

Rey Huevo

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King Egg is a children's illustrated novel or comic book for ages nine and up that follows the adventures of its friendly-looking square-headed protagonist as he learns about the world and the many and varied creatures in it. Miguel B. Núñez has written many other comics for children and young people and began his career in the 1980s producing fanzines and cover art for the record label Subterfuge, and the drawings here do have echoes of Keith Haring's brightly coloured dancing men or the artwork by Mark Beyer for alternative dance group Coldcut.

King Egg is a creature who hatches inexplicably out of an egg in a forest, and immediately starts exploring the world around him. After hearing some high-pitched sounds emerging from a hole in the ground, he falls in and ends up in a strange underground world. Thus begins a long, rambling adventure in which he meets a cast of odd-looking characters, some of whom want to crown him king, some to eat him up, others to help him in his quest and others not. The overriding theme is that if you are curious and like making friends (as it says on the back cover), the world will turn out to be an exciting place with lots of fun to be had and people to play with. It is a very optimistic, quirky, joyous book.

The characters have unusual names that are quite pleasing to the ear, and which would provide a fun challenge for any translator who took it on. The first creatures he meets are called the Pipiyamas, tiny yellow things with incredibly shrill voices who want to make him king because his head fits the crown they have, a job King Egg most certainly doesn't want and so runs away. He then meets an enormous orange creature with a trunk called Caramba (Crikey), who lives on the little bulbs growing on the cave's floor. King Egg makes friends with one of the bulbs or corms, who turn out to have little feet and faces, and makes Caramba promise not to eat any more of them. In return, he promises to find a new source of food for Caramba and the rest of his long-nosed family. The little corn is made king instead, and with his and the Pipiyamas' help, King Egg leaves the underground cave and goes back up to the forest where he was born. There he meets René, a grumpy little chick who eventually joins in his search, after initially refusing to help in an exchange that playfully teaches children how helping others will reap rewards of friendship and fun (René: 'what will you give me in exchange for helping you?' King Egg: 'But I don't have anything.' René: 'What a rubbish deal.' King Egg: 'It's a favour, not a deal!' René: 'This is nonsense!' King Egg: 'Don't help me if you don't want to, but you definitely won't make any friends that way!' René: '...wait for me!').

They meet several other creatures along the way, including Yeti, who at first seems scary but turns out to be very helpful; a spirited little girl called Catalina who lives in a fruit tree; the duck-like Juijajumos, fans of detective fiction who are rather inept at looking after their egg; a green sea monster; a fairy-like creature called Sutra who feeds off light; a stone giant who causes tsunamis; and some fuzzy green island-dwelling people called Yeyés, who shoot arrows and fight anything that comes near them, including each other. Most of these creatures are potential friends for King Egg and end up helping him on his quest, or at least good-naturedly hindering him. The ones who aren't provide a few scenes of 'mild peril', but King Egg is never far away from a solution and he and his friends always end up rescuing each other or being saved in the nick of time by a new character.

There is a slightly hairy moment at the end when, after King Egg and his new friends finally return, Caramba decides he's too hungry to wait any longer and will just have to eat them all up. But the friends work together and jump on Caramba, sitting on him until King Egg brings him one of the pieces of fruit from Catalina's trees: 'You see? You don't need to eat anybody. Here on the ground there's enough food for you and your whole family.' Everyone makes promises to live (and eat) happily ever after. Catalina promises she 'won't get cross if you eat my fruit', the Pipiyamas swear that they 'won't make anyone be our king!' the corm says 'I won't abandon my friends!' and Caramba says 'Me and my family will live here with the corms', and King Egg finishes by saying 'and now we can all eat happily!'

The book has many themes simply presented that children will recognize and enjoy discussing: sharing, helping your friends, being hungry, being different to people, and doing things you don't want to. Its message, although not hammered home, is a worthy one: it pays to be curious in life and to help others, as then they will help you and anyway, life is always more fun with lots of friends. It has a surreal, slightly chaotic feel to it and at times seems to move along at quite a pace with little pattern – characters appear and are scarcely introduced before another one appears, and it could be hard to keep track of them all (although maybe this is easier if you're a child of around

nine!).

The pictures are clear, bright and eloquent, and at times recall a less eerie Tove Jansson, and would I think be pleasing to children, and the book would work fine in English translation since neither the creatures, settings or themes are specific to any country. The only translation issues might be the names, but I think it could be fun to re-create these, and other than this the language is very simple. I do feel that maybe it would be suitable for an even younger age group than suggested on the cover, say six upwards.

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