

Book reviews

William Lynwood Montell. *Tales from Kentucky Funeral Homes*. 2009. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky. 208 pages. ISBN 978-0-8131-2567-1 (hardcover).

Back in the early 1980s when I was writing my doctoral thesis I was enormously influenced by Lynwood Montell's *Ghosts Along the Cumberland: Deathlore in the Kentucky Foothills* (1975). Since then there have been, among others in Montell's phenomenal collecting career, *Kentucky Ghosts* (1993), *Ghosts Across Kentucky* (2000) and *Haunted Houses and Family Ghosts of Kentucky* (2001). Now we have *Tales from Kentucky Funeral Homes*, which presents in the region of 400 personal experience stories told by funeral directors from 2007 through 2008. Typically, Montell tells the reader, these men and women were middle-aged or older and practicing in small-to-medium sized towns. Some of their tales recount events from the days when hearses were used as ambulances and the funeral director's horse dragged sick or dying people to hospital on sleds; others compare past and present customs; and others present modern practices. The stories are thematically grouped in six chapters—Funeral and Burial Practices through the Years; Funeral and Burial Folk Customs; Funeral Humor and Mistakes; Personal Practice Stories; Memories of Family Funeral Businesses; and The Bereaved—each of which is preceded by a brief explanatory headnote. The main body of the book is top-and-tailed by a short Introduction and biographies of the 23 contributors.

I am intentionally using the term “contributors” here, rather than the more usual word “informants,” in order to draw attention to Montell's exemplary practice. Some of the most difficult professional decisions that folklorists and oral historians have to make cluster around the question of how to present the material that has

been collected from oral sources. Of course, no modern scholar would consider rewriting stories in the manner of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century collectors, but we have also to recognize that, unless the intended readership is limited to a community of like-minded scholars, verbatim transcriptions of the spoken word are not the best alternative. If the collection is to be published the final product must be readable. In fairness, it has to do justice to the storyteller's skills and make his/her stories accessible to general readers as well as specialists. Montell's practice here—which he discusses in the Introduction—is to transcribe the recordings and turn them into texts that he can send to the storytellers for their approval and (presumably) personal editing. This collaborative storytelling text is what the reader encounters on the page in this volume.

And very good storytelling it is—informative, lively, and always authentic-sounding. In William Bledsoe's story "Not a Ghost" (pp. 74-75), recorded in September 2007, for example, the storyteller begins, "This is a true story. I know it's not real but it's the truth," and he continually circles round and returns to this paradox. "There was no way possible that he could have been there when I saw him and spoke to him," he says. "But I will die always knowing that's who I spoke to, and he spoke back to me." This sounds totally authentic to me—all the features of the oral telling of supernatural personal experience stories have been retained and shine out. What is true of this story is true of all of them, and I think this is a considerable achievement.

Readers will also find a good deal of humor in this collection. The story "Kentucky's Finest" (pp. 64-65), for example, features a lady who insists that she wants to be "created" when she dies; "Lady's Senior Moment" (pp. 56-57) gives us a grandmother in her nineties whose children take her to see a new family grave-plot they have bought and who remarks, "I guess it is OK, but I don't know how in the world I could ever find your-all's graves when I come to visit"; a lady who announces that her son is to be a "ballbearing" at a funeral ("Other Names for Pallbearers" p. 57); and (surely traditional, this one!) the man who falls into a grave whilst in a drunken stupor, wakes up in the morning, and looks

round, remarking, "Vell, vell, resurrection morning and I'm the firstun up" ("Heavy drinker fell into grave" p 54).

For under \$25, this book is excellent value for money for social historians and folklorists in especial, and for the general reader too.

Gillian Bennett

James McCormick and Macy Wyatt. *Ghosts of the Bluegrass*. 2009. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky. 208 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8131-9237-6 (paperback).

Georgetown College professors James McCormick and Macy Wyatt, as an assignment to improve interviewing skills, sent out 23 of their students to collect ghost stories from the communities of central Kentucky. The stories, as collected and published verbatim, were compiled and organized into ten major categories. Each of the ten chapters begins with a concise discussion on the specific grouping of the ghost stories while each of the individual stories is accompanied by basic information about the informants: gender, age, and location of teller. The lengths of the stories vary from a few sentences to several paragraphs. Many of the stories are also accompanied by editorial comments regarding local ghosts, motifs, and references to universal supernatural occurrences. "See also" notations frequently appear in the editorial comments as well.

The authors' introduction discusses ghosts and supernatural stories both generally and with specific references to some of the stories in this collection. The authors define the Bluegrass region for people outside of the area and give concise background information on the coursework that initiated the collection of these anecdotes. The first chapter, "Unfinished Business," contains 23 stories, some of which discuss the same ghost while others refer to well-documented supernatural experiences such as "Image at the Window" (pp. 13-14) and a version of a tale from my own repertoire, "Lantern on the Tracks" (pp. 14-15).