

## Reviews

Jeffrey S. Debies-Carl. *If You Should Go at Midnight: Legends and Legend Tripping in America*. 2023. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. 312 pages. ISBN: 978-1496844125.

The folk practice of exploring haunted or uncanny locations is, by all indications, widespread and long-standing in Anglo-American lore. Gervase of Tilbury, a thirteenth-century British chronicler, recorded a legend trip practice focused on the ancient hill fort at Wandlebury, near Cambridge, England. “An actual happening,” the author says, “well-known to many, which those who lived there and nearby told to me,” holds that if anyone went to the place and shouted “Let my adversary appear,” they would at once be attacked by a mysterious black knight. Wandlebury is still haunted by a psychic “death energy” and in 2001 was the site of two uncanny “crop circles” that appeared overnight (Ellis 2004: 117-18). Even today, ghost tours of Edinburgh, Scotland, continue to feature the “Black Mausoleum,” resting place of “Bloody Mackenzie.” If one challenges the dead man to open the door and come out, tour guides affirm, he will rise from his grave and leave any unwise tourist battered and bloody (Ironsides 2018: 95-96).

In the United States, legend trips are not ancient, but they are certainly pervasive. They came to folklorists’ attention in the 1960s, thanks to Linda Dégh, a monumentally influential scholar of folk narrative at Indiana University. Building on her insight that oral narratives about folk beliefs must be studied in terms of the real-life practices that they occasion, her students produced a series of case studies of local legend trips. Broader-based discussions soon appeared, particularly after Dégh (writing with her eminent husband Andrew Vázsonyi) proposed the term “ostension” for such real-life actions modeled on traditional narrative. This concept, in turn, has proven useful in understanding the burgeoning of traditional behavior among Internet users. Michael Kinsella (2011) has boldly proposed that the “physical visit” version of the tradition had come to influence “virtual visits” to websites supposedly revealing hidden mysteries of dark science. More recently, a number of researchers, including Tolbert (2018) and Peck (2023), have suggested that the Slender Man corpus had become a basis for web-based legend tripping and ostension.

At the same time, the older “physical visit” form of the tradition continues, but has received less attention from folklorists. So, the appearance of this book, by sociologist Jeffrey S. Debies-Carl, is a welcome event. The author generates an inclusive model for viewing and understanding the tradition, integrating folkloristic research into a broader social science perspective. Rather than working through case histories, Debies-Carl proposes a structural model for legend trips, starting from the influential three-part analysis proposed by Kenneth A. Thigpen (1971) (preparatory story-telling/visit/ retrospective story-telling). Relying on the social science literature on rites of passage by Arnold van Gennep and Victor and Edith L. B. Turner, Debies-Carl expands Thigpen’s scheme into six stages, with special emphasis on the liminal realm at the heart of such trips. In the author’s scheme, two stages are “preliminal” (legend telling, plus preparations and journey), two are “liminal” (rites/rituals plus close encounter), and two are “postliminal” (return plus telling the tale).

This model allows the author to compare how elements from different legend trip traditions conform to these stages, and by organizing his book by discussing one stage at a time, he provides full emphasis to aspects that are neglected by folklorists yet are clearly crucial to many disparate versions. Rather than focusing on the storytelling aspect of this tradition, he stresses the logistical end of the journey. Careful preparation is crucial for the legend trip to be a successful one, he observes, and necessary accessories begin with obtaining (or making) a clear map to the legend trip site, along with directions on how to find the spot that is at the heart of its mystery. Also, as technology continues to evolve, increasingly trippers go armed with cameras, flashlights, psychic force detectors of various kinds, and extra batteries (since paranormal entities drain the electricity from such devices much more quickly than one expects). The hallmark of an accomplished mission, he notes, is a brief but intense sense of contact with the unknown, so many legend trips conclude with a sudden mad dash for the exit. Again, logistic preparation is essential, the author argues, for the immediate entry and exit from the liminal part of the trip both need to be handled properly if the event is to have its proper impact.

Debies-Carl gives full credit to the ground-breaking work by Dégh and her students, but he develops a more inclusive theoretical framework by placing legend tripping into a broader background of related activities. He gives full value to recent work by sociologists such as Dennis Waskul who argue that images of the supernatural are key means of negotiating the social constructions of everyday life. This includes the activities of “ghost hunters” who carry out (and commodify) paranormal investigators of historical locations, as well as commercialized “ghost

walks” and “haunted tours” of public places. These activities have recently inspired substantial sociological investigation, often under the category of “dark tourism,” and the author handles them as equal to impromptu legend tripping, a step that may concern folklorists who see their subject of inquiry as distinct from commodified forms of culture. But other scholars (e.g., Ironside 2018) have argued that these commercial activities share a common structure and social purpose with folklore, and Americans’ observance of Halloween, also a holiday with roots in young people’s transgressive play, has likewise been radically domesticated in the past century (Ellis 1994a).

