

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.

Interpretation of Fairy Tales. By Bengt Holbek.
Folklore Fellows Communications 239. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1987.
Pp. 660, preface, bibliography, index of tale types.

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-

ops a method of fairy tale interpretation, proposes a theory on which this method rests and applies it to a historically and contextually defined body of data.

Holbek planned to write an introduction to the study of verbal art, but soon realized that "elementary introductions come last." He noted, however, the lack of coherence in what was known about verbal art, and decided instead to develop a method, resting on comprehensive theory, by which a culture-specific understanding of the meaning of fairy tales could be gained.

The stumbling blocks of fairy tale interpretation are those elements which have afforded them separate genre status: the marvelous episodes. Holbek is convinced that for the tellers and listeners of fairy tales, there is no fairy or wonderland, that the tales are neither remnants of some ancient imagination nor childish products of illiterate fantasy. Such views, by far not the most absurd which have been suggested, must be amended: "The contents of the tales are related to the living conditions of the narrators and their audience," he writes. "When applied to the 'marvelous' elements of fairy tales, this leads to the theoretical premise that all such elements refer to features of the real world as experienced by the members of the storytelling communities" (pp. 408-9). The marvelous characters and elements of fairy tales are then symbols of real-life emotional impressions which "allow the narrator to speak of the problems, hopes, and ideals of the community" (p.439). The last part of the book, the application of Holbek's method, finds these problems and hopes rooted in social inequalities, family constellations, and traditional gender expectations.

Holbek arrives at this thesis by combining what he - after careful scrutiny - considers theoretically and methodologically sound steps in analysis. He draws from Propp, Kōngäs-

Maranda, Dundes, from structural and psychological theory, but he does so always in sufficient caveats. It will not be easy to discount his choice of symbolic interpretation, as it rests on a logically built edifice of Holbek's making and not on any easy adaptation of Proppian or Freudian schemes of analysis.

Interpretation of Fairy Tales concerns a body of narratives collected in the last third of the 19th century in Denmark's Jutland province. Evald Tang Kristensen was a school teacher who, judging by the size of his collection, spent more time travelling to narrators than teaching school. He was overshadowed by his contemporary Svendt Grundtvig - despite the fact that Grundtvig profited vastly from the materials that Kristensen sent him, and much of his collection remains unpublished. Holbek gives due attention to Kristensen's life and especially his collection methods, and writes an ethnographic sketch of Jutland's social life and economy during Kristensen's lifetime. For interpretation, he selected a limited number of narrators, who showed an active repertoire. In order to establish a profile of the narrator community, we are given biographical data on all of them. Holbek also analyzes the narrators' age and gender relative to when Kristensen recorded from them, and finds, for example, that Kristensen encountered far more male than female narrators of low economic and social status. Similarly, there were gender distinctions in tale repertoire. It is from this careful examination of the tellers and their living conditions that Holbek's thesis about the relationship between fairy tales and teller's social reality receives support.

Holbek may have had to abandon the idea of writing an "easy" introduction, but instead he offered what is the most sophisticated review of folktale scholarship to date. The brief section on "conceptions of fairy tales" groups 150 years

of research into six well labeled and keenly characterized "viewpoints," such as the "super-organic" or the "nationalistic" viewpoint. In the third and densest part of the book, Holbek covers historical, psychological, morphological, and structural approaches to tale interpretation, mustering an impressive array of diverse sources. The book offers historical ethnography and careful ethnographic source evaluation, leading the way in how future research with the many unexamined folktale collections should be framed. *Interpretation of Fairy Tales* is for the 1980s, what Thompson's work was for the 40s and Dégh's for the 60s: a milestone of research. Holbek undertakes for narrative research what Glassie's *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia* did for material culture - offering a challenging, holistic, and theoretically sophisticated approach to understanding folk culture.

There are a few points a spoiled reader might wish to have redressed in a possible future edition of *Interpretation of Fairy Tales* - and I hope that it will receive wide enough a circulation to warrant new editions. A somewhat longer conclusion summarizing the interpretive findings with regard to the meaning of Jutland fairy tales of the last third of the 19th century would be helpful. As it is, one finds this meaning overwhelmingly illustrated in the individual interpretations - a summary would help to convey Holbek's stance more fully. As a prudent scholar, he may have chosen to refrain from such a summary: as it is, the reader has to follow him step by step and thus easy labels such as socialist or psychoanalytic analysis will not stick to him. An American reader would probably also favor translations of the extensive French and German quotations. Given that Holbek wrote in a non-native language, asking him to adhere to non-native academic practices would, however, be excessive. His work deserves the attention of folklorists - not simply narrative scholars -

and may encourage others to combine analytic thought with warm concern for the folk of the present and past.

First Prize: Fifteen Years! An Annotated Collection of Romanian Political Jokes. By C. Banc and A. Dundes. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses. 1986. Pp. 182, preface, index. \$26.50.

Reviewed by Regina Bendix.

C. Banc is a Romanian refugee who in her mental luggage brought a collection of three hundred political jokes to the United States. Alan Dundes teamed up with Ms. Banc to produce the present, thoroughly annotated text collection. The jokes are - admittedly - arbitrarily divided into ten thematic chapters, covering areas such as "The Ministry of Truth" or "Our Beloved Leaders." It is the texts that are of interest to the authors who limit themselves to cursory analytical statements in their preface. Though this is undoubtedly the largest Romanian political joke collection in print, it does fall into the same category as many of the articles and books listed in the bibliography: the texts are taken as testimonials to the terrible living conditions behind the Iron Curtain, and each thematic group is to illustrate yet another facet of grim Communist suppression.

Annotation is the first useful step in the analysis of these jokes. With it, the authors convincingly demonstrate that the same jokes circulate in most Iron Curtain countries, thus illustrating the similarity of sociopolitical experience. Yet the circumstances leading to joke collections like this one make it almost impossible to analyze the material in depth. The jokes here are remembered and told in a drastically different context. Performance character-