

Book reviews

Lindahl, Carl, ed. *American Folktales From the Collections of the Library of Congress*. Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2004. Two vols. 729 pages. Foreword by Peggy A. Bulger.

Carl Lindahl's two-volume anthology of American folktales from the collections of the Library of Congress makes a significant contribution to folklore studies and manages to be engaging and accessible for both general readers and academic ones. It is one of those classic works that all libraries (from public to high school to university) should have on their shelves, as should folklore and narrative scholars. Lindahl asserts that the "most important mission of the Library of Congress is to cultivate and sustain an American Memory" (2004: xxiii), and these volumes are an important aid toward that end. Until their publication in *American Folktales*, the only way to encounter these stories was to trudge to the Library and listen to the narratives on tapes in the American Folklife Center's Reading Room. However, Lindahl has now done the trudging and, valiantly, the transcribing for us. In some cases, he listened to parts of the tapes over one hundred times in order to transcribe hard-to-decipher passages. Despite such difficulties of the tape-recorded interview, the stories themselves are vibrant, and their vitality is enhanced by the collection's organization around the tellers rather than the narratives and genres.

And what a collection of tellers it is: Aunt Molly Jackson, Son House, Woody Guthrie, Hector Lee, and Samuel Harmon, among many others. Whenever possible, Lindahl includes the tellers' own accounts of their experiences as narrators. Some sections also include the narrators' analysis and contextualization of the tales they tell. For example, Ellis Ogle from Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, recounts lying abed at night, pretending to sleep, while listening to

the “old folks” argue about physics and metaphysics—that is, whether spook lights in the mountains were caused by “minerals” (methane gas), as Granny Shields held, or witches and black magic, as Granny Ferryman maintained.

Along with presenting folk etiological debates, the volumes also cover America’s regional and ethnic diversity; over seventeen ethnic groups are represented (from African to Cuban to Irish to Osage to Welsh, for example). Forty of the fifty states are present, as are at least twenty-eight occupational groups (from bar owners to doctors to ex-slaves to linguists to migrant workers to singers, for example).

Despite the hefty number of total pages, each volume is easily held, handled, and read. The books are visually inviting and graced with memorable black-and-white photographs, including shots of narrators at their kitchen tables or at work, scenes from the Dust Bowl days, and portraits of ex-slaves. The books also include photos of folklorists (such as John Lomax, Stetson Kennedy, Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, Richard Dorson, and Zora Neale Hurston) at work in the field—or even telling tales themselves (such as a very young Barry Jean Ancelet in Louisiana in 1980). The two-volume set has extensive comparative notes, autobiographical notes about the narrators, an index of narrators, a bibliography, an index of collectors and collections, an index of tale types, an index of motifs, an index of tales in audio format released by the Library, and a geographic index (state-by-state and city-by-city). These materials would be of particular use for students if the books were adopted as textbooks in an advanced folklore or narrative course; however, the list price (\$199.00) seems to relegate the books to the non-circulating, reference sections of libraries.

The only aspect of the volumes that had me scratching my academic head was the discussion of “folktale” in the introductory material. Lindahl acknowledges that many scholars used the term “folktale” to signify an oral narrative that is fictional, which is the definition to which I subscribe. However, he uses the term much more broadly “to apply to any traditional tale . . . the scope of this book extends far beyond fiction” (xlvii). Indeed, *American Folktales* encompasses belief tales, personal experience stories (such as those about September 11, 2001), legends, jokes, children’s stories, and narratives

about local and national history. Lindahl argues that his emphasis on the tellers lends itself to this kind of an approach; as Maine storyteller Joshua Alley says about stories, they “ain’t all one kind of stuff” (xlviii). So Lindahl includes lots of different kinds of genres, or different kinds of “stuff,” under the umbrella term “folktale.”

Like the stories themselves, these volumes can be read on many levels, which makes them excellent source material for both undergraduate and graduate folklore and narrative courses, particularly introductory or folk narrative courses. I have used these volumes in my own research, and I direct students to them. Reference librarians should be forewarned, however: the volumes almost demand to circulate so that readers can curl up with them in front of a fireplace or on a front porch swing for a long, satisfying read.

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Sharon R. Sherman and Mikel J. Koven, eds. *Folklore/Cinema: Popular Film as Vernacular Culture*. 2007. Logan: Utah State University Press. 232 pages. ISBN: 978-0-87421-673-8 (hard cover).

Sharon Sherman and Mikel Koven, who individually have made significant contributions to the relationship between film and folklore, have again collaborated on an anthology of studies at the intersection of film studies and folkloristics. The motivation behind this iteration—as opposed to their excellent co-edited volume of *Western Folklore* 64.3-4 (2005)—was to compile a set of essays that would be equally accessible and relevant to the two disciplines: “In editing these chapters, we strove to ensure that we represent both their filmic and folkloristic dimensions” (7). This they do admirably well, although, as a folklorist, I did find myself engaging in that perennial “Why didn’t they cite....?” exercise when I read the works more rooted in film studies; I would presume the obverse is true as well.