

A clarification

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In the first issue of *Contemporary Legend*, Linda Dégh states: “Nicolaisen tells us that it is wrong to ask *what* a legend has to say; it should be *how* it says it” (Dégh 1991:28). Since this is so contrary to my thinking about the legend, a clarifying disclaimer is called for. I have searched all my writings on the (contemporary) legend over the last ten years, especially the two articles which Dégh cites (Nicolaisen 1987, 1988) without being able to discover anything that would even vaguely support her assertion. As my chief interest is in the linguistic structure and narrative form of legends as stories, this misunderstanding—and I cannot think of it as anything else—may have arisen from the juxtaposition of two statements which I made in the course of my enquiry into the compatibility of the terms German *Sage* and English *legend* and their usage in international folk-narrative scholarship. In that essay (Nicolaisen 1988:83–84), after tentatively claiming that the “chief interest” of scholars studying the *Sage* “has been focused on what it has to say rather than how to say it,” I continued my argument a little later by suggesting that “if we want to treat *Sagen* as full members of the folk-narrative family, it is primarily, possibly even exclusively, their narrative actualisations which must receive our attention. *Sagen* must be treated as stories if they are to be the true equivalent of *legends*.” To me, the concepts of “narrative actualisation” and “story” essentially include both contents and form or, in this specific case, both “*what* a legend has to say” and “*how* it says it.” How could it be otherwise? Let us hope that this clarifies matters.

References

- Dégh, Linda. 1991. What is the Legend After All? *Contemporary Legend* 1:11-38.
- Nicolaisen, W.F.H. 1987. The Linguistic Structure of Legends. In *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend II*, edited by Gillian Bennett, Paul Smith, and J.D.A. Widdowson, 61-76. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- . 1988. German Sage and English Legend: Terminology and Conceptual Problems. In *Monsters with Iron Teeth: Perspectives on Contemporary Legend III*, edited by Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith, 79-87. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.