

**Anne K. KALER, *The Picara: From Hera to Fantasy Heroine* (Bowling Green, Ohio, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1991, 210 p.+index, ISBN 0-87972-515-X, hardcover, 0-87972-516-8 paperback)**

Peggy L. Day

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Though the book does not propose to offer a single thesis, it braids together some persistent themes: paradox, clowning, transformation, play, inversion, liminality, anti-structure (along with its opposite, structure), and process (along with its opposite, system). Handelman treats these in the tradition of symbolic anthropology; the influence of Victor Turner and Bruce Kapferer, for example, is noteworthy. Handelman's approach, though not structuralist or phenomenological in any formal sense, has the structuralists' preoccupation with dialectical polarities and the mediation of oppositions, as well the phenomenologists' concern to avoid reductionism.

Handelman's strength is the same thing as his weakness, namely, his capacity for transforming public events into "snares for thought". He makes rites think well. His interpretations are meditations, ruminations that meander as they ascend. They are not easy to read, because their path is winding, sometimes torturous, but they usually arrive someplace interesting. If one loves the journey, as I do, Handelman seems a worthy guide through the depths and heights of public events. We see in them what neither the performers nor we suspected was there; it is all very magical. However, after the carnivalesque journey one may be left with the vague premonition that Handelman has tricked us — maybe even himself — into believing that the snare for thought resides in the public event rather than in the scholarly mind that loves tinkering and toying with performances.

Ronald L. GRIMES  
Wilfrid Laurier University  
Waterloo, Ontario

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The picara in literature, according to Anne Kaler's introduction, is a female character typified most clearly by her autonomy. Launched on "the masculine outward quest of the hero" by abandonment, she is most often a childless wanderer who lives by her wits and her sexuality on the fringes of respectable society. The purpose of Kaler's book is to trace the literary origins of the picara and then to identify and discuss her most prominent characteristics. As the title of the book makes plain, the literature that Kaler examines ranges over a vast expanse of time and territory.

As a scholar with a particular interest in portrayals of females who do not model socially constructive behaviour, I approached this book with a great deal of enthusiasm. I must confess that I came away extremely disappointed. The apparent lack of any serious editing or proofreading has resulted in a book littered with typos, grammatical errors, and sometimes incomprehensible sentences and paragraphs. Problems created by poor writing style are compounded by the way Kaler presents her material. The chapters dealing with literary characteristics of the *picara* (chapters 3-9), which constitute four-fifths of the book, do not stick to the topics announced in the chapter titles and hence are jumbled and confusing. Also in these chapters the reader is inundated by a flood of examples taken, without sufficient contextual orientation, from a plethora of stories. This simple heaping up of example upon example made it difficult, at least for this reader, to remain attentive and involved.

Kaler also makes a number of factual errors, such as her assertion that Jerusalem is a port city (p. 46) and that the meaning of the name Eleazar is to be derived from Greek (p. 13), that could have been avoided simply by consulting an atlas or a dictionary. Factual errors such as these, while arguably trivial on first reflection, betray, I think, a fundamental carelessness that serves to undermine the reader's confidence in Kaler's scholarship. This assessment was confirmed for me when she discussed topics within my own area of expertise, such as ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern goddesses, and biblical stories. Kaler's treatment of these topics evidenced sloppy reading, forced interpretations and uncritical appropriation of opinions voiced in highly dubious secondary literature.

In summary, my overall impression of this book is that it is insufficiently researched, poorly organized and shoddily published.

Peggy L. DAY  
The University of Winnipeg  
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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Robin RIDINGTON, *Little Bit Know Something: Stories in a Language of Anthropology* (Vancouver, Douglas and McIntyre, 1990, xvii+281 p., ISBN 0-88894-681-3).

A few years ago Robin Ridington published a book, *Trail to Heaven*, which immediately commanded attention as one of the first self-consciously postmodern ethnographies, complete with acknowledgements to Clifford and