Any interest?
Tom Angelo Jacobs
(Snr)

Required reading

Nothing rotten in the state of English

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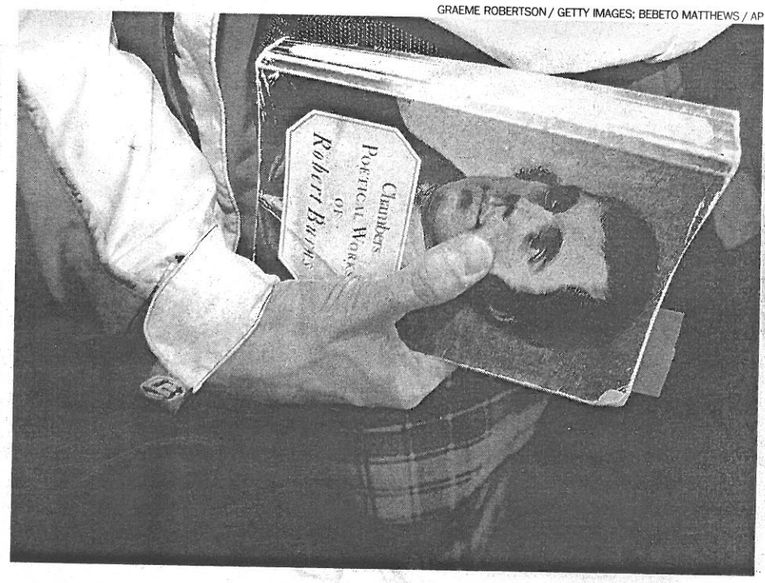

Dohra Ahmad's anthology *Rotten English* celebrates the language at its most diverse and unorthodox. **Ian McMillan** bathes in its glories

SOME PEOPLE BELIEVE that the English language is a precious and delicate vase that must be handled with care, perhaps in lace gloves while wearing a surgical mask; these people think that if your hand slips and the vase falls to the ground it will smash into a million smithereens and smithereeneens (I made that word up because I know what the English language really is) that can never be put together again.

Those people are, of course, wrong. English is a robust jug that can be thrown around, dropped and hurled to the floor as much as you like and will never smash into anything that even sounds like a smither.

English can be broken, and pummelled and pulled and stretched and tickled and that's part of the fun of it — but it can never be shattered.

This new anthology parades battalions of voices in celebration of, in the late Nigerian activist and writer Ken Saro-Wiwa's resonant phrase, "Rotten English".

There are poems, stories, extracts and essays that confirm the sheer glorious multitude of sounds and shapes that English is and can be — from familiar names such as Linton Kwesi Johnson to writers I hadn't come across before, such as Zora Neale Hurston, who began writing stories in Florida in the 1920s and whose piece *Story in Harlem Slang* is a joyful romp through an English that doesn't seem to need an excuse to dance:

"The girl drew abreast of them, reeling and rocking her hips. 'I'd walk clear to Diddy-Wah-Diddy to get a chance to speak to a pretty lil' ground-angel like that' Jelly went on. 'Aw, man, you ain't willing to go very far. Me, I'd go to Ginny-Gall, where they eat cow-rump, skin and all."

Hurston provides a helpful glossary to finesse the detail: Diddy-Wah-Diddy, like Ginny Gall, is a suburb of hell. Ah yes, I've been there. They all speak RP.

There is a wider public dimension to all this, as James Baldwin notes: "It goes without saying, then, that language is also a political instrument, means and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identity: it reveals the private identity and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger public or communal identity."

Or as the great Scots poet Tom Leonard puts it in his poem *Unrelated Incidents — No.3*:

this
is ma trooth.
Yooz doant no
this trooth
yirsellz cawz
yi canny talk
right. this is
the six a clock
nyooz.
belt up.

Poets are well represented in the book, as you'd expect; as well as Tom Leonard and Linton Kwesi Johnson and loads of others, there is Robert Burns with the whole of *Auld Lang Syne*, including the verses that hardly anyone sings on New Year's Eve:

We twa hae run about the braes
And pou'd the gowans fine;
But we've wander'd mony a weary fit,
Sin' auld lang syne...
We twa hae paidl'd in the burn,
Frae morning sun till dine
But seas between us braid hae roar'd
Sin' auld lang syne.

Try belting out those glorious words next year! In her introduction, the American academic Dohra Ahmad writes: "What we term Standard English, their work reminds us, is after all only one dialect among many — the one that happened to be spoken by the groups of people responsible for compiling dictionaries and assembling grammar manuals."

