

• *Book Reviews* •

Playing Dead: Mock Trauma and Folk Drama in Staged High School Drunk-Driving Tragedies. By Montana Miller. (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2012. 148 pp., foreword, references, index).

“Every 15 minutes, someone in the United States dies from an alcohol related incident” (1). Although government agencies have noted the outdated nature of this statistic, it is still actively used in the production and reproduction of the two-day event titled with the same grisly statistic: Every 15 Minutes (also called E15M). This program, hosted by schools and produced with community involvement, aims to prevent drunk driving by high school students through the enactment of a visually impactful and elaborate “mock tragedy” (3) that results in varied reactions from the participants and spectators. In the forward to this book, the second volume of his series *Ritual, Festival, and Celebration*, editor Jack Santino calls these productions “didactic...morality plays” (ix).

Miller classifies Every 15 Minutes as a folk drama, addressing both the elements that remain consistent across productions and those that are manipulated—whether planned or unplanned. She strives to answer the ultimate questions: *why* and *how*? This work is a product of four years of research (1999-2003) based on productions of E15M from across the country. Miller’s intention is to “examine the complex interplay of realistic and unrealistic elements in Every 15 Minutes, and the ways participants play with these ambiguous frames throughout the event” (2). In analyzing the intersection of folklore and education, Miller also discusses the messages that are “conveyed, displayed, and debated” through such a program (2). Moreover, instead of looking at the effectiveness of such programs, *Playing Dead* aims to explore the reality of E15M productions versus the expectations and perceptions. This yields some interesting and unexpected discrepancies.

Miller makes use of ethnographic methods, the concept of folk drama, frame analysis, and the theory of play when discussing her extensive fieldwork and making sense of the elements of E15M. Her work is divided into six chapters: an introduction to the text and material; an overview of the background onto which E15M unfolds; an

analysis of the program as a kind of play “in which participants shift frames continually” (14); a discussion of the ways in which the author’s data challenges scholarly theories of engrossment as a requirement for folk drama; a conversation concerning the appeal of “dark play” in programs such as E15M; and an explanation of YouTube’s impact on the emergence of E15M. The chapters are then divided into subheadings that provide somewhat disjointed, but clearly delineated, sections of Miller’s discussion.

Miller applies frame analysis in play theory (Bateson 1955; Goffman 1974) onto the spectacle of E15M in a way that helps the reader to see the somewhat vague nature of the roles of the participants and the spectators as they shift throughout the experience. Markers, or recognizable signals of “time, space, sound, costume, speed, [and] touch” (51) are used by participants in E15M events to frame the activities. These markers communicate rules and expectations: for example, some accident scenes have restricted audiences and spatial parameters. However, those excluded from participating can still find ways to manipulate the framed activity to influence their inclusion, perhaps by skipping class or watching through windows (51-52). Miller provides an analysis of internal and external markers that place E15M in the realm of play and also discusses the real and pretend ambiguity that takes place.

It becomes very clear that there are elements that are consistent over the hundreds of E15M programs that Miller has analyzed, through both her explicit explanation and the evidence that is included throughout the text. While perhaps not exactly in line with the focus of the work, examining the reasoning for the variation among the programs more in depth would have provided an additional layer of interpretation. Miller briefly touches on some issues caused by ethnic and cultural heritage of those enacting E15M; however, a deeper exploration of demographic and religious impacts on the research would have contributed to a more holistic understanding of why and how variation occurs. The text could have also benefitted from some photographic evidence to illustrate E15M and Miller’s research.

While the text was somewhat dense, I would recommend this book to anyone with an interest in folk drama or folklore and education. *Playing Dead* is not only a

study in folkloristics but also makes use of the fields of “education, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and public health” (6). Given the proper amount of time to digest the text, I think that this book offers itself to a wide audience—general readers and academics alike.

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