

Brown, Carolyn S. **The Tall Tale in American Folklore and Literature.** Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987. Pp. ix + 168, bibliography, index, preface, epilogue, photos, illustrations. Cloth, n.p.

Reviewed by Kenneth D. Pimple

Carolyn S. Brown's *The Tall Tale* is not only informative but also nearly as entertaining as its subject. Her style has none of those unfortunate marks that I associate with the dissertation-turned book-self-conscious defensiveness and dreary repetition of already-made points—but is crisp and well-paced.

Brown's emphasis is on the literary tall tale, but her discussion opens with and is always illuminated by consideration of oral tales which she and others have collected. She does not present a "source hunter's" approach to folklore-in-literature, but rather considers "how that complex interaction between tale, teller, and audience has been transferred to print" (vii). According to Brown, a genre "is distinguished by the kind of material presented, by the function it assumes in the community, and by the rhetorical relationship between artist and audience" (viii), and she succeeds admirably in considering these aspects of the tall tale in both its oral and literary manifestations.

In her brief first chapter, Brown presents the orientation of the book; in Chapter 2, "Stretchers, Yarns, and Windies: A Genre of the Folk," she presents the form and performative characteristics, social functions, and typical contexts of oral tall tales and introduces the concept of "the tall tale conceit" (25).

Like the metaphysical conceit of the seventeenth-century poets, the tall tale conceit compares its subject to something strikingly different; but the tall tale conceit creates the comparison comically, absurdly. The tall tale does not simply exaggerate, describing mosquitoes three or eight or ten feet long, but concretely and comically compares, telling how they sounded like dive bombers and can be heard "nigh onto twenty miles away." (25)

Brown also discusses the "broad continuum" of tall tale exaggeration, "from the mildly improbable, through the physically impossible, to the mind-jarringly illogical" (23). Illogical exaggeration includes the category mistake, which "creates an absurdity by allocating an object or a concept to a logical type or category to which it does not belong," as in stories of winters so cold that words freeze as they are spoken (23).

In Chapter 3, "Flush Times: Varieties of Written Tales," Brown discusses several kinds of literary tall tales, illustrating each with works by one or more authors. She considers Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's sketches; anecdotes about Davy Crockett; hoaxes by T.B. Thorpe, Mark Twain, and Dan DeQuille; and the frame tale as written by William C. Hall and T.B. Thorpe, including an extended and insightful discussion of Thorpe's "The Big Bear of Arkansas."

Chapter 4, "Sut Lovingood: A Nat'ral Durn'd Yarnspinner" is an excellent treatment of often difficult material. As Brown admirably demonstrates, we are unlikely to appreciate George Washington Harris's Sut tales—full of "discomfort,

pain, and degradation" (74)—without understanding them as tall tales rather than as reports of Sut's "true" experiences.

Chapters 5 and 6 are discussions of Mark Twain's *Roughing It* and his *Autobiography*, respectively. Since no complete edition of Twain's autobiography has been published, Brown uses the three partial editions available. Brown compares two of Twain's stages as tall tale teller. In *Roughing It*, he chronicles his transformation from a tenderfoot into a seasoned yarnspinner, often making his own, younger self the butt of tall tale humor. In his *Autobiography*, Twain presents his life and himself as a tall tale completed.

Brown rounds up the book with Chapter 7, "The Way the Natives Talk: A Note on Colloquial Style," discussing the influence of colloquial, down-to-earth style in American literature, and her "Epilogue," in which she succinctly traces some tall tale influences in more recent literature, mentions Philip Roth, Ralph Ellison, and Garrison Keillor. At times in this book, it seems that Brown has nearly spread her interpretive net too thin and begun to describe things which are not tall tales at all, but she always reels it back in, as when she admits that much of Keillor's work resembles local color more than the tall tale (136).

In all, *The Tall Tale* is an excellent study of the tall tale, especially in its literary incarnations, and an exemplary fusion of folkloristic and literary concerns.

Taylor, J. Golden, et al, editors. **A Literary History of the American West.** Sponsored by the Western Literature Association. Edited by J. Golden Taylor, Thomas J. Lyon, George F. Day, Gerald W. Haslam, James H. Maguire, and William T. Pilkington. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1987. Pp. xliii + 1353, preface, chronology, selected bibliographies, illustrations, index. \$79.50, cloth.

Reviewed by Robert E. Walls

In some of my less optimistic moments, I often think, as a non-native Westerner, that attempting to comprehend the American West—just the literary West—and the romance, sentimentality, mythology, and realism underlying that heritage is a task for which several lifetimes would not be sufficient. To examine the popular, academic, and esoteric voices of the Old West (e.g., Bret Harte, Jack London, Mary Austin, Owen Wister, Mari Sandoz, Louis L'Amour) and of the New West (e.g., Edward Abbey, Larry McMurtry, Gary Snyder, Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch) to shed some light on the voices of the folk seems so natural, so necessary, yet so formidable. But a book such as *A Literary History of the American West* offers considerable comfort. Here one can read with confidence about the literary West, recognizing that it is simply impossible to read through all of it. This book does a magnificent job of organizing, summarizing, and clarifying a tremendous quantity of material, all the while making it accessible to a diverse audience.