When I read that, I have to admit that I stood up and ran around whooping. A shame that I was on the 7.30 to Bradford Interchange at the time, but it was wonderful to read a justification of my English-as-a-robust-jug theory.

Ahmad also points out that the "vernacular renaissance captured in this volume has by no means been exclusive to English" and notes new "rotten" French, Chinese, Spanish and Russian writing.

So for anybody who has ever been tutted at for the way that they speak and write, come and have a bath in the wonderful Englishes in this book.

Here are one or two of my favourites to tempt you in: "Dere's no guy livin' dat knows Brooklyn t'roo and t'roo (only the dead know Brooklyn t'roo and t'roo) because it's take a lifetime just to find his way aroun' duh goddam town (only the dead know Brooklyn t'roo and t'roo, even the dead will quarrel an' bicker over the sprawl and web of jungle desolation that is Brooklyn t'roo and t'roo)."

That passage is from a story titled *Only the Dead Know Brooklyn* by Thomas Wolfe, the American novelist and inspiration for later Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac, and whose epic examinations of 20th-century America are well worth searching out.

Or how about these lines by the Jamaican poet Louise Bennett, from her stirring work *Colonisation in Reverse*?

By de hundred, by de tousan
From country and from town,
By de ship-load, by de plane-load
Jamaica is Englan boun.
Dem a pour out a Jamaica,
everybody future plan
is fe get a big-time job
and settle in de mother lan.

There are Scots Englishes here and African Englishes and West Indian Englishes and street Englishes and shebeen Englishes and top-of-the-bus Englishes. And the jug is still nowhere near being smashed to smithereens, let alone smithereeneens. Come on in, the Rotten English is lovely!

Norton, £9.99; 352pp
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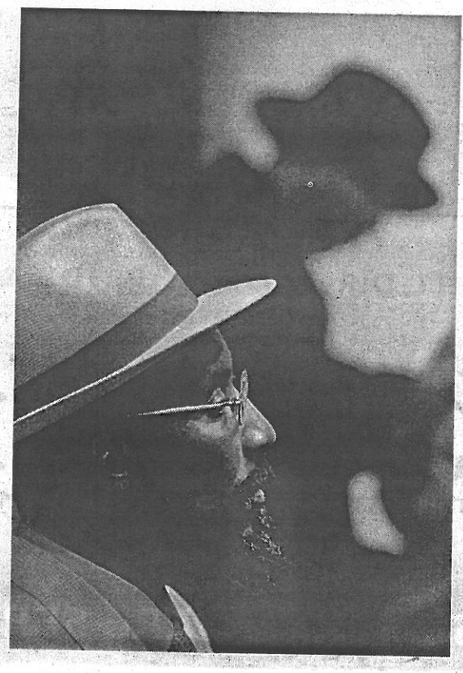

As she is spoke: the 20th-century Jamaican of Linton Kwesi Johnson, left, and the 18th-century Scots of Robert Burns are all part of the linguistic mix

A LITERARY ANTHOLOGY

ROTTEN ENGLISH

EDITED BY DOHRA AHMAD

Extract

from **ROTTEN ENGLISH**
A Literary Anthology
edited by Dohra Ahmad

Before outlining its history, I should explain what I mean by "vernacular literature". What the writers included here have in common is their choice of composing in linguistic codes that are primarily spoken rather than written, and also ones that have generally been perceived as having a lower status than Standard English. Those primarily spoken languages have as many labels as variants: among others, non-standard, dialect, demotic, slang, pidgin, creole, and patois. Such designations are slippery and politically loaded: "vernacular", for example, originally referred to the language of a house slave, but sounds to the modern ear more neutral than the often derogatory "dialect". I prefer "vernacular" for the wonderful way in which it exemplifies the duality of the phenomenon it describes: from an openly debased slave language to a mode associated with avant-garde experimentation and literary prowess. Other writers use different terms. Kamau Brathwaite, the West Indian poet represented here in the poetry and essay sections, coined "nation language" to replace "dialect". If dialect is the language spoken by caricatures, Brathwaite writes, nation language is "an English which is like a howl, or a shout or a machine-gun or the wind or a wave".

As for as what to call it, my own favourite formulation comes from the martyred Nigerian writer and environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, whose compelling and heartbreaking *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* provides the title of this collection. In his introductory note, Saro-Wiwa tells us of his goal to create a hybrid language that "throbs vibrantly enough and communicates effectively"; *Sozaboy* far surpasses those criteria.

All of the writers in this volume compose in languages that challenge the hierarchy implied by "dialect" versus "language" or "standard" versus "non-standard", insisting that the codes they practise be recognised for their strength, coherence, and communicative capacity.