



Weird English

By Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien

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Weird English explores experimental and unorthodox uses of English by multilingual writers traveling from the canonical works of Nabokov and Hong Kingston to the less critiqued linguistic terrain of Junot Díaz and Arundhati Roy. It examines the syntactic and grammatical innovations of these authors, who use English to convey their ambivalence toward or enthusiasm for English or their political motivations for altering its rules. Ch'ien looks at how the collision of other languages with English invigorated and propelled the evolution of language in the twentieth century and beyond.

Ch'ien defines the allure and tactical features of a new writerly genre, even as she herself writes with a sassiness and verve that communicates her ideas with great panache.

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Weird English By Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

"With increasing frequency in literature, readers are encountering barely intelligible and sometimes unrecognizable English created through the blending of one or more languages with English." Or so writes Ch'ien, an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Hartford, whose literary study argues that a new movement of writers is blending postcolonial ideas with modernist sensibilities. Their trademark, she claims, is "weird English," a linguistic style that has four main characteristics. It revolts against Standard English, thus depriving it of its dominance. It breaks the rules of English grammar with its "aesthetic adventurousness." It stems from nonnative English. And it gives unique expression to the various "diasporic cultures" that are schooled in Standard English. Ch'ien focuses her study on the novels of Vladimir Nabokov, Maxine Hong Kingston, Arundhati Roy, Junot Díaz and Salman Rushdie, but she also proposes that Jonathan Safran Foer and Irvine Welsh are "weird-English writers." At times, her analysis is concise and revelatory, particularly in the chapters focusing on Roy and Díaz. At other times, however, her attempt to link disparate works by their authors' status as nonnative English speakers seems simplistic. One problem is that her convoluted definition of weird English could be applied to any number of writers, including specialists in regional dialect, such as Flannery O'Connor. Some readers may also be put off by the author's reliance on invented and academic jargon ("Lolita signifies a step beyond imaginary estate: linguistic property is metaphorized as an unruly child"). While Ch'ien's combination of postcolonial and modernist literary theory is certainly provocative, her argument lacks the kind of precision necessary to be truly convincing.

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Review

Evelyn Ch'ien's *Weird English* offers up an innovative, risk-taking, colorful, richly textualized, and important new text which refigures our tired, familiar, or overly-representative notions of the "global postcolonial" or "US ethnic" text as literary and cultural-political event. Ch'ien's scholarly text is offbeat yet on the social aesthetic mark in a way that has never quite been done before. *Weird English* posits and defines the allure and tactical features of a whole new writerly genre based and rooted in the minority deformations of British and American English. Activating what she talks about as the newness, stigmata, and social struggle to achieve freedom and respect of writing in this emerging new genre she calls "weird English," Ch'ien herself writes/performs like some scholarly cross between Helen Vendler and Margaret Cho: everywhere mixing the prosodic insight and sensitivity to linguistic close-readings and aesthetic valences of the former, say, with all the sassiness, adventure, and in-your-face verve and minority-rooted freshness of the latter. "Insouciance" of language and attitude is both Ch'ien's subject and, at times, her style, as scholarship swerves into polemic, probe, joke, song, and the social energies of mongrel mixture. Her unprecedented writing on Junot Diaz is especially fine and visceral, close to the inner-American grain of its ghetto life and linguistic-social emergences, and thus grants his Spanglish a new world company and genre. Like some homegrown Deleuze, Ch'ien comes close to, articulates, and thus activates the "minority becoming" of Diaz's writing showing how the Diaz mixed-minority language is seeped in social utterance and subaltern energies, without writing them out of existence or abstracting them via the routine distances of postcolonial theory (which she later bravely and even recklessly admonished for its opaque sublimations of such social forces). In cumulative effect, then, *Weird English* comprises not so much a direct hit upon the US minority field-imagery as an end-run around and through its over-determined political anguish, racial melancholy, and will-to-be-canonical concerns of Asian American studies as ethnic or subaltern mission. (Rob Wilson, author of *Re-Imagining the American Pacific* and *American Sublime*)

Nien-Ming Ch'ien makes a sophisticated theoretical argument by proposing that with the rise of world literatures in English, readers are encountering barely intelligible and sometimes unrecognizable English

resulting from a combination of one or more languages with English. She terms this combination 'weird English'...Examining the works of such multicultural writers as Vladimir Nabokov, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Arundhati Roy, [she] posits that weird English obliterates the boundary between the sacred and the profane in language and demands a new literary theory...[Ch'ien's] somewhat unorthodox and vivacious style perfectly complements her argument. (Aparna Zambare *Library Journal* 2004-05-01)

Have you noticed how the English language is being relentlessly globalized? *Weird English*, by Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien, is a celebratory take on that trend in literature...You need only be interested in things literary in order to find this an enlightening and quite fascinating read...[It] is written with verve, and presents an intriguing and important idea. Ch'ien argues that 'weirding' English allows bi-cultural writers to create a truer, more representative linguistic space for their imagined communities. They do this by displacing the rhythms of English, subverting its rules, and pollinating it with other languages--literally...Weird English is a kind of literary street law, in which ungrammatical language, patchwork syntax, linguistic stuttering and unintelligibility are not shortcomings but the tools and bricks of identity-building...*Weird English* is a robustly academic work, but Ch'ien's style is quite palatable--even veined with humor. (Mitali Saran *Far Eastern Economic Review* 2004-07-01)

Review

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Catherine Graziani:

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