

• Book Reviews •

Folklore Rules: A Fun, Quick, and Useful Introduction to the Field of Academic Folklore Studies. By Lynne S. McNeill. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2013. pp. xvi + 90, 4 diagrams, 7 black and white images, preface, acknowledgments, foreword, index).

Introducing the academic study of folklore to a new audience can be a daunting task. Instructors need to overcome assumptions and conceptions reinforced through popular culture such as what *folklore* is, who the *folk* are, and what *folklorists* actually do. Author Lynne S. McNeill attacks this challenge head-on with *Folklore Rules*, and the book's subtitle is truth in advertising. Where previous attempts to introduce the field have taken more comprehensive but often dry approaches, McNeill is conscious of her audience and the need to succinctly lay forth the breadth of the field to unversed students without detours through debates on definitions or the field's role within academia.

Folklore Rules actually has two audiences: students *and* instructors. McNeill speaks directly to the instructor in her foreword, aptly titled in classic McNeillian candor: "For the Instructor: Why You Want to Use This Book." A veteran of teaching introductory folklore courses, McNeill speaks from experience when she addresses the issues with the current model of teaching folklore in an environment where the number of "folklore" programs is declining and the courses are often shoehorned into larger programs and departments. Most important for McNeill is the ability to connect and define the scope and breadth of the field of folklore quickly; the other texts available are simply too long and too complicated, no matter how well-meaning they might be. From the perspective of an experienced folklorist or folklore instructor, complications in terminology and the field's relationship to other academic disciplines are key points of dispute. For college students new to the field, those arguments are practically irrelevant and potentially distracting, obscuring the "fun" of collecting and interpreting traditional culture. Recapturing the "fun" of folklore—not just for students, but for instructors as well—drives McNeill's book, and is ultimately where it succeeds the most. By intentionally making the text short, accessible, and simple, McNeill avoids the intra-discipline arguments over definition, scope, and interpretive approaches

that can alienate the uninitiated. Explicitly an introductory text, McNeill recognizes that only after a student is drawn into the field will he or she care about such disagreements.

That said, folklore does have distinct concepts, theories, and perspectives that need to be introduced. McNeill accomplishes the task by breaking her book into four short chapters. The first chapter's title asks the basic question: "What Is Folklore?" McNeill's prose is quick and informal, often addressing the reader directly. For example, in the first chapter she congratulates the reader on being in a folklore class. The intentionally colloquial phrasing—"a guy named William Thoms"—might be off-putting to professional folklorists, but again, McNeill's audience is new students looking for the basics, not seasoned experts arguing the historiography of the field. Addressing the definition of "folklore," McNeill draws attention to its compound construction, framing the idea of "folklore" within "culture" and recognizing that both are complicated ideas. Instead of stopping there, however, McNeill adeptly gives short and succinct definitions to move the book forward. "Variation" and "tradition" are treated with the same expository brevity, merging definitions with examples. This is an effective technique, as it allows the book to reinforce *what* folklore is—"the cultural stuff - customs, stories, jokes, art..."—as well as *how* it is folklore—"...that we learn from each other, by word of mouth or observation" (16). To complete the stylistic approach, the end of the chapter has a simple paragraph summary answering the question posed by the chapter's title.

The second chapter, "What Do Folklorists Do?," builds off of the definitions established in the first chapter but focuses on the practitioners of folkloristics rather than the traditions or tradition-bearers themselves. A concept that often perplexes non-folklorists is one that McNeill addresses right away: "folklorists don't necessarily perform the folklore they study" (21). Using an extended analogy of how asking a folklorist to "tell us a story" is like asking a criminologist to "commit us a crime," she draws an interesting parallel on how to think about scholarship in relation to its subjects. There can be practical, hands-on approaches to studying a topic or more intellectual and theoretical approaches. McNeill equates this division to the difference between collecting folklore and analyzing

folklore. She demonstrates through example that folklore is not a static performance but an experiential one, not always well suited to written documentation.

