. Like very basic sound poetry—at least to the uninstructed. Religious zealots from the glossolalian’s particular sect would, of course, be more likely to see “the presence of God” than the presence of, let’s say, local flora.

In the 16th century the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, had his servants record a new language. If un-disturbed by human languages, the infants would eventually start speaking the language of God (presumed to be Hebrew, Latin, Arabic or Greek). The infants were completely isolated from hearing any language. They never spoke and they died for they could not hear any language. They never comprehended, only instinctively babbling by the onomatopoeia of secret words and corporate deception unwrapped after the fact. Let’s part the action and excited and in power-fitting vice democracy by definition, power by the people.

Water Lippmann equated mass society to a bewildered herd, relations ship of a dog. The chromatic and incapable of comprehending the world beyond the pictures in their minds by the powerful and wealthy and of course a part of the herd that bows to power and wealth, the media that functions as a lap dog of corporations and governments rather than as the watchdog of the people. At the beckon call of the ones with money and the ones with power and the ones who had entitled to paint the pictures that will oc- cupy the heads of the herd, some media is there to depict that in our eyes and distract us from what is really important.

It will be interesting to see what pictures David Olission will paint at the bottom of the heap the media is there to depict that in our eyes and distract us from what is really important.

Books | Review

The Far Traveler: Voyages of a Viking Woman

Nancy Marie Brown
Harcourt (2007)

The title and blurb of this book leads you to think it’s about Gudrún, literally the “wave, the wife of Sigmundur Karle- fi and mother of Snorri Þorfinns- son, the first Su- danese to be born on the North American continent. But in fact, The Far Traveler is a very general book about literature, ships, North Atlantic settlement, artefacts and life in the Viking Age. It puts women’s experiences in the foreground, and it does talk about Gudrún, but it’s not really about her or her voyages.

The Far Traveler works best as an intro to the scholars who have tried to reconstruct life in the medieval north through archaeology, genetics, anthropo- logy and literary studies. Indeed, Brown’s background is as a science writer and she is skilled at interviewing scientists. Her interest in Iceland dates back to studying Old Norse literature in college. Nearly the better passages in the book are about Brown’s own experience research on a dig in Skagafjörður. The images the book left me with are archaeological: excavating a farm in Greenland as it’s being eroded by a rushing river. Brown’s visit to L’Anse aux Meadows, the Viking site in New- foundland; a face-off over whether to strip turf layers by hand or with a back- hoe; tramping away ash layers and look- ing for the old walls of a longhouse in Skagafjörður.

Brown speaks with a number of scientists who cast doubt on Jared Dia- mond’s perhaps faulty theory that the global colony collapsed because Icelanders couldn’t adapt their palates to local resources like fish. Brown pursues a few special topics. Chapter 3 muses on the sexual inde- pendence of women in pre-Christian Europe as opposed to the Christian idealization of virginity. Chapter 9 is a detailed discussion of Viking Age tech- niques for weaving cloth. Chapter 10 describes how the laws were the transi- tion from paganism to Christianity. The book mounders. It was difficult to follow the story of Gudrún. I was never able to keep her life story straight. A relationship chart of her immediate family would have helped. Better maps and a few inexpensive black-and-white photographs would also have made the book more attractive. The book does provide a nice annotated bibliography of books on Viking Age Iceland.

By the end of the book, I got the feeling that at some point the author’s agent or editor looked at a manuscript or book proposal about the Viking Age in general and said “Don’t you think we could reshape this around a more salable theme?” This Gudrún, maybe her life story to structure the book with? And definitely beef up the women’s history angle here. Sprinkle in some goddess references and yes, do that weaving chapter?” If the text of the book never quite caught up with this idea, that would explain why it’s a bit odd with the book’s title.

Brown has written a previous book about Icelandic horses. She is a companiable and sincere author, with a genuine interest in the North. Overall, I’d recommend this book to medieval Iceland buffs. But the story of Gudrún never quite comes together and the book doesn’t quite stand out enough to urge on general readers.