
Reviewed by Mary Beth Stein.

Janet Langlois' analysis of the Belle Gunness legend is an excellent testimonial to the shaping influence of community perceptions and values on the narratives of local events. Add to that arson and a sensational discovery of multiple murders shrouded in mystery, and one is once again reminded that legend studies make for highly entertaining reading. The appeal of this work, however, is not limited to the intriguing storyline. Langlois brings a sophisticated blend of theories from folklore, symbolic anthropology, and semiotics to her analysis of the legends and narratives about Belle Gunness.

Belle Gunness, popularly known as the Lady Bluebeard and listed in several editions of the Guinness Book of World Records under the category of "Most Prolific Murderers," was a Norwegian immigrant believed to have killed several husbands, children, and an indeterminate number of suitors answering matrimonial advertisements. A fire on the Gunness farm in LaPorte, Indiana, in 1908 and the subsequent discovery of dismembered bodies - among them the decapitated body of a woman presumed to be Belle - simultaneously served to "put LaPorte on the map" and challenge the traditional social values of this midwestern community.

Langlois draws her material from the interviews and popular play of the mystery writer Lillian de la Torre, archival and newspaper sources, and legends and oral histories collected during fieldwork from 1975-76. She examines the narratives about Belle Gunness as metaphors for social experience which attempt to create
meaning out of disorder and resolve cultural conflicts. The author concludes that the Belle Gunness story is a key to a complex symbol system in which themes of deviance, gender, community, and social change are shaped and signified by the residents of LaPorte.

The book is divided into three parts. The first, "Community Disorder," examines the perceived disintegration of the small town community. The narratives point to a symbolic landscape, in which the Gunness farm, on the outskirts of the community, was marginal at best. Even before Belle's arrival, the house on the Gunness farm had associations with marginality and deviance for the residents of LaPorte. Previous owners of the house had included southern sympathizers and a madam from Chicago. The narratives in this first section emphasize Belle's marginality and the violation of the small town codes of neighborliness and hospitality.

The second part, "Gender, Kinship, and Marriage Reversals," examines the blurring of traditional gender lines and the changes in the social institution of marriage. The narratives dealing with Belle's ambiguous sexuality focus on her masculine appearance and behavior, her physical strength and abrupt manner. Langlois observes that the ambivalence about Belle's sexuality is symbolized in the depiction of Belle in between the cultural categories of male and female.

The third part, "Economic and Political Upheavals," examines the Belle Gunness story in the context of significant social and economic changes around the turn of the century. The narratives in this section depicting Belle as monster, trickster, outlaw, and scheming business woman signify contradictory conclusions to the events on the Gunness farm and complex attitudes toward modern, urban, and industrial life.

Belle Gunness: The Lady Bluebeard is an intriguing study of legend and oral history in a
small town community on the verge of major social and political change. The most interesting and theoretically exciting aspect of this work examines the manipulation of cultural categories and symbols in the creation of socially acceptable metaphors for local history. Although some of the concluding theoretical observations deserved more than a postscript and could have been better integrated into the body of the work, Langlois has offered an intriguing analysis of the relationship between local history and folk narrative in a small midwestern community.


Reviewed by Regina Bendix.

The study of the folktale has historically been a dominant branch of folkloristics. Numerous theoretical ideas were developed or tested with fairy tales and some of the discipline’s major reference tools grew out of work with this one genre. Yet there are few works that competently survey the existing literature and at the same time propose adequate ways to make sense of a genre which - despite its dwindling oral existence in the First World - continues to hold our attention.

The Danish scholar Bengt Holbek has written such an exemplary work, and he has done so with clarity of mind and a relentlessly critical spirit, carrying the reader lucidly, at times charmingly, through the thicket of narrative scholarship. Working with the materials of Evald Tang Kristensen, one of the most prolific and least recognized folklore collectors Europe has seen, Holbek synthesizes three themes: he devel-