McNeill's introduction of Alan Dundes' tripartite "text, context, texture" division frames the descriptions of collecting, ethnographic fieldwork, and analysis. The complexities of collecting and fieldwork are only half of the story; analysis is presented as the process of answering questions such as "What is it?", "How does it work?", and "How does it travel?" Directly referencing William Bascom's "Four Functions of Folklore," McNeill is giving the reader an insight into the more academic side of the field, while also grounding the discipline in the concrete, objective collection of "the folk culture they *actually* have, not the culture we think they *should* have" (33).

Having established what folklore is and who studies it in the first two chapters, McNeill's third chapter classifies the major "Types of Folklore." The longest of the chapters, I suspect this is where the most intra-discipline dispute will arise. Purists in the field will undoubtedly scoff at cheeky declarations such as "Folklorists prefer the term *narratives*, as it sounds more academic" (62n3). But, keeping her audience ever-present in her prose, McNeill is intentionally and successfully walking the line between being colloquial and being informative. A necessary by-product of this style is the simplification of well-known and nuanced types. McNeill separates the field into William A. Wilson's basic categories: things we say, things we do, things we make, and things we believe. And while she does highlight the differences between major genres in each category (e.g., folktales and legends), the simplified definitions might leave instructors wanting more detailed explanations and supplementary materials.

Often in Chapter 3, McNeill shows her strength in tying together concepts with relevant examples. Calendar customs mentioned range from annual holidays like Hanukkah to monthly events like a book club to weekly gatherings like a Pancake Sunday. The theory and jargon introduced when discussing rites of passages, like *liminality* or *carnivalesque*, are grounded in common and relatable examples such as being allowed to drive and getting engaged to be married. Her discussion on folk objects moves the reader beyond "classic" folk materials like quilts and tools into a modernized (and for newcomers

to the field, not always self-evident) conception of how “folk” materials can be found in the way an object is used, not just how it was produced. The final section, on folk beliefs, compares the cultural source hypothesis and the experiential source hypothesis, again showcasing McNeill’s skill in dealing with more advanced theoretical orientations in succinct and logical ways. Using examples such as Bigfoot, giant squids, and sports fans, McNeill walks the reader through the series of assumptions and contexts that folklorists must question and investigate to properly understand folk beliefs.

The final chapter, “Types of Folk Groups,” might be the most significant addition to the field that the text makes. In the first sentence McNeill admits that she cannot list every type of folk group but has chosen a representative sample. She chose wisely. Three stalwarts of “folk group” discussions—occupational, children’s, and religious folk groups—are combined with two that are more immediately relatable to college students: campus and digital folk groups. By identifying and equating these groups in an introductory text, McNeill makes a statement as to the scope of folklore studies today. Looking to engage new, inexperienced audiences, folklore instructors should leverage their natural surroundings. Every college student has experience with campus traditions, just as they do with digital expression. Utilizing this inherent advantage not only benefits instructors but also makes concepts born a century ago applicable and relevant to everyday life today. This section brings the message of the book into reality. Not only does McNeill advocate the use of new approaches to teaching folklore, she provides them.

Through the prose, layout, definitions, illustrations, and editorial choices, *Folklore Rules* explicitly sets out to create a new introductory text to the field that exposes unfamiliar students to a complex and evolving discipline. Uninterested in the intra-disciplinary debates over terms and theories, McNeill has put forth an engaging and concise but deceptively detailed text that will surely find its way into syllabi across the country. If the book is successful, readers will be drawn into the field and will still have plenty of concepts and terms to further investigate. To the devotees of the discipline, the book’s value is more limited. For instructors, and the students they teach, *Folklore Rules* will be a valuable new addition to their pedagogical toolbox, and one that will surely be useful in

scholars' ongoing efforts to expand the scope and reach of folkloristics to new generations of learners.

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