The book, in addition, takes full advantage of recent work on the emerging prominence of the supernatural in Internet culture. Increasingly legend-trip lore has become disseminated through websites identifying (and often giving directions to) allegedly haunted sites in rural America, and YouTube has likewise become the platform for posting “trophy” videos documenting successful adventures. The electronic revolution’s influence on carrying out ghost hunts, private and commercial, has been documented by, among others, Michel Koven (2007) and Elizabeth Tucker (2017), and Andrew Peck’s work on the virtual evolution of Slender Man (2023) establishes the fully interactive dynamics of such online communication. Debies-Carl adds to this work by providing detailed and perceptive analyses of online reactions posed on “Haunted America” websites, as well as virtually shared videos documenting alleged paranormal contacts. Postliminal discussion among legend trippers, he argues, is exactly parallel to the interaction of professional ghost hunters (with their enhanced technological devices) as they discuss whether (or not) they have detected a genuinely paranormal force. Debate and doubt remain as central to the nature of legendry as credulity and belief.

The result is a much more detailed picture of the process of legend-tripping than folklorists have been able to reconstruct from the retrospective memorates of teens who have visited a given site. The author shows that the phenomenon is much “messier” than it first seems: multiple and contradictory versions happily co-exist about what can happen at a legend trip site and how to make it happen. Participants’ sense of what they experienced is even more diverse: while some are convinced that they have experienced the supernatural, others experience nothing more than the ambient spookiness of a midnight journey, and others are just not sure. As I found with my deep analysis of “The Hook in the Door” legend (Ellis 1994b), the degree of variation in even a relatively stable legendary narrative makes it impossible to determine a “core narrative” (much less a “core meaning”) for its many audiences. Debies-Carl shows that the same is true to the next degree with legend

tripping, in itself a caution to scholars who want to reduce this tradition, or any of its individual variants, to a unitary social function or significance.

That, however, points to a limitation of this new book: Debies-Carl comes close to dismissing the legend trip as being socially meaningless. By organizing his study around the six stages of a consistent ritual journey, he argues for a deep unifying structure at its heart: a diligent preparation for an entry into a liminal realm, an experience (perhaps intensely personal), and an often complicated return to everyday life. It is therefore surprising that his chapter at the end seems to disparage the legend trip as incoherent and lacking a proper sense of closure. Participants, he observes, go into the experience with no coherent religious or scientific framework, so even if they experience something that is “potentially profound” to their worldviews, they lack reliable means of constructing coherent meaning from their encounter and sharing it with others (243).

A rite of passage, as properly defined in sociological research, presupposes a clearly-structured institutional ceremony, at the end of which participants emerge invested with new identity and elevated social status. The author mentions weddings, graduations, and baptisms as normative examples. By contrast, Debies-Carl argues, when legend trippers experience liminality, it is as if they see “someone appear out of thin air, hand you a blank diploma, and declare ‘Congratulations! You are now . . .’ before trailing off and fading away from view like a ghost” (245). Perhaps, he suggests, the “quasi-institutional” structure that he sees emerging in commodified ghost-hunting might in time allow legend tripping to “enter the realm of conventional culture and even take on a degree of institutionalized predictability.” Thus equipped, trippers “may set forth knowing exactly what they are supposed to experience and armed with predetermined, preindoctrinated conclusions about the experience’s meaning” (249-50)

I suspect this argument is a bit of a pose, for the personal experiences that Debies-Carl includes along the way make it clear that he and many of the participants observed found it enjoyable to retrace the steps of legend trippers and try to contact “the” site of alleged liminality. An especially effective “participant observer” episode shows him searching the Old Hill Burying Ground in Concord, Massachusetts, for a cursed tombstone proclaiming that “all must submit to the King of Terrors.” As dusk gathers, he finally locates the stone and photographs it, and the trophy of his successful quest illustrates and crowns the accompanying page (151-52). But even here, the author laments that “the absence of a single coherent legend” connected to the stone makes his mission easy to accomplish but vitiates its success. The stone exists and looks spooky:

so what? Debies-Carl comes close to saying that if the legend trip has no set structure or worthy goal, then it also lacks social significance; it is no more than a form of enjoyment.

Scholars of play have long dealt with this trivializing “no more than” dismissal and struggled with ways to analyze (or even justify analyzing) social behavior that is self-defined as unproductive and yet is visibly compelling to its participants. (Sutton-Smith 1970 and Ellis 2020 illustrate a half century of this academic struggle). It is true that folklorists may have overstated the degree to which legend tripping is, in point of fact, a rite of passage like those described by social scientists. And Debies-Carl is quick to point out that many such rites are “needlessly cruel and traumatic” (251), illustrating this point with an example from an indigenous African culture. (He could more properly have cited a contemporary case of hazing from an American collegiate, military, or corporate context.) But our field is familiar with the ways in which folklore often “poaches” from institutionalized culture, borrowing the structure of culturally revered rituals for playful transgression. In addition, the folklore mode of social interaction privileges small groups and individual perspectives. So ethnography and qualitative research are the normal methods for understanding folk activities like legend trips, rather than focusing on an implicit structure that obtains for all participants. Debies-Carl might have heeded the cautions of folklorist Jeanne Banks Thomas, who warns ethnographers to approach fieldwork or participant observation in a posture of humbleness, setting aside the ego’s natural tendency to judge and listening, with the goal of achieving cultural competence in the subculture’s often subtle mode of communication (2014: 38-39)

Anyhow, structured subversion of institutional norms is rarely trivial, and it is significant that this transgressiveness obtains even in the quasi-institutional avatars of the legend trip. The author suggests one promising way of seeing the legend trip as socially meaningful: it aligns with ways in which American culture is trending away from institutional religion, adopting instead an “individual spirituality” (247-48). Many other academics have observed this pervasive trend. Rachael Ironside, scholar of dark tourism (yet another avatar of the legend trip) comments that during her experience in leading commercial ghost hunts, many participants comment that such events encourage them “to consider deep moral questions” as well as “to affirm deeper questions and validate prior experiences,” providing them with “a shared experience of spiritual exploration” (2018: 109). Sociologist Marc Eaton (2015) makes a similar argument about paranormal investigators: as organized religion declines in authority, such ghost-hunters engage in “quest culture,” combining concepts from science and from an ecumenical understanding of world

religions. “The freedom afforded by being marginal has fostered the growth of an epistemological pluralism, a live-and-let-live mentality” Eaton concludes, “that enables individuals to pursue spiritual meaning in their own ways while also maintaining their membership in a community of belief” (2015: 408-09). As theologian Linda A. Mercadante (2014) has shown, one common theme among the growing group that self-identifies as “spiritual but not religious” is “detraditioning,” i.e., challenging any spiritual movement that claims authority over followers’ beliefs. Answers to existential questions, one of her interviewees said, simply do not exist: “There is nothing but the search. It’s coming to the point where the search is the answer” (2014: 78-81).

One might more fairly see legend trips as compelling precisely because they are improvisational ways of approaching and experiencing the marvelous. Private quests are risky, both Mercadante and Debies-Carl note, because they do not provide a safe, socially structured destination. But in this world young people often question whether our culture’s cherished institutions are, in fact, taking them in any predictable or secure direction. And so, like so many Americans who are opting out of institutionalized religion, they find the never-ending quest for alternative worldviews more satisfying than any mundane “safe haven” that religion or science can guarantee them.

There are other, less crucial issues raised by the book. It boldly subtitled itself as a study of legends and legend tripping “in America,” but in fact the fresh examples of the tradition rather narrowly represent upstate New York and coastal New England. Other locations are discussed through previously published case histories by folklorists. While the Midwest is well represented by these case studies, large sections of the United States remain undiscussed, notably the Southeast and the West. Given the rapid growth of websites documenting legend trip sites in all parts of the country, certainly some effort could be made to ensure that all regions are catalogued, even minimally. Canada is certainly part of “America” and an active participant in the legend tripping scene, while Mexico and Latin America remain unexplored in this regard. Further, the extent to which non-Whites participate in legend trips remains unclear; if this is a distinctively Anglo tradition, that in itself would be an interesting finding with ramifications for Debies-Carl’s conclusions.

The robust presence of a legend tripping tradition in Japan (see Ellis 2015: 208-13) suggests that some form of it exists worldwide, and so legend tripping may well be connected with a basic human social and psychological imperative for questing. This issue, I concede, is too broad and unruly for a book as focused as this one. That *If You Should Go at Midnight* is broad and informative enough to inspire questions such as

these proves its value in providing a provocative overview of a lively tradition. It allows us to ask just how “ritual” and how “American” legend trips really are. And in any case, there should no longer be any reason to argue for (or against) their social significance